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NSS attacks Welsh archbishop's comments on collective worship

The National Secular Society last month launched a scathing attack on the Archbishop of Wales over comments in *The Times Educational Supplement* that older pupils should not be allowed to opt out of collective worship at school.

The NSS was instrumental in bringing forward the amendment to the Education Act that permitted older children to exempt themselves from collective worship – otherwise they need their parents' permission.

But Dr Barry Morgan, the Archbishop of Wales, said that the law "degraded the status of faith schools". He said that group prayer offered pupils a rare opportunity for "recognition, affirmation and celebration of shared values" and should be encouraged.

"Collective worship has been branded as something that young people grow out of by the age of 16, at precisely the time when it might be the best way of feeding both their minds and their hearts as they start to explore the responsibilities and consequences of adult life," Dr Morgan said. "I am concerned that this is the thin end of the wedge and could be just the start of a process that devalues and ultimately marginalises the provision of collective worship in schools."

His warning came after Wales joined England by passing a law allowing pupils aged 16 and over to withdraw from collective worship without parental consent. All schools are required to offer a daily act of worship. However, under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, sixth-form pupils are now allowed to opt out.

Dr Morgan wrote: "Without a clear recognition of a spiritual dimension, schools run the risk of becoming narrowly focused on personal attainment. A shared spiritual experience, the development of a sense of awe and wonder and a reverence and veneration for the divine, all provide a chance for pupils to participate fully in, reflect on and respond to life and religious issues."

Dr Morgan warned that strict secularists should take caution from the examples of the US and France and "their struggle to build a sense of cultural understanding and mutual respect".

But Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, who campaigned hard to get the right of 16 years written into law, was dismissive of the Archbishop's comments.

He said: "The Archbishop is either ignorant of or cares nothing for older pupils' human rights. It is not legitimate for the state to force older pupils to worship. He even wants to row back on



Dr Barry Morgan, the Archbishop of Wales

rights of withdrawal enshrined in law since 1944. It is simply ridiculous and arrogant to insist that those old enough to join the armed forces, and who will already have endured ten years of forced worship, should not be permitted to withdraw themselves. The National Secular Society fully supports assemblies at which values can be shared, but this is not the same as forced worship.

"It is little wonder that the Archbishop is so determined to force his world view on unwilling near-adults. Church attendance in Wales is less than half of what it was in 1980, and is projected by Christian Research to drop to around a quarter of what it is now by 2050. Given he cannot stop the churches from emptying, where could be more fertile ground than pupils captive in school?"

Heaven-bound killers

BARRY DUKE LEARNS THAT HELL IS FOR BLASPHEMERS, NOT MURDERERS

I have had some bizarre encounters and communications over the years with evangelical types, but none amused and appalled me in equal measure quite as much as a message posted last month on the *Freethinker* website by the deacon of a non-denominational church in Pennsylvania.

Jack Rickard, of the Tetelestai Church in Forest Hills, came to my attention following his startling assertion in August that a former parishioner who had just shot three women dead in a fitness centre, was now "in heaven".

The gunman, devout Christian George Sodini, 48, committed suicide after killing the women and injuring a further nine people.

This is what Rickard said: "We believe in permanent security – once saved, always saved. He will be judged, but he will be in heaven ... He'll be in heaven, but he won't have any rewards because he did evil."

When I posted the quote on the *Freethinker* blog, one reader, Tim Danaher, commented with a line from *The Life of Brian* – "Ooooooh!!!

He's just making it up as he goes along!"

Such is the astonishing power of the internet that, within hours, Rickard became aware of Tim's comment, and he posted this breathtakingly arrogant reply: "Well Tim, you profess to have Scriptural (*sic*) knowledge. If you want to get into my reasoning from Scriptures from the statements I made – come on. My only prerequisite (*sic*) is that you are a professing Christian ie. You believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and you were saved by Grace through Faith to that fact."

So, in order to debate the merits or morality of any statement made by a believer, you need to be a believer yourself? *Wow!*

Anyway, Tim came back with this devastating put-down: "Jack, I do not profess to have any scriptural 'knowledge' (whatever that means). Your interpretation of ancient, primitive texts has no more worth than the next person's (whose interpretation would presumably differ from yours).

"Since interpretations differ, the rules of logic dictate that they cannot all be simultaneously true. They can, however, all be simultaneously false.

"It's not my job to provide any backing for an alternative viewpoint for these tawdry, fly-blown mythologies – that I'll happily leave to others who share your delusion.

"However, if you can point me to a link where you argue your viewpoint against that of a fellow sufferer whose viewpoint runs counter to yours (and I'll bet there are many who think that the gentleman in question is now, of necessity, burning in some imagined 'hell'), then kindly do so.

"It would be like watching two bald men fighting over a comb.

"And I'll leave the examination of your complicity in this tragic event to others, as well."

Rickard went silent after that.

What is interesting about this tragic affair is that Sodini – a sad, sorry loser who developed a hatred of women as a result of a catalogue of unsuccessful relationships, truly believed that once he had been "born-again" he had become "hellfire-proof", as it were.

Sodini ran his own internet blog, and shortly before rampaging through LA Fitness with his firearms, posted this message:

"Maybe soon, I will see God and Jesus. At least that is what I was told." (Sodini claimed that he had been assured by church pastor Alan "Rick" Knapp that he would go to heaven even after committing murder.)

"Eternal life", he added, "does NOT depend on works. If it did, we will all be in hell. Christ



George Sodini

paid for EVERY sin, so how can I or you be judged BY GOD for a sin when the penalty was ALREADY paid. People judge but that does not matter. I was reading the Bible and *The Integrity of God* beginning yesterday, because soon I will see them.

"If you are a Christian, all Sins apart from blasphemy against the Holy Ghost will be forgiven."

Scripturally speaking, Sodini was, of course, correct. According to the Christian website, **Bible.com**, murder is not an unpardonable sin. But blasphemy *is*: "The only unforgivable sin are rejecting Christ (Mark 16:16) and blaspheming the Holy Spirit." Mark 3:28-29 declares: "Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men ... but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation."

And Christians have the gall to say that atheists have no morality!

Incidentally, when I related this story to a work colleague who had a Catholic upbringing he exclaimed: "But the man cannot be in heaven; he committed suicide, for chrissake – and that's a mortal sin!"

Once again, I turned to **Bible.com** for clarification, and this is what it says: "Some people believe that all who commit suicide go immediately to Hell. *However, the Bible never says if this is the case* (their italics).

"The Bible is silent on this issue. God probably did not address it in black in white for a good reason. If we knew that we would still go to Heaven if we killed ourselves, there would probably be a lot more suicides taking place than there already are. However, if we knew that all who killed themselves were automatically banished to Hell, no matter what their situation, it may be too much for the grief-stricken family and friends to bear."



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Nigerian atheist attacked by a Christian mob at a child witchcraft conference

Nigerian atheist, Leo Igwe – a regular contributor to the *Freethinker* – was attacked in July by a mob of Christians at a conference he staged to discuss Child Rights and Witchcraft.

Igwe had his glasses smashed and his bag, phone and camera stolen by the mob, numbering between 150 and 200, who were alternately singing and aggressively disrupting the conference in Calabar. After an hour and a half, the police turned up and dispersed the mob. One person was arrested.

Leo had recently returned to Nigeria from London where he attended a British Humanist Association day conference and other international humanist events held at Conway Hall over the space of a week.

Events included the world's first international conference on "Untouchability", where he was invited to speak on the problem of caste discrimination in Nigeria.

Whilst in London he also spoke to the BBC on the problems faced in Nigeria due to religious superstition, with particular regard to a widespread belief in child witches.

A leading figure in a despicable campaign to associate children with witchcraft is Helen Ukpabio and her church, the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries. They have operated a campaign of terror against children and those committed to fighting for children's rights,

The witchcraft conference had been organised by the Nigerian Humanist Movement and the UK charity, Stepping Stones Nigeria, in response to the widespread abandonment, torture and killing of children in Akwa Ibom and Cross River State due to the belief in child witches.

As the conference began at around 10.30 am, religious protesters dressed in orange raided the venue and began protesting loudly.

Speaking after the event Leo said: "The conference was a peaceful meeting for people to openly debate what could be done to prevent the abuse of child rights linked to the belief in witchcraft. This attack by Helen Ukpabio's supporters once again highlights the depravity of this so-called 'woman of God'. Such false



Leo Igwe

prophets should be immediately arrested and prosecuted under the child rights act."

The issue of child witchcraft has attracted a great deal of media attention since the broadcast of the documentary, *Saving Africa's Witch Children*. The documentary, which won the prestigious BAFTA and Amnesty Film awards highlights the role that Helen Ukpabio has played in spreading the belief in child "witches" in South-Eastern Nigeria. Teachings offered by Ukpabio in her book, *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*, includes: "A child under two years of age that cries at night and deteriorates in health is an agent of Satan."

Josh Kutchinsky, a Trustee of the British Humanist Association, said: "Leo is a dear friend. He is knowledgeable, wise and courageous. I know that he is outraged by the damage done by superstition and irrational religiosity to the

potential for development in Nigeria.

"One of the principal methods he uses to combat these problems is to write well-crafted and cogent articles. These have been published in national media and have gained considerable attention. His other methods are to organise conferences and to visit others in support of them as individuals or their organisations. He is working with Amnesty International and Stepping Stones Nigeria. He is the IHEU representative in West Africa and a representative on the African Commission on Human and People's Rights.

He added: "His intervention in individual cases of injustice no doubt involve some personal risk. He and his fellow Nigerian Humanists have been awarded the Rainbow Humanist Award by Nordic Rainbow Humanists for their risky public support of LGBT rights in Nigeria."

Speaking from Stepping Stones Nigeria's office in UK, the charity's Programme Director, Gary Foxcroft, said: "The prevalence of the belief in child witchcraft in South-Eastern Nigeria can be linked to the books, movies and teachings of Helen Ukpabio. She has made a great deal of money by promoting this superstitious belief and seems willing to do anything to protect her interests. We call upon the Nigerian Federal Government and the Inspector General of Police to act urgently to prevent Helen causing any further embarrassment to Nigeria's reputation."

'Arrest me', says euthanasia campaigner

DR MICHAEL Irwin, 78, has challenged police to arrest him for his involvement in the death of a British businessman in 2007.

The former GP sent £1,500 to the Swiss suicide clinic Dignitas to help cover the money needed to fund Raymond Cutkelvin's death. This kind of payment is illegal under British law.

Dr Irwin was part of a group who travelled to Zurich with Mr Cutkelvin and his partner Alan Cutkelvin Rees in February 2007. He told Sky News: "I met them twice beforehand and felt compassion towards them. I personally sent a cheque directly to Dignitas, before they went."

Mr Cutkelvin, 58, was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer in August 2006. He decided to end his life in Switzerland.

Dr Irwin wrote an open letter to Hackney CID stating that he would be voluntarily attending Shoreditch Police Station to explain his role in the suicide.

Mr Cutkelvin's partner of 28 years was arrested at his flat in Hackney on July 17 on suspicion of aiding or abetting the suicide of another.

Alan Cutkelvin Rees was bailed to return Stoke Newington police station on September 23, when he will find out if he is to face charges.

Irwin, a former chairman of campaign group Dignity In Dying and a board member of pro-suicide charity Friends At The End, cannot understand why Rees was arrested but he was not.

He said: "They should arrest me. I gave financial support, moral support and advice. I consider myself equally involved. If not, they should admit they made a mistake in arresting Alan.

In 2003, Irwin hit the headlines after he was arrested following his confession that he had tried to assist a terminally ill friend to die. No charges followed, but in 2005 he was struck off the medical register after an inquiry by the General Medical Council. He has also claimed to have helped at least 50 terminally ill patients to die..



Helen Ukpabio – a dangerous charlatan



“ This is an absurd diversion from real policing ”

Police ape Muslims in an attempt to ‘improve community relations’

Outrage has been expressed over the revelation that three non-Muslim police officers in Sheffield had spent a day in full Muslim dress “as part of a scheme to improve community understanding” in the city.

Two sergeants and a community support officer dressed in head-to-foot burqas and other traditional clothing and went out shopping.

The move was part of a police initiative dubbed “In Your Shoes”. But it attracted strong criticism from onlookers.

Matthew Elliott, of the Taxpayers’ Alliance, said: “This is an absurd diversion from real policing. People want the police out catching criminals, not indulging in politically correct gimmicks. The police are overstretched as it is without officers being paid to do other things than their real job.”

Douglas Murray, director of the Centre for Social Cohesion, added: “This has nothing to do with crime. Like most people who have been a victim of crime, I am amazed and flabbergasted that they have solved all the crimes so they can spend a day playing dressing-up games.

“I did not know it was the job of police to see how people feel. I thought it was their job to solve crimes. This is a fantastic demonstration that for the last ten years the British police have been having an institutional nervous breakdown. They do not know what their job or their role is.”

The clothes-swapping day took place earlier this year in Sheffield town centre and followed a similar event in Barnsley.

The officers wore brightly-coloured traditional Muslim outfits and a full-length black jilbab plus a niqab, which covers the face leaving slits for eyes.

Sergeant Deb Leonard, who wore some of the clothing, described her experience in a South Yorkshire Police in-house magazine.

She said: “I have gained an appreciation and understanding of what Muslim females experience when they walk out in public in clothing appropriate to their beliefs. We are keen to gain a better understanding of issues which our communities face.”

No one from South Yorkshire Police was available to comment.

But the in-house magazine added: “The exercise is just one of many activities South Yorkshire Police has planned with communities



Sergeant Deb Leonard, PCSO Helen Turner and Sergeant Deb Pickering in Muslim clothing in Sheffield

and ethnic minority leaders to secure strong relationships, celebrate diversity and encourage integration, working towards a safer, closer society.”

Shortly after, *The Times* reported that Avon and Somerset Constabulary had begun equipping its female officers with uniform issue hijabs to wear when they enter a mosque.

The £13 headscarves are embroidered with the West Country force’s name and logo, and come in two colours – black for police officers and blue for community support officers. A spokeswoman insisted that they were not intended purely to cater for Muslim cultural sensibilities but were multi-faith.

Flashy gnashers are ‘un-Islamic’

An Islamist group in Somalia – al Shahaab – has decreed that gold and silver teeth are un-Islamic. It is now forcibly removing flashy gnashers – either with pincers or simply by hand if they aren’t anchored firmly enough.

The group’s attacks on offenders have been concentrated on residents in southern Somalia. Those living in the coastal town of Marka say the group has been rounding up anyone seen with a silver or gold tooth and taking them to a masked man who then rips them out using basic tools.

The group says the gold and silver teeth are used for fashion and beauty, which is against strict interpretations of Islam.

“They are designed to be used in any place of worship and can be used to cover the head or the shoulders. For example, plain clothes officers could use them to cover their shoulders in a Catholic Church, or they can be used to cover the head in synagogues.”

The scarves were developed in a joint project with the Aklima Initiative, which focuses on working Muslim women, and the Mosque Initiative – both Islamic groups.

The scheme is believed to be a first for the British police.

The Metropolitan Police, the largest and most diverse UK force, said that it issued headscarves to its Muslim female officers but not to non-Muslim officers. A Met Police spokeswoman said:

“We have had these scarves for Muslim female officers for some time, but as far as officers going into mosques – if it was appropriate for them to wear a scarf they would do that. But I don’t think there are any plans to issue 15,000-odd officers with a headscarf.”

Jackie Roberts, Assistant Chief Constable for Avon and Somerset, modelled the black headcovering for reporters arranging its folds with the help of PCSO Nora Ndiaye, who modelled the blue version. They are among 15 women officers to have received the head coverings so far.

Ms Roberts said that the scarves were intended to respect the cultural and religious practices of local communities. “This is a very positive addition to the Avon and Somerset uniform and one which I’m sure will be a welcome item for many of our officers.”

Rashad Azami, imam and director of the Bath Islamic Society, said he was pleased with the move. “This will go a long way in encouraging a trustful relationship between the police and the Muslim community.”



Police Community Support Officer Nora Ndiaye and Assistant Chief Constable Jackie Roberts of Avon and Somerset Constabulary

'Jewish Taliban' clash with riot police over car parks opening on the Sabbath

Thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews clashed with riot police in Jerusalem last month when they protested against the opening of the city's municipal car parks on the Jewish Sabbath.

The decision by the secular Mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, to open the car parks enraged the city's ultra-Orthodox population and has turned into an effective battle for the soul of the city.

Said Yoelish Krausz, an ultra-Orthodox protest organiser: "If we win this fight, then Jerusalem is ours."

Known in Hebrew as Haredim, or those who fear God, Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox population numbers about 200,000, or 32 per cent of the city's Jewish population.

Krausz added: "Jewish people who choose to violate Jewish law in private is one thing – but for the public authorities, who are Jewish and who are in control of city, to violate the Sabbath, that is a direct challenge to the word of God."

Fearful that the opening of the car parks will lead to the widespread opening of shopping malls and other desecration of the Sabbath, Krausz vowed that the protests would continue every Saturday until the municipality reverses its policy.

Krausz says his ultimate goal is to bring about a change in the way Jerusalem is governed. "We want international sovereignty for Jerusalem. This is a city that belongs to everyone, to Jews, to Christians and to the Arabs. The worst thing is that it be governed by Jews who disobey God."

The fight over the car parks is not the only source of tension between the Haredim and the local authorities. In July the arrest of an ultra-Orthodox mother accused of starving her son sparked riots across the city.

Krausz, a member of the Edah Haredit sect of Haredi Jews, which strongly opposes Zionism and the state of Israel, said he spoke for 9,000 families in Jerusalem – or about 90,000 people in total. At 37 and already a father of 11, his family came to Jerusalem from Hungary after the end of World War II.

But just as Krausz and his supporters seek to exert maximum pressure on the Jerusalem municipality, the mayor, Nir Barkat, is under enormous pressure from secular and mainstream religious Jews not to cave into the



Father of 11, Yoelish Krausz, a leading member of the 'Jewish Taliban'. Photo: Gali Tibbon

Haredim.

Said Tzvi Fisher, 53:

"I call them the Jewish Taliban. They have no respect for any way of life other than their own, and I am here to urge the mayor not to give into their thuggish intimidation and threats of violence."

Fisher says it is time Barkat took a more aggressive stance.

"We let them get away with everything. Women's rights, gender-segregated transport, allowing them not to serve in the army and huge state social security support."

With the multiplex cinema at the Jerusalem Mall now set to close and be replaced by a Swedish department store, Fisher also blames the Haredim for Jerusalem's dwindling number of cinemas.

Under pressure from the ultra-Orthodox, the developer of the new Mamilla Mall in the downtown area agreed to scrap his original plan to allow a new cinema complex, he said.

"By the end of next year there will only be two cinemas left in the whole city."

Iowa atheists win bus ad battle

ATHEIST Bus Campaign posters were stripped off vehicles operated by the Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority shortly after they were sponsored by Iowa Atheists & Freethinkers.

The reason given for their removal was the use of the word "God".

Elizabeth Prusetti, chief development officer for the bus agency, said: "We have never allowed that word in our advertising, promoting a religion."

Lilly Kryuchkov, spokeswoman for Iowa Atheists & Freethinkers, said the group was surprised by the bus agency's decision and believed its right to free speech was being trampled.

"We were not trying to offend anybody. We were just trying to reach out to people like us who don't believe in God and we were surprised and disappointed that DART pulled the ads."

When the atheists challenged the bus company, it quickly backed down, and the ads were reinstated.

The agency decided that its advertising policy was outdated, and is changing it to better align with other policies regarding civil rights, the state's obscenity and profanity laws and the diversity of the community, said Brad Miller, the agency's general manager.

Prusetti said the agency did not specifically address religion in its old advertising policy and that the decision not to have the word God appear in ads has just been continued over the years. She said the word God will be allowed under the new advertising policy.

The ad campaign is part of an expanding national effort by Washington DC-based United Coalition for Reason, which has placed ads on buses or billboards in several cities in the US.

The UCR, which works to raise the visibility of nontheists and to improve the way they are perceived by average Americans, said the ad campaign is fuelled in part by the prevalence of mainstream discussion of religious beliefs. Spokesman Fred Edwards said the environment in the country has begun to shift.

"We're in the right moment right now where we're motivated to speak out, and we have the opportunity and enough of a level of acceptance that we're willing to do so. We aren't the pariahs we once were."

The alleged wisdom and

BY DR THOMAS W SMYTHE AND DR THOMAS G EVANS, C

Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians often take the Bible to be the literal Word of God as imparted to human authors by means of revelation. Such Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Since Jesus is the Son of God, they conclude, his moral teachings are infallible and he knows all moral truths. We think this view has some serious and fatal difficulties. We will investigate some pronouncements of Jesus concerning divorce, punishment, and family relations that we think throw credible doubt on Jesus' moral infallibility.

We will begin with the pronouncements of Jesus on the subject of divorce. In Matthew Jesus says, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (5:31-32). Mark and Luke have Jesus say much the same thing (Mark 10-12; Luke 16-18), but only Matthew mentions an exception of marital unfaithfulness as sufficient grounds for divorce. The Gospels do not say that one must divorce a spouse who is unfaithful.

Christians who blindly adopt the divorce policy mandated by Jesus in the Gospels contribute to a great deal of unwarranted human suffering. It is clearly false that unfaithfulness is the only grounds for divorce. Domestic violence, physical and psychological abuse, and basic incompatibility of life goals and aims are also reasonable moral justifications for divorce. Anyone who disagrees at least has the burden of showing why the harm caused by cruelty and abuse is outweighed by the putative harm of divorce. The few words of Jesus on the subject certainly offer no such argument, nor do the passages from the Old Testament on which much of the New Testament thinking is based offer more clarity or logical consistency.

Jesus' dictum that a divorced person who marries again is committing adultery, as is the person he or she marries, oversimplifies the complex nature of human relationships and overlooks the moral reasoning that justifies

the divorce in the first place. To command that a divorced person may never remarry is not only morally unjustifiable but cruel. Such a view prevents divorced people from leading happy and fulfilling lives. We conclude that if Jesus really said "whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery," he was clearly mistaken and morally unjustified. It is difficult to see how the position on divorce stated in



the Gospels is consistent with the much more defensible Golden Rule stated two chapters later in Matthew: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them for this is the law and the prophets" (7:12).

Even less consistent is the position on eternal punishment given in the verses immediately following the Golden Rule: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those that enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those that find it are few" (Matt. 7:13-14). Matthew is concerned to establish that Jesus is saying nothing inconsistent with the letter of Mosaic Law and that most of us would be

doomed by this strict standard. In Luke 13: 23, 24, Jesus is asked "Lord, are those who are saved few?" and he said to them "Strive to enter the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able."

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the gate to heaven is not so narrow. Paul, who was trying to convert non-Jews to Christianity, presents a much different road to salvation: "For man believes with his heart and so is justified; and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is the Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10: 10-13). In the unlikely event that Matthew and Paul both accurately reflect the views of Jesus, then the views Jesus held were illogical and inconsistent, the one requiring strict adherence to Jewish law, the other making no such requirement.

The very idea of eternal punishment for the masses is at variance with any plausible theology. It is certainly inconsistent with the Golden Rule ethic. Jesus threatens people with hell fire and eternal torment throughout the New Testament. In Matt 11: 20-24 Jesus condemns entire cities to dreadful deaths and eternal torment in hell just because they do not care for his teachings. These are hardly the opinions one would expect from a morally perfect being.

They are, instead, opinions one might expect from a rigid, intolerant authoritarian. In Matt 12: 30, Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me." Such intolerance is hardly a moral virtue, let alone a sign of moral perfection. In Mark 16: 16 we read "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." We find such a simplistic solution to the complexities and subtleties of the human condition, where people are complex individuals with many variables determining their personalities and behavior, to be a major affront to the dignity of thinking human beings everywhere. Jesus proclaims that "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the king-

and kindness of Jesus Christ

EVANS, OF NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY, USA

dom of heaven" (Matt 18: 3). This dictum can be interpreted as commanding us not to question, think critically, or try to use reason to educate ourselves morally. We find such authoritarian remarks to be contrary to what a mature moral agent ought to be. A mature moral agent must look beyond disjunctive, simplistic authoritarian pronouncements. Human beings are complex creatures with multiple variables influencing their personalities and behavior. Any rational, humane system of morality must take these basic facts of human nature and human society into account.

On the issue of parenting, the moral pronouncements of Jesus as recorded in Matthew fall quite short of this mark: "For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die'" (Matt. 15:4). Such a remark that echoes the harsh parenting advice of Exodus and Deuteronomy shows not only a lack of compassion but also a lack of original thought, and there is no sense at all that parents must do anything to deserve the honor they are due or that some children may have very good reason not to honor their parents.

Finally, Jesus abandons even this question-

able commitment to family values when it comes into conflict with his apocalyptic Messianic mission: "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10: 34-38). Such intellectual bullying makes Jesus an unworthy moral exemplar, and it calls into question the intellectual honesty behind his adherence to the Mosaic Law he elsewhere so vigorously defends.

An historical-critical interpretation of these passages from Matthew could point out that they might reflect Matthew's opinions or at least his spin on what Jesus may have actually said. Certainly Paul and John present different

pictures of Jesus. But Christian Fundamentalism usually rejects such a critical approach and argues instead for an infallible Jesus and an inerrant, divinely inspired text. Although there are many virtues that we have not mentioned that Jesus exemplifies in the Bible, we have shown that the Jesus depicted in Matthew is less than morally infallible and omniscient, and that he is sometimes unkind and intolerant of others, his ethical advice often mistaken, even cruel.

The moral we draw is that good people need to read scriptural texts critically and reflectively and use their ability to reason morally. Certainly, not everything one finds in scripture, even when directly attributed to Jesus, will offer reliable guides to leading a moral life.

• All quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version (New York: Nelson, 1952).

Jesus & Mo

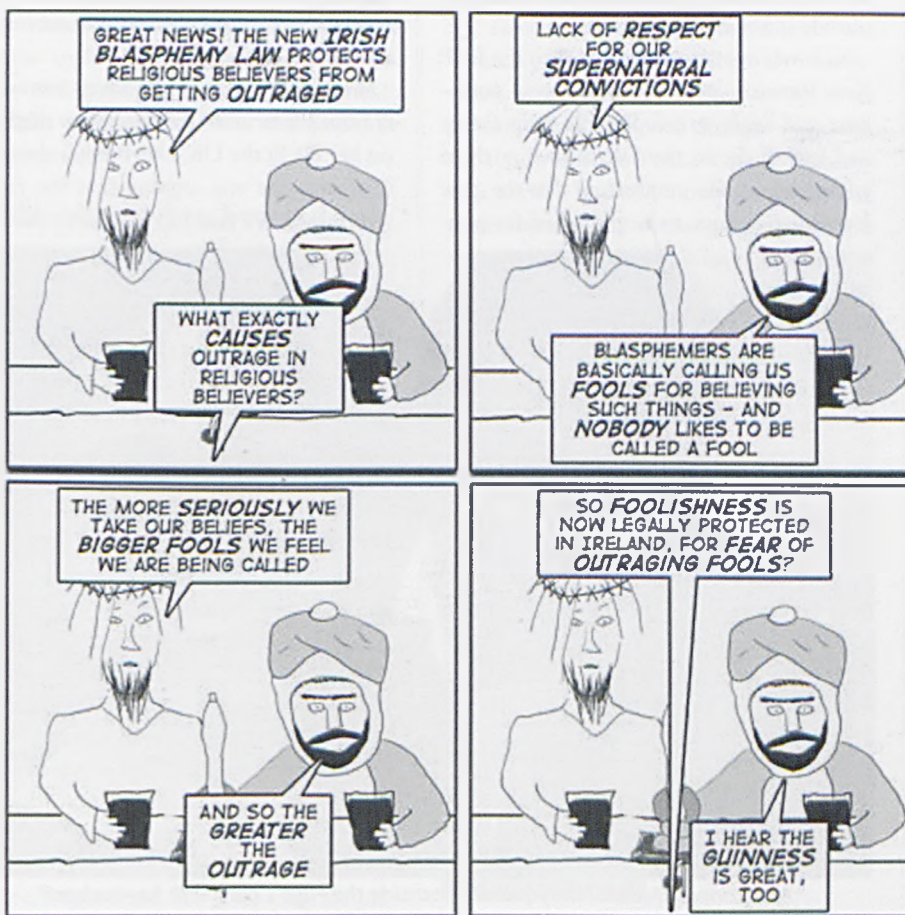
Blasphemy law complaint filed

SWEDISH MP Karl Sigfrid has filed a complaint at the European Commission about the controversial new Irish blasphemy law. He argues that the blasphemy law contravenes Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which covers free speech.

He is concerned that bad legislation has a tendency to spread. Once a restriction is in place in one European country it will quickly be legitimised, and politicians in other countries can point to it as they take away fundamental rights from their own citizens. He argues that if a developed Western society such as Ireland does it, it surely cannot be incompatible with democratic principles.

He told the *Irish Herald*: "Free speech is a necessary condition for scientific debate and is the best way to rational conclusions about what the truth is."

He said of the new Irish law: "It seems like a huge step backwards."



ANALYSIS

Assisted dying: Purdy's potential and public reassurance

Guy Otten argues that 'in no other area of law do people who want to break the law have to ask for permission to break it!'

An important case on assisted dying was handed down by the Lords on their last day of sitting as the House of Lords. The case, brought by Debbie Purdy, has been hailed as a step forward towards decriminalising those who are requested to assist the suicide of a loved one.

However, the Lords' decision was restricted to a small number of cases. This is because they only directed the Director of Public Prosecutions to devise guidelines for cases similar to Mrs Purdy's – ie where the assisted suicide is to take place outside England and Wales. But the moral distinction between assisting a suicide in the UK and assisting one outside is not easy to fathom.

So it was not surprising then that the DPP, Keir Starmer, decided that the new guidelines will apply to people who help family and friends die in the UK as well as those going abroad. He emphasised that the new interim guidelines, to be published for pub-

lic consultation this month, would apply to all assisted suicides; permanent guidelines are expected in spring 2010.

Since the Lords last considered a similar case, that of Diane Pretty, the European Court of Human Rights has considered the issue, and said: "The applicant in this case is prevented by law from exercising her choice to avoid what she considers will be an undignified and distressing end to her life. The Court is not prepared to conclude that this constitutes an interference with her right to respect for her private life as guaranteed under article 8 (1) of the Convention."

In the Purdy case the Lords decided it was right to follow this ECtHR decision as far as article 8(1) goes, but the terms of article 8(2) also have to be considered.

While Mrs Pretty sought advance immunity from prosecution for those who might assist her die in the UK, Mrs Purdy's claim was narrower. She was arguing that the factors which the DPP had to consider in deciding

whether to prosecute a person suspected of helping someone to take their own life were unclear. She said the effect was that she was unsure whether to go to Switzerland when she could still do it unaided, or whether she could wait until she could no longer tolerate continued life, and then rely on her husband to help her get to Switzerland and to take her own life. She wanted to live as long as she could bear it and not feel forced to take her life earlier for fear her husband would be prosecuted.

Although the Lords decided that her right to respect for her private life was engaged they also considered that the interference in Article 8(2) presented by s 2(1) Suicide Act 1961 was generally justified, except in one important respect: the Lords accepted that there was uncertainty in the law in relation to the factors which the DPP would take into account in deciding whether it was in the public interest to prosecute a person who had helped a loved one to die in Mrs Purdy's circumstances.

There is a code for prosecutors which assists them to decide (*inter alia*) whether it is in the public interest to authorise criminal charges generally. But this code is a general code and does not cover the factors relevant to a decision whether or not to prosecute an offence under s2(1) Suicide Act 1961.

The lack of clear guidance meant, the Lords said, that the requirements of Article 8(2) were not fully complied with. Article 8(2) requires the law to be sufficiently clear and predictable so that citizens can know if they are likely to break the law and be prosecuted. That is why they directed the DPP to formulate and publish specific guidelines to cover the offence in question.

But are guidelines good enough? Will such guidelines for prosecutors really be sufficient both to reassure the public and ensure that assistance is given only when the person



A victorious Debbie Purdy pictured outside the High Court with her husband

wishes to control the manner and timing of their death in genuine circumstances which are voluntary and appropriate?

This issue may well attract the attention of the legislature. Harriet Harman is reported as saying that if the DPP fails to produce clearer advice on when it is illegal to help someone die, the Government might consider giving time for a bill to allow Assisted Dying. She said the issue was on the boundary between “prosecutorial discretion and legislative definition”. And David Winnick MP has reportedly pledged to bring forward such a Private Members’ Bill.

Is it really satisfactory for a decision whether a person has committed a serious crime or not to be the subject of guidelines to prosecutors who will apply them privately, and after the event?

Wouldn’t a more public and open system which can give clearance to individuals in advance regarding the proposed assistance be more transparent – and minimise uncertainty at a difficult time?

Some Proposals

How could an advance “clearness” system work? Alternatives being mooted are:

- Something along the lines of an Ethics Committee. But these committees still sit in private.

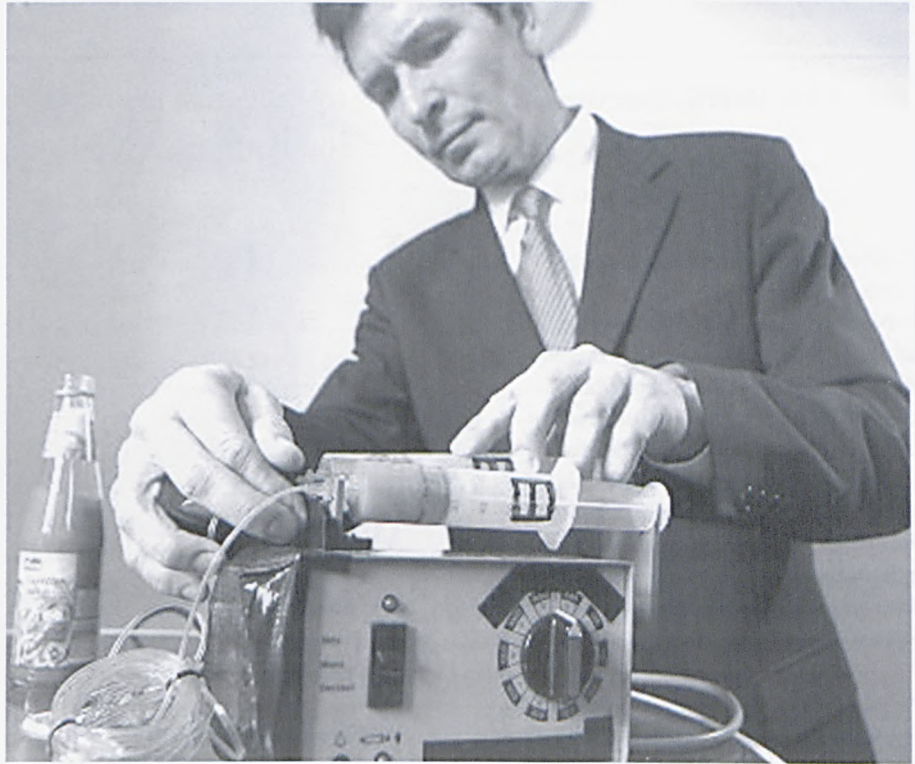
- The Court of Protection. But this is concerned with people who do not have capacity to make their own decision by reason of learning difficulty, brain damage or dementia. Using it may stigmatise unduly those who make a rational decision to seek assistance to die, sending out totally the wrong message.

- The High Court, which has been the venue for cutting-edge cases up to now, but may prove too expensive for routine cases. It will have an important role to play for those under age and without capacity.

- The Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT). Again people who seek assistance to die are not to be assumed to be mentally ill, although perhaps one of the checks that the public expects to be made is that the person seeking clearness is not so mentally disordered as to undermine his/her decision. The forum of the MHRT conveys the message that the applicant is mentally ill and again sends out an inaccurate message.

Nevertheless, the tribunal model arguably has much to recommend it. The panel could include:

- A tribunal judge with a prosecutorial background,
- A psychiatrist, to ensure the person had full capacity and was not mentally disordered, and



Former Hamburg justice senator Roger Kusch caused controversy in Germany last year when he unveiled a machine he designed to help people commit suicide.

- A person with social worker to assess the social aspects, the voluntariness of the proposal, the feelings and views of the relatives.

Such a tribunal could sit quickly and in public, and receive and test medical and social evidence. Its purpose would be to check that the applicant was an adult with full capacity and that the proposed assisted suicide was fully voluntary and was not medically inappropriate.

She wanted to live as long as she could bear it and not feel forced to take her life earlier for fear her husband would be prosecuted

It would publish its reasoned decision (on a website?) so that the public would find the reassurance it reasonably requires.

Such a tribunal (perhaps called “The Clearness Tribunal”) would have all the usual powers of tribunals to manage their hearings. It would require just procedural not substantive legislative change, and it would be relatively cheap. It would in effect clear the way for an assisted suicide without fear of prosecution.

Some might argue that these cases are pri-

vate and the details, especially medical and personal, should not be made public. But death is a public matter and much information is often made known in Coroners’ inquests. The public also need to know the full facts to be sure that the suicide was voluntary and reasonable. The only concession I would therefore suggest would be to publish the full reasoned decision only after the death. But the Police/Crown Prosecution Service and the Coroner would have to receive the full decision immediately it was made and should be kept informed of the details of the plans to proceed with the assisted suicide.

They and the applicant should also have a right of appeal to the Tribunal’s Upper Chamber, if they considered the Clearness Tribunal had got its decision wrong.

- Guy Otten is Chair of the Greater Manchester Humanists. He is a former prosecutor and now works as a Consultant Solicitor with Hempsons solicitors in their Mental Health and Social Care Team. He is also a part-time Tribunal Judge in the Mental Health Review Tribunal.



Why religious violence persists in Nigeria

LEO IGWE, Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, explains why his country is plagued by outbreaks of religious violence

In February and April of this year, religious violence broke out in Nigeria's Bauchi and Niger states – a region that has been marked by religious bloodletting since independence. As usual, the incidents left many people dead and many more injured and displaced.

It is a tragedy that almost 50 years after independence, Nigerians are still attacking and killing themselves in the name of religion – and the failure of the government to tackle this social menace and national disgrace is a matter of tremendous concern to me.

Most cases of religious violence have taken place in Northern Nigeria, where Islam is dominant. So why does religious violence persist in Africa's most populous nation, particularly in its Northern states?

First of all I think this problem persists because the culprits go unpunished.

Since independence, there has been a clear lack of political will to bring to justice those who mastermind religious uprisings in the Northern regions. Religious fanatics – Islamic ones in particular – are treated as “sacred cows” who cannot be prosecuted or be brought to book by authorities.

Just take a look at all the religious crises in Northern Nigeria – the Maitatsine riots of the 80s, Kano riots of 1991, sharia riots of 2000, the Jos religious crisis of 2004 etc. None was thoroughly investigated – nor were the perpetrators adequately punished.

In most cases Commissions of Inquiry were set up by the government. And after that nothing was heard about the commissions' reports and recommendations. Nothing was heard about how the government is implementing the recommendations.

Whenever religious riots occur, arrests are made but most of those arrested are later released. In a few cases some of those arrested were brought to court but were later acquitted for want of evidence. So it is clear that Nigerian courts lack the competence to prosecute criminals who operate under the guise of religion. What a shame! Punishment is a deterrent to crime. And as long as the states in Northern Nigeria refuse to prosecute and adequately punish these criminals who indulge in religious carnage, the problem will persist.

Again, I also think that religious mayhem in Northern Nigeria is caused by poverty

and unemployment. Most Northern states are the poorest and most underdeveloped in the country. There is a general prevalence of illiteracy and lack of effective education. And that means the government should do more to provide meaningful education and jobs for the young. An idle mind, they say, is a devil's workshop.

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hatred, intolerance
and bloodshed.

In Northern Nigeria idle minds are fertile breeding grounds of religious fanaticism and bigotry. But we must not forget that it is not only in the Northern states that we have unemployed restless youths – other states in Southern Nigeria, and other nations in the developing world, have armies of unemployed youngsters. But why is it that it is only in the Northern states that jobless youths take to religious terrorism and bloodshed – and nothing else?

It is also true that recurrent religious uprisings in the North are a result of a failure of security intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Most religious uprisings in the region have taken the police and other security bodies unaware. Beyond that, I suspect some foul play on the part of our security agents – I think they collude and

conspire with those who master-mind religious conflicts.

That is why most religious clashes have caught our police and intelligence outfits napping – intentionally napping, I would say.

But some people argue that religious violence occurs because many religious believers do not read their “holy” books well enough. This is not true. Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria read their Bible and Koran assiduously. In fact these books form the basis of religious indoctrination which all religious believers receive from cradle to the grave. We just need to acknowledge the fact that while the “holy” books contain teachings of love, tolerance and respect for human lives, they also contain passages that sanction and sanctify hatred, intolerance and bloodshed. The sacred texts have injunctions that promise eternal life and paradise to those who die fighting the cause of God or Allah or those who die battling infidels and other real or imaginary enemies of God or Allah. And as long as religious leaders continue to preach such hateful messages and believers continue to blindly accept them and unquestionably draw inspiration from them, religious violence will not stop.

More importantly, religious uprising occurs because Northern Nigeria has a tradition of jihadist Islam – that is a kind of Islam that is practised or promoted through force and violence. Islam came to Northern Nigeria in the 11th century. But the 1804 Jihad of Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio radicalised Islam. It foisted on Northern Nigeria a militant form of Islamic faith. It enthroned a kind of Islam that is promoted and defended with bows and arrows, swords and cudgels. Jihadist Islam sanctifies violence as an act of faith, as a demonstration of piety and as a virtuous way of living and of relating with infidels and with non-Islamic faiths or institutions. Jihadist Islam regards non-believers as “enemies” who should be conquered, converted or subdued by force.

As long as the jihadist Islamic mentality persists in Northern Nigeria, religious conflict will not cease.

Related to the above point is the imposition of sharia law. Sharia is the weapon of political and radical Islam. Sharia is the tool which Islamists use to subdue, dominate



Members of Boko Haram, arrested by security forces after their recent rampage

and tyrannise individuals and communities. The imposition of sharia on most states in Northern Nigeria was marked by widespread violence, riots and clashes. It has created a situation of suspicion, hatred, division, rivalry and antagonism between Muslims and non-Muslims. Sharia emboldened fanatics and gave legitimacy to Islamic fundamentalism in Northern Nigeria.

Ideally, governments should be neutral in religious matters. They should be impartial arbiters and guarantors of the rights of all individuals, no matter the religion or belief. But in most states in Northern Nigeria that is not the case. State governments support Islam, sponsor Islam, spread Islam and privilege Islam over other religions or beliefs. There is no separation of mosque and state.

As long as the states continue to mix religion and politics and refuse to separate mosque and state, and refuse to recognise, respect and defend the equal rights of individuals of different faiths and beliefs, religious hatred and uprising will not go away.

Religious bloodletting is not good for any nation, and it is bad for believers and non-believers alike. Religious bloodletting is a barbaric practice that should not be identified with the Nigeria of the 21st century. One can only hope Nigeria's Federal government will join hands with the Northern states to tackle the menace of religious violence in the country.

Editor's note: Shortly after Leo Igwe penned this piece, hundreds of people died in sectarian violence when an Islamic group called Boko Haram (Western Education is Sinful), went on the rampage against Christians, police and other targets. In the aftermath of the violence, the group's

leader Mohammed Yusuf was killed while in police custody.

Writing on the Counterterrorism website, Walid Phares, author of *The Confrontation: Winning the War against Future Jihad*, observed.

"The renewal of violence in the northern provinces of Nigeria brings this oil producing country to the brink of 'Talibanisation', threatening not only the precarious ethnic and religious makeup of the most populous African state but also the entire region, from Chad to Senegal.

"The fight between the now-called 'Nigerian Taliban' and the governmental forces took place within a country whose borders are 300 miles from where President Barack Obama stood inside the Ghana Parliament to address Africa's 'problems'. Unfortunately, the president didn't use words such as 'Taliban', 'jihadists', 'Shariah', 'salafists', or any term indicating that Nigeria and ten other African countries are suffering from a real invasion, fueled by a totalitarian ideology. That was a miss that came back to haunt international public opinion as dramatic pictures of the bloodshed were disseminated by the news agencies.

"In short, Nigeria is at war with the jihadists, as much as Somalia, Algeria, Morocco, Mali, and Chad are, to name a few. But the Nigerian brand of terrorists is peculiar. It indicates not only that we weren't giving enough attention to the expansion of the Wahhabi ideology in sub-Saharan Africa, but it also projects where the next waves of 'African Talibans' will hit inside one of the most explosive countries on the continent, if not across many borders.

"The radical Islamist movements in Nigeria obviously have local issues, but as with all jihadists worldwide, the local is

subservient to the higher 'cause', that is to resurrect the caliphate from China to the Atlantic Ocean. According to the region's experts the spread of salafism in Nigeria is the result of the irresponsible financial irrigation provided by the oil-rich regimes of the Arabian Peninsula. Wahhabism has been the most aggressive incubator of madrassas and extreme-Shariah militants throughout the Sahel for decades.

"Nigeria, as a half-Muslim country, didn't escape the spread. Today, the population of the oil-producing country is about 140 million, the single largest national population on the continent. The Hausa form the majority of the mostly Muslim north; the Yoruba are the largest to the southwest and the Christian Ibo are concentrated in the southeast province of Biafra.

"In 1968, a genocidal civil war killed more than a million Ibo who were claiming self-determination, *a la* Kosovo, but without obtaining the same support from the international community. After years of military regime, civilian rule came back in 1998 but clashes between Christians and Muslims still left 9,000 casualties, including about 700 killed in the central part of the country last November. However, the most recent incidents were initiated by jihadi elements, as Christians and mainstream Muslims have been sharing power. In 2007 a Muslim president, Umar Musa Yarado, succeeded a Christian predecessor, Olusegun Obasanjo.

"In 2002, a jihadi group emerged from the vast network of Wahhabi-indoctrinated militants branding the name of Boko Haram, which in the local language means 'Western education is forbidden'. The rapidly rising militia promotes Wahhabi teachings and emulates the Taliban methods by waging terror in the northern provinces, 12 of which already apply some form of shariah laws.

"The Boko Haram, like the Somali now-defunct Islamic Mahakem and their successors Shabab al Jihad, wants to establish a total shariah state throughout Nigeria, regardless of the fact that the southern half is Christian and Animist. Hence these self-declared Taliban of Nigeria have two strategic tasks: first wage a 'jihad' inside the Muslim communities of the north, mostly the Hausa tribes, to defeat the seculars; and second, wage an 'Islamist jihad' against the rest of the non-Muslim ethnicities, principally the Yoruba and the Ibo, to establish a greater Emirate of Nigeria.

"Their chief, Mohammed Yusuf, who was killed in the recent incidents, claimed the 'jihad' was about local demands, against corruption and for the strict implementation of shariah. But pro-government Muslim groups, such as Nasr el Islam, dismissed his allegations

Religious violence in Nigeria

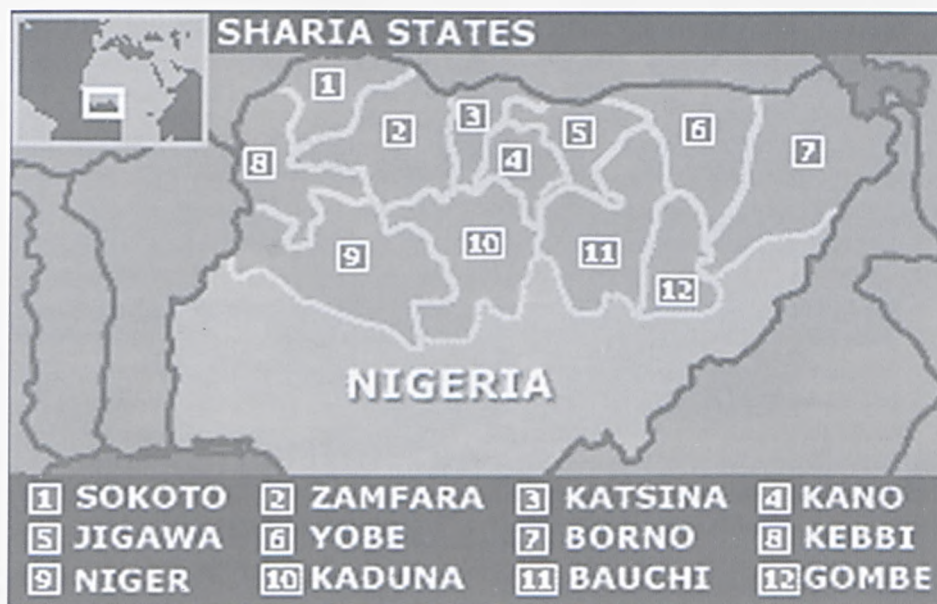
declaring him an 'extremist', a similar scenario to those in Somalia and Pakistan.

"The latest clashes took place in several locations but mostly in Maydo Ghoric city, not far from the Chad borders. Yarado responded to the Boko Haram actions with a strong military campaign leaving hundreds of casualties among the country's "Taliban." More than 100 children were freed from the latter's compounds, perhaps avoiding a Beslan-like horror. So far, the government has won this round but in my assessment it is not over.

"Grounded in Wahhabi indoctrination throughout the north, and fed by oil-related funding from the Gulf, Boko Haram will come back against with a new leader, and possibly with a future name.

"What is behind these Nigerian Taliban are a lethal ideology and oil interests. These jihadists want to seize Nigeria's precious commodity, oil, for the caliphate. If you scratch deeper, you may find the hallmarks of some players inside OPEC, who want to make sure no one can escape its domination of the game.

"Meanwhile the jihadists' propaganda war



is on. Posting on Al-Jazeera, the 'Islamic Emirate of Egypt' said 'our brothers the Mujahidin are striking back at Western evangelisation in Nigeria'. Abu Ayman al Hadrami, of Saudi Arabia, said the Nigerian government is 'an agent of the West, but Islam will win in Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pal-

estine, Somalia, Iraq, and the entire world'. The internationalist jihadists won't let go, that's the lesson from Africa."

• *Dr Walid Phares is a Senior Fellow with the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. He teaches Global Strategies at the National Defense University in Washington DC.*

Boko Haram declares 'total jihad'

AS we were going to press, we learned that Boko Haram had declared "total Jihad" in Nigeria, threatening to islamise the entire nation by force.

A statement issued by the sect's acting leader, Mallam Sanni Umaru, declared that Boko Haram "does not in any way mean 'Western Education is a sin' as the infidel media continue to portray us. Boko Haram actually means 'Western Civilisation is forbidden'.

"We are talking of Western ways of life which include: constitutional provision [relating] to, for instance, the rights and privileges of women, the idea of homosexuality, lesbianism ... blue films, prostitution, drinking beer and alcohol and many others that are opposed to Islamic civilisation."

Boko Haram, said the statement, "is an Islamic Revolution ... not limited to Northern Nigeria, in fact, we are spread across all the 36 states in Nigeria, and Boko Haram is just a version of the Al Qaeda which we align [to] with respect.

"We support Osama bin Laden, we shall carry out his command in Nigeria until the country is totally islamised which is according to the wish of Allah."

It added that "the killing of our leaders in a callous, wicked and malicious manner will not in any way deter us. They have lost their lives in the struggle for Allah."

The statement declared: "We have started a jihad in Nigeria which no force on earth can stop. The aim is to islamise Nigeria and ensure the rule of the majority Muslims in the country. We will teach Nigeria a lesson, a very bitter one.

"We shall carry out series of bombing in Southern and Northern Nigerian cities, beginning with Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu and Port Harcourt. The bombing will not stop until Western civilisation is wiped off from Nigeria. We will not stop until these evil cities are turned into ashes.

"We shall make the country ungovernable, kill and eliminate irresponsible political leaders of all leanings, hunt and gun down those who oppose the rule of sharia in Nigeria and ensure that the infidel does not go unpunished.

"We promise the West and Southern Nigeria, a horrible pastime. We shall focus on these areas which is the devil empire and has been the one encouraging and sponsoring Western Civilisation into the shores of Nigeria.

"Either you are for us or against us."



Mohammed Yusuf, pictured after his arrest. He later controversially died in police custody

In Search of the Moderate Muslim

Diesel Balaam reviews Jon Gower Davies' follow-up to *Bonfires on the Ice*

JON Gower Davies follows up his devastating critique of multiculturalism in Britain – *Bonfires On The Ice* (reviewed in the *Freethinker*, September 2007) – with the sequel that his previous book was crying out for.

On page 163, he relates the harrowing tale of Samira Nazir, a 25-year-old Muslim woman who was killed by members of her own family in Southall, London, in 2005, after she refused to marry any of the men they had selected for her. Her two sisters, aged two and four, were forced to witness her death after she was held down and stabbed 17 times before having her throat cut. It is a shocking account. Davies concludes the story with the words “May the Lord bless and keep her” – a jarring and clearly hegemonic (though undeniably touching) invocation that sits uneasily in what is otherwise a scholarly and crisply rational exploration of Islam in modern Britain.

For the remainder of the book, this former Labour councillor, academic and communicant Anglican, steers clear of such emotive comments, grounding his arguments against extravagant claims for the existence of a “moderate” Islam, in a brisk canter through various Muslim histories, self-serving Muslim interpretations of those histories, and some forensically detailed statistical analysis that explains the problematic, unembedded character of Islam in Britain today.

Davies repudiates the notion, widely accepted by lazy liberals, that there is some kind of “moderate” body of Muslim opinion that can be appealed to, or reasoned with, in the wake of terror attacks, “honour killings”, fatwas, and the rest.

Save for the odd diseased cow, or stone-throwing incident outside a theatre, most other non-indigenous faith communities have integrated well, but Davies recognises, gives examples of, and explains why, so many Muslims have singularly failed to do this. His 18-page section on the “Muslim Crime Wave”, for example, begins with the astonishing statistic that while Muslims are only 2 percent of the general population, they make up nearly 10 percent of the prison population.

Refreshingly, Davies pinpoints the reasons for this Muslim failure, not on the usual guilty-liberal get-out clauses of “racism” and “deprivation”, but on the historic Muslim experience of migration. For practising

Muslims, the process of migration is never one of willing adaptation or concession to their hosts. It is almost always one of sullen insularity and aggressive colonisation. Davies also provides numerous examples of how officialdom, blighted by multiculturalism, indulges and passively facilitates the colonisation of mixed institutions and even whole neighbourhoods by these pushy Muslim newcomers.

This is a new population, with no pedigree of Britishness. Davies points out that just over half of the Muslims in Britain today were actually born here, but most of those were born here after 1980. Most Muslim immigrants are working class and from rural areas in failed states like Pakistan and Bangladesh, but otherwise, they are separated into multifarious ethno-linguistic factions, an insularity rigorously enforced and perpetuated by marriage arrangements, of the kind that poor, tragic, Samira Nazir fell foul of in Southall.

So what of the elusive “moderate Muslim” Davies is in search of? It is not until the final chapter that this is fully addressed. Several individuals and organisations have put themselves forward as, or representing, “moderate” Muslims, willing to face up to the association of Islam with terror and trying to engage with the West (sometimes at considerable risk to their own safety). Unfortunately, most of these men – and they are nearly always men – seek accommodation with the West by misrepresenting what the West is, a convenient contrivance that leaves Islam unsullied and intact. Such moderates as Davies has been able to find include the academic, T J Winter (aka Abdal Hakim Mu-

rad), the ex-Islamists of the Quilliam Foundation and the Islamic Foundation (note the absence of the Muslim Council of Britain). The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain is also acknowledged by Davies, who notes that “this last group seems to find it possible to be moderate only by ceasing to be Muslim”. Other moderate Muslim scholars, like Tariq Modood, speak in rather opaque cultural jargon that seeks to lay Muslim claim on British territory and even on the whole of Europe: “Euro-Islam may be the emerging Third space” opines one. “In European cultural interruption lies the key to redeeming the hopes of the past” says another. With masterly understatement, Davies confesses to having “some difficulty in knowing what this means”, but the colonising ambitions of even “moderate” Muslims is self-evident.

Of course, Davies has his own Anglican agenda in all of this, which does at least allow for an exploration of how “moderate” Muslims like T J Winter manipulate convoluted theology and internationalism, to challenge, diminish and sideline the meaning of Britishness, our national church and its major role in shaping our history and who we are. For this very reason, of course, many left-wing secularists find themselves ideologically closer to these “moderate” Muslims than they do to other British secularists occupying centre-right positions, as they similarly seek to undermine our nationhood, denigrate our past, promote anti-Americanism, as well as rubbish Christian theology. Further evidence of this unspoken alliance between “moderate” Muslims and left-wing secularists comes when Davies accuses Tariq Modood of “sheer arrogance” for his “scarcely veiled desire to disestablish the Church of England”. Davies is right. These self-styled “moderate” Muslims are not moderate at all, they are arrogant and delusional, refusing to engage with and adapt to Britain, or even understand what Great Britain is. Freethinkers will be challenged by this book, certainly, but its depth and understanding is a vast improvement on any critique of Islam offered by the Left, or the lamentable lack of one emanating from secular sources.

• **Jon Gower Davies is former Head of Religious Studies at Newcastle University. *In Search of the Moderate Muslim* (ISBN 978-1-904863-37-3) sells at £10.00.**

Quotable Nietzsche quotes

- *The Christian faith from the beginning, is sacrifice: the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit; it is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation.*
- In Christianity neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point.
- *One is not free to become a Christian. One must be sick enough for it.*
- A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything.

points of view...



A DIG IN THE POST BAG... LETTERS FROM OUR READERS ...

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DEEP MISGIVINGS OVER DEBAPTISM CERTIFICATES

THOUGH a long-term *Freethinker* reader and NSS member, I have somehow managed to remain unaware until now of the "debaptism" campaign, so that your report of the scale of its development and the notice taken of it by the religious press has come as something of a shock.

A programme endorsed by Barbara Smoker and Terry Sanderson is entitled to be treated with great seriousness and respect and not lightly challenged, but I feel obliged to put on record my deep misgivings as to its purpose and its effect.

I don't know whether, or in what terms, the Church of England newspaper commented, but if I had been a keen churchman, as I was long ago in my unenlightened youth, I should have been delighted to see all these defectors from religion and their supporters so eager to shoot into their own goal!

Don't they realise, I should have asked, that the more publicity it gives rise to, the more strongly this formal renunciation of baptism serves to reinforce the public perception of the significance of the sacrament in the life of Christians and of the whole community? Evidently not, or they would have chosen rather to disregard it.

The Catholic Church, it seems, has grasped this point, and deals with it in its usual realistic way. The provision of an official procedure to undo the outward effect of baptism has the effect, not of weakening but of reaffirming the principle of "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic": once you have undertaken (whether knowingly and willingly, or by your godparents on your behalf) the obligation of Catholic membership, you can be released only by the church itself; you cannot simply walk away. (You do, of course, if you are sensible, and however busily they may try to recapture you, you remain your own master, whereas the officially released, "debaptised", ex-Catholic remains as it were "free on licence").

The concept of "debaptism" is a philo-

sophical and logical nonsense, anyway, and it seems a pity to see so much effort being put into it by well-intentioned humanists.

A fact cannot be undone, cancelled out, "de-facted", but it can be made of no effect by ignoring it. If you were baptised, that is a fact of your personal history: but it is a fact that, unless by your free choice you make it so, has no significance whatsoever for yourself or for anyone else, and it is much better to treat it with due indifference, rather than to go through a procedure which can serve only to bolster the church's conviction of its importance. Whatever value the campaign may have in the context of statistic-gathering, I cannot escape the conviction that it will be outweighed in the long term by the underlying effect of its inherent weakness.

Derek Fane
Bognor Regis

ASSISTED SUICIDE

SOME may think me callous (they are wrong), but when I heard about the assisted suicides of Sir Edward and Lady Downes, I smiled. I was glad they were able to end their days in the way they wished and imagined the elderly lovers holding hands as they made their dignified departure. I was sad that their lives should end but at the same time I was happy for them that they were eased on their way.

The news was particularly poignant because my sister and I recently witnessed our mother's ten-day agony, prevented from enjoying her own gentle exit by this nation's cruel, religion-driven laws on dying. She had passed ninety but had multiple myeloma, a cancer that had caused her spine and rib-cage to collapse; a lively mind trapped in a hopelessly crippled body. Immobile and barely able to breathe, but conscious, she spoke directly to her doctor in slow, painful words: "I - want - to - die". It was a simple enough request expressed with clarity, but though he knew the words came from a competent mind, he couldn't allow it and the oxygen supply that prolonged her agony was kept on. Had we, in desperation,

quietly "pulled the plug": for her, we would doubtless have been nabbed for manslaughter, though we would have done it out of love and compassion. It's not bloody fair!

I urge readers to maintain the pressure already being applied to MPs to change the law preventing assisted dying for those who wish to have final relief from wearisome old age and/or painful infirmity.

Dr James Merryweather
Kyle of Lochalsh

I ACCEPT that there is amusement, even hilarity, to be extracted from many of the crazy ideas of the religious bigots around us. Often, however, I find the cruelty, unforgiving viciousness and repellent certainty of their opinions too much even to read with restraint.

There is no way I can be objective when these bigots affect our laws. The 14 bishops in the House of Lords who tried to stop the support for minor change for helping people to die did not even have to be elected.

They squat there, puffed up and dressed up, and pontificate at tedious length, to the 74 percent of the population who favour change far beyond what these theocrats seek.

Their cruelty, and indifference to the suffering of those they do not represent, was summarised well in the description of the added pain inflicted on Sir Edward Downes and his wife Joan. (August *Freethinker*, "Downes' Death Pact re-ignites debate over Swiss euthanasia clinic").

How is any one of us, with a semblance of decency, able to deal with this, as we know rational discussion, kindness, even an appeal to a common humanity cannot succeed with people who hold to the bishops' religious views?

Friedrich Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human* sums up the dilemma:

Means of bestialization: In the struggle with stupidity the fairest and gentlest people finally become brutal. Perhaps that is the right way for them to defend themselves; for by rights the argument against a stupid brow is a clenched fist. But because, as we have said, they have a fair and gentle disposition, this means of self-



defence makes their own suffering greater than the suffering they inflict."

Denis Watkins
Wales

OVER-POPULATION

I AM grateful to Bob Shayler and Nelly Moia for pointing out the dangers of over-population, especially when there are still so many people calling it a myth.

All those well-meaning practices advocated by the environmental agencies (eg how to save energy and water) will achieve next to nothing if the population still continues to grow.

What's the point of decreasing the per capita CO2 emission by x percent if at the same time the population increases by x percent or more?

Concern about consumption and pollution is meaningless if it does not include concern about the number of consumers/polluters. It is not only a question of the quality of life (what is more desirable: a larger number of people living like beggars or a smaller number living comfortable lives?) but ultimately a question of the survival of mankind.

Nelly is probably right in saying that the Vatican and other religious fanatics are the main culprits for this attitude, but I also blame hard-line capitalists (more babies = more customers = more profit) and militarists (more babies = more future soldiers) and the "politically correct" trendy lefties (who shy away from criticising the reactionary views of Hindus and Muslims and African Christians and some other non-European religious communities, who on the whole still tend to have larger families). Still more disturbing is the fact that even some major environmental organisations, such as Friends of the Earth or the Green Party, do not address the problem of unchecked population growth, for similar sycophantic "politically correct" reasons.

Alex Hill
London

TRANSCENDENCE

IN HIS article on Cormac Murphy O'Connor and transcendence (*Freethinker*, July) John Radford spreads his nets too wide.

Transcendence is a concept found almost uniquely within the Abrahamic religions. Judaism invented the omnipotent creator God, and because he created the universe, he has to be outside it in a discrete, physically unknowable dimension. This is the transcendent or supernatural. The Judaic God and his other world were enthusiastically adopted by Christianity and Islam who proceeded to turn this other world into a mind-boggling phantasmagoria.

Abrahamic religions are alone amongst

world religions in both having a creator God and insisting on the factual truth of their creation myth - creating a fantasy world and allowing it to rule this one. Over a long lifetime O'Connor has managed to convince himself of the reality of this fantasy world. And his comments about being "less than human" are reminiscent of the acid head who can't understand why you can't see his green monsters in the street, or the messages from God in the sky. In the full flow of his trip he can only presume that you lack some faculty of which he is possessed, being incapable of understanding the real origins of his own state of mind. Similarly the good Cardinal wishes all humanity to bathe in the warmth and joy, reassurance and comfort that his fantasy brings him. But perceiving that they are unable to do so can only presume that they lack some faculty of which he is blessedly possessed.

Rather than condemning O'Connor, a life such as his in servitude to a fantasy and habitual denial of reality should be grounds

for compassion and even pity, although the task would probably daunt even the Dalai Lama. But when we look, for instance, at the outcome of the Irish Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse, we can see the dark side of the organisation which is served by O'Connor's fantasy.

But this, and many other outrages, are put to one side because only the Church can offer access to the transcendent, a fix according to O'Connor and his like that every human being craves, and which justifies any moral slippage by the priesthood on the road to the Beatific Vision and Divine Ecstasy. But the transcendent is a con trick and should be treated as such. A good starting point in understanding this is "The Bible Unearthed" by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (Simon & Schuster, 2002) which pulls the rug from under the whole monotheistic shebang, a result which has yet to filter into the freethinking consciousness.

George Taylor
Guiseborough

THE CREEPING ISLAMISATION OF BRITISH SOCIETY

THE furore caused by Jim Fitzpatrick, the Foods and Farming Minister, and his wife walking out of a Bangladeshi marriage ceremony last month in protest at having, against their expectation, to sit in separate rooms, highlights the creeping Islamisation of British society: where once men and women could mix freely at Muslim weddings, now gender separation signals increasing radicalisation.

To pass off Islamic radicalism - with its snub to British values - as posing no dangers for civil society is delusional; equally delusional is the belief that religious extremism in the UK will eventually be extinguished by the leveling effect of an inter-faith dialogue. The hope that this will engender a mutual accommodation of competing faiths by a sort of osmotic "spiritual" sharing of beliefs has no evidence in history: multiculturalism is an oxymoronic dream. Amid the rancorous, relativised, emotionalised, burqua-black, nascent adhan-wailing nightmare, someone has to be top dog. That politicians shy away from recognising this reality and fail to address the damage to social cohesion and harmony that religious divisions cause is, in my opinion, an indictment of ministerial courage and intelligence.

Intelligence, or IQ, is the faculty for cognition and reasoning that is assessed by verbal, general knowledge, and visual-spatial test modules aggregated against a population average of 100. Democratically elected politicians usually possess high verbal and general knowledge IQs, which explains why they can talk around subjects they don't understand, or truths they don't want to reveal, with verbiage vacuous enough to inveigle credulous voters (and vex many an interviewer) while cannily finessing legal frameworks (it's no accident that most are trained in law). But visual-spatial IQ is less easy to assess on camera. And I don't think it should be taken on trust, because this is the faculty necessary to understand and apply the logic and probability in maths and science that would enable wiser decision-making - and to readily accept post-Darwinian evidence-based reality against the superstitious nonsense the religious lobby clamours to promote. Because Parliament consistently panders to faith initiatives and the funding of faith schools, one can only assume the majority of MPs either misrepresent their irreligious views or are themselves blinded by god-belief and thus supportive of religion.

A downside of media-driven democracy, then, is that, in addition to the guidelines in party manifestos, the qualities needed for electoral success - egotistical oratory skills and general knowledge - alone are not the qualities that guarantee an intelligent administration. Perhaps this might better be achieved if candidate selection included contenders with complementary high visual-spatial IQs - outspoken atheists, for example - who can argue for a long-overdue definitive secularisation of society. Maybe then the common good - and common sense - will prevail over religious special interest groups and the Muslim ascendancy. Raising the intelligence of the unelected Establishment - most of whom, naturally, live within neither sight nor sound of a mosque - or even waking them up, would be a more intractable challenge.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

Birmingham Humanists: i Tova Jones 021454 4692 w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Friends' Meeting House, George Rd and St James's Rod, Edgbaston. Wed, Sept 16, 7.45pm. Eddy Hunt: *Ecodwellings*.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: i 01273 227549/461404 w <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Sept 2, 8pm. Michael Irwin: *Assisted Dying – What is Legal and What is Not*. Wed, Oct 7, 8pm: Peter Vlachos: *Challenging Religious Privilege*.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. i 01959 574691.

w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com

Central London Humanist Group: i Chair: Alan Palmer. Sec: Josh Kutchinsky e info@centrallondonhumanists.org w www.meetup.com/central-london-humanists

Chiltern Humanists: Enquiries: 01296 623730.

Cornwall Humanists: i Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.

Cotswold Humanists: i Phil Cork Tel: 01242 233746. e phil.cork@blueyonder.co.uk. Wendover Public Library, Wendover High St. Tues, Sept 8, 7.45 for 8pm. Tony Blake-Pauley: *Atheists are Arrogant!* (debate).

w www.phil-cork.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/humleft.htm

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: i Tel: 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Cumbria Humanist Group: i Tel: 01228 810592. Christine Allen w www.secularderby.org e info@cumbria-humanists.org.uk.

Derbyshire Secularists: Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on w www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists: i Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046 e info@devonhumanists.org.uk

w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506.

w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: i Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: i Tel: 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Essex Humanists: Programme available i 01268 785295.

Farnham Humanists: 10 New House, Farm Lane, Woodstreet Village, Guildford GU3 3DD.

w www.farnham-humanists.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): 1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067.

Email: secretary@galha.org w www.galha.org

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: i John Coss: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday, 7.30pm) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wed, Sept 9, Sandra Palmer: *Christian Humanism*.

Hampstead Humanist Society: i N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 OHP. Tel: 0207 328 4431.

w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wednesday of the month (except January, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow at 8pm. September 9th. Jim Herrick on 30 Years of GALHA.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagamba@hotmail.com

Humanists of Havering: i Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Cres, Gidea Park. Meetings on first Thursday of the month, 8pm.

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland: i Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 e brianmcclinton@btinternet.com.

w www.nirelandhumanists.net

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programmes from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.

Humanist Society of Scotland: 272 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

uk Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Dundee: 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh: 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Glasgow: 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Highland: 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Perth: 07017 404776, perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: i Robert Tee on 0113 2577009.

Isle of Man Freethinkers: i Jeff Garland, 01624 664796. Email: jeffgarland@wm.im w www.iomfreethinkers.org

Humanists4Science: A group of humanists interested in science who discuss, and promote, both.

w <http://humanists4science.blogspot.com/>

Discussion group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/humanists4science/>

Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Group: i David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e davidb67@clara.co.uk

Jersey Humanists: Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780

e Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com w <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/>

Lancashire Secular Humanists: Meetings 7.30 on 3rd Wed of month at Great Eccleston Village Centre, 59 High St, The Square, Great Eccleston (Nr. Preston) PR3 0YB.

w www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk i Ian Abbott, Wavcrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 e ian@lanzere.demon.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel: 07598 971420.

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Lewisham Humanist Group: i Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. The Goose, Rushey Green, Calford SE6. Meetings on third Thurs, 7.30pm. Sept 17, Muriel Seltman: *How I Became a Marxist-Humanist-Quaker-Universalist*.

w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com

Liverpool Humanist Group: i 07814 910 286.

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e lhghumanist@googlegmail.com. Meetings on the second Wednesday of each month.

Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens: i Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Marches Secularists: w www.MarchesSecularists.org

e Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

Mid-Wales Humanists: i Maureen Lofmark, 01570 422648 e mlofmark@btinternet.com

Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group: i Vince Chainey, 4 Mill St, Bradenham, Norfolk IP25 7QN. Tel: 01362 820982.

Northants Secular & Humanist Society: For information contact Ollie Killingback on 01933 389070.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): i C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): i the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North London Humanist Group: Meets third Thursday of month (ex August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact Sec: 01707 653667 e enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

e enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

North Yorkshire Humanist Group: Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

Peterborough Humanists: i Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Sheffield Humanist Society: i 0114 2309754. University Arms, Western Bank. Public Meeting first Wednesday of the month, 7.30pm. Wed, Oct 7. Rob Murfin – *Topical Issues*

South Hampshire Humanists: Group Secretary, Richard Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689 e info@southhantshumanists.org.uk

w www.southhantshumanists.org.uk

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings, Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8037/4

e library@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or e edward.gwinnell@talktalk.net

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists: 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828.

w www.suffolkhands.org.uk e mail@suffolkhands.org.uk

Sutton Humanists: i Alan Grancy. 0208 337 9214. w www.suttonhumanists.co.uk

Think Humanism: An independent discussion forum for anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought - www.thinkhumanism.com

Watford Area Humanists: Meet on the third Tuesday of each month (except August and December) at 7.30 pm at Watford Town and Country Club, Watford. i 01923-252013

e john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk w www.watford.humanists.org.uk

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: i 01568 770282

w www.wmhumanists.co.uk e rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk.

Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: i 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Listings, the Freethinker,

PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication.