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The Internet proves a potent weapon against Scientology

This has not been a good year for Scientology. And, as more and more details emerge on the Internet about this loopy religion's bizarre beliefs and questionable tactics, the Church's downward spiral could accelerate further and lead to its total collapse.

Scientology, which currently has around 100,000 members worldwide, took two significant hits this autumn.

In October a Paris court fined the French branch of the Church of Scientology a total of 600,000 euros after finding it guilty of fraud – but allowed the group to continue operating in France.

Days later came the bombshell that Oscar-winning director and long-time Scientologist Paul Haggis had turned his back on the organisation, citing its homophobia for his decision to pack it all in.

When the hearing in France opened, there were expectations that the court could order the group to be banned, but legislation passed in Parliament just before the start of the trial in May, ruled that option out.

The legislation has since been changed back to allow the dissolution of an organisation found guilty of fraud but because of the timing of the case, there was no question of forcing the Church of Scientology to be wound up.

"It is very regrettable that the law quietly changed before the trial," Georges Fenech, head of the Inter-ministerial Unit to Monitor and Fight Cults, told television station France 24.

"The system has now been put in place by Parliament and it is certain that in the future, if new offences are committed, a ban could eventually be pronounced," he said.

The court handed down suspended prison sentences ranging from ten months to two years, and fines of 5,000 to 30,000 euros to four leaders of the group in France.

"This is an important and historic decision because it is the first

time that Scientology has been found guilty of involvement in organised fraud," Olivier Morice, one of the lawyers for the civil parties to the case, told reporters.

The case was brought by two former members who said they were cajoled into spending 21,000 and 49,500 euros on personality tests, vitamin cures, sauna sessions and "purification packs".

Scientology, which is officially considered a sect in France, denies fraud and is expected to appeal.



Scientology poster boy, the Hollywood actor Tom Cruise

Registered as a religion in the US, with celebrity members such as actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta, Scientology enjoys no such legal protection in France, where it has faced accusations of being a money-making cult. The trial, which began on May 25th, centred on complaints made in the late 1990s.

Scientology has faced numerous setbacks in France, with members convicted of fraud in Lyon in 1997 and Marseille in 1999. In 2002, a court fined it for violating privacy laws and said it could be dissolved if involved in similar cases.

When Paul Haggis walked out on the Church, he cited Scientology's support of Proposition 8 in California banning gay marriage as the main reason for leaving. In a scathing letter to the Church of Scientology's Celebrity Centre leader

Tommy Davis, he wrote: "I told you I could not, in good conscience, be a member of an organization where gay-bashing was tolerated ... In that first conversation, back at the end of October of last year, you told me you were horrified, that you would get to the bottom of it and 'heads would roll.' You promised action. Ten months passed. No action was forthcoming." The *Million Dollar Baby* director added: "The Church's refusal to denounce the actions of these bigots, hypocrites and homophobes is cowardly. I can

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When hunters become the prey

BIGOTS MUST LEARN TO PUT UP OR SHUT UP, SAYS **BARRY DUKE**

I am old enough to remember the days when evangelists would hit the streets with a raft of hysterical rants covering issues ranging from the desecration of the Sabbath to the satanic properties of mini-skirts.

I was particularly amused by their denunciation of men who wore their hair long – and I well remember the day in Carnaby Street, London, when a wild-eyed bible-thumper picked me out of the crowd to condemn my long auburn tresses, which reached way below my collar, as “an affront to God Almighty”.

Into my hand was pressed a tract by American evangelist Dr Hal Webb, entitled *Long Hair – Did Jesus Wear it?* The leaflet was addressed to “the unsaved young man”, which tickled me no end. I laughingly thanked the pasty-faced loon – and bade him farewell with the words: “Eat your heart out, baldie” which he took with exceptional bad grace.

The tract opened with the biblical quote: “Doth not nature itself teach you that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?” 1 Cor-

inth. 11: 14. Webb, a great fan of superfluous quote marks, then declared: “The current ‘craze’ of male members of society to wear long hair is not the harmless fad that many assume. It is a planned, calculated trend to break down the manliness of American men. It is developing a ‘unisex’ population of weakness, while it destroys the ruggedness of our men.

“It degrades, sissifies and victimizes our youth who pattern their hair after the ‘fairies’, ‘creeps’, ‘addicts’, ‘homos’ and ‘anarchists’ of this generation. I am aware that these are strong accusations, but read further. Of course, to your present thinking, it may just be a style, yet ask yourself a question or two. Does it please God and glorify Jesus Christ? No indeed! The Bible calls it shame. Now please check the facts.There is not one single proof that Jesus wore long hair. In fact, I believe the facts are clearly just the opposite.”

Webb then offered historical and biblical “proof” to support his assertion that Jesus was cropped. His arguments were as silly as they were boring, and I consigned the tract to the nearest bin – but thanks to the wonders of the internet, last month I was able to reclaim it some 40 years later through Google.

Say what you like about those demented, old-school evangelists, they at least had variety and could conjure up a multitude of imaginative sins to rail against. *Dammit*, they could even be amusing at times, albeit unintentionally.

At some point though, it seemed as if they had run completely out of steam, and one subject alone became the focus of their glassy-eyed wrath: homosexuality. Their preoccupation – nay, obsession with the subject – escalated to such levels of shrill intolerance and dementia that a backlash was inevitable, culminating in legislation in many parts of Europe, and now in America, to curb homophobic hate speech.

I have to say that am uneasy about any laws that seek to curtail free speech – but fundamentalist Christians have over-reacted completely, claiming that such legislation is tantamount to “persecution”, or worse.

Take, for example, American Dr Gary Cass, who is so convinced that the forces of secularism are out to get him that he has set up an organisation called the Christian Anti-Defamation Commission, and published a book called *Christian Bashing*. Hardly anyone had ever heard of Cass (on this side of the pond, anyway) until the US recently introduced the Matthew Shepard Act, named after a young gay man murdered by homophobes, to protect citizens against hate crimes committed because

of their perceived sexuality. Cass was so enraged by the new law that he organised an anti-gay rally in Washington last month, where he and a bunch of fellow bigots exercised what they claimed was their right to badmouth homosexuals. Cass even managed to land a “big fish” to join his pathetic display of hatred and paranoia, British lawyer Paul Diamond, of the Christian Legal Centre, who likes to be known as a “leading religious rights barrister”.

If Cass and his ilk are to be believed, it is not gays who are under threat in America, “but Christians around the country who are met with violence and marginalisation. While the overwhelming majority of Americans are professed Christians, it has become routine for the media and elites to openly mock and trivialise Christians because they choose to express their faith.”

In his book, Cass, former Executive Director of the Center for Reclaiming America for Christ, examines “The threats, slurs and violence being perpetrated against Christians – and the apathetic reaction of American society.” The blurb for *Christian Bashing* says: “Christian bashing, the last acceptable form of bigotry in America, is alive and well and growing more intense and hysterical by the day. For decades, desperate secularists and cultural elites have stereotyped and marginalized conservative Christians in an effort to stop their growing influence on American culture. And the defamation of Christians by ‘progressives’ is only getting worse.

Says Cass: “When controversial statements are made against certain groups, there is a demand for an immediate apology. When anti-Christian sentiments flow from the media, there is never a response – until now.

“When a group known as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of radical homosexual agitators, recently disrupted a Catholic mass in San Francisco, the reaction from the entire religious community was a big yawn. It is time for Christians to stand up and call bigotry by its rightful name and to fight back when defamed.”

Here is just one example of Christian bashing in *Christian Bashing*:

“Christopher Hitchens, on the day [televangelist] Jerry Falwell died, appeared on CNN and referred to Falwell as, “a little toad ... a horrible little person... an evil old man... a conscious charlatan and bully and fraud”.

Which is *precisely* what the lard-arsed turd was, so what’s Cass’s gripe?



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Muslim psychiatrist who killed thirteen American soldiers was a religious maniac

Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the psychiatrist gunman who killed 13 at America's Fort Hood military base on November 5, once gave a lecture to other doctors in which he said non-believers should be beheaded and have boiling oil poured down their necks.

He also told colleagues at America's top military hospital that non-Muslims were infidels condemned to hell and that they should be set on fire.

The outburst came during an hour-long talk that Hasan, an Army psychiatrist, gave on the Koran in front of dozens of other doctors at Walter Reed Army Medical Centre in Washington DC, where he worked for six years before arriving at Fort Hood in July.

Colleagues had expected a discussion on a medical issue but were instead given an extremist interpretation of the Koran, which Hasan appeared to believe.

He also once told a female superior that she'd be "ripped to shreds" because she was not a Muslim.

These were the latest in a series of "red flags" about his state of mind that have emerged since the massacre at Fort Hood, America's largest military installation, last month.

Hasan, armed with two handguns including a semi-automatic pistol, walked into a processing centre for soldiers deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan, where he killed 13 and injured more than 30.

Fellow doctors have recounted how they were repeatedly harangued by Hasan about religion. One Army doctor who knew him said a fear of appearing discriminatory against a Muslim soldier had stopped fellow officers from filing formal complaints.

Another, Dr Val Finnell, who took a course with him in 2007 at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Maryland, did complain about Hasan's "anti-American rants". He said "the system is not doing what it's supposed to do. He at least should have been confronted about these beliefs, told to cease and desist, and to shape up or ship out. I really questioned his loyalty."

Selena Coppa, an activist for Iraq Veterans Against the War, added: "This man was a psychiatrist and was working with other psychiatrists every day and they failed to notice how deeply disturbed someone right in their midst was."



Major Nidal Malik Hasan

Senator Joe Lieberman, who chairs the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security, said there had been "strong warning signs" that Hasan was an "Islamist extremist". The committee would ask "whether the Army missed warning signs that should have led them to essentially discharge him." He added: "The US Army has to have zero tolerance. He should have gone."

But General George Casey, the Army's Chief of Staff, said it was "speculation" that military authorities failed to pick up on warning signs.

"I don't want to say that we missed it. We have to go back and look at ourselves, and ask ourselves the hard questions. Are we doing the right things? We will learn from this."

"It's too early to draw conclusions but we will ask ourselves the hard questions about what we are doing and the changes we should make as a result of this."

Meanwhile, Yemen-based Anwar al-Awlaki, who once served as an imam in America (he was born in New Mexico) has come out in full support of Fort Hood killer Nidal Hasan.

Writing on his website, the Muslim extremist said: "Nidal Hassan (*sic*) is a hero. He is a man of conscience who could not bear living the contradiction of being a Muslim and serving in an army that is fighting against his own people. This is a contradiction that many Muslims brush aside and just pretend it doesn't exist. Any decent Muslim cannot live, understanding properly his duties towards his Creator and his fellow Muslims, and yet serve as a US soldier."

"The US is leading the war against terrorism which in reality is a war against Islam. Its army is directly invading two Muslim

countries and indirectly occupying the rest through its stooges.

"The heroic act of brother Nidal also shows the dilemma of the Muslim American community. Increasingly they are being cornered into taking stances that would either make them betray Islam or betray their nation. Many amongst them are choosing the former. The Muslim organizations in America came out in a pitiful chorus condemning Nidal's operation.

"The inconsistency of being a Muslim today and living in America and the West in general reveals the wisdom behind the opinions that call for migration from the West. It is becoming more and more difficult to hold on to Islam in an environment that is becoming more hostile towards Muslims.

"May Allah grant our brother Nidal patience, perseverance and steadfastness and we ask Allah to accept from him his great heroic act. Ameen."

Al-Awlaki holds a degree in civil engineering from Colorado State University and a master's degree in educational leadership from San Diego State University.

He was interviewed by the FBI after the September 11, 2001, attacks when he was accused of serving as "spiritual adviser" to two of the attackers at his mosque in Falls Church. He was detained by Yemeni authorities in August 2006 and held for more than a year as part of a secret investigation.

In January this year he delivered a lecture by video link to the East London mosque. In August he was banned by the local council from addressing a British fundraising event by video link at the Kensington town hall.

Military prosecutors appear likely to ask for the death penalty for Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, who was charged Thursday with 13 counts of premeditated murder.

That prosecutorial tack is indicated by military investigators' position thus far that Hasan acted alone and without instruction when he attacked Fort Hood's Soldier Readiness Processing Center, killing 13 and wounding 29.

The military is also considering charging Hasan with a 14th murder because one victim was pregnant. The death of an unborn child can qualify as murder under military law.

If Hasan is convicted, any death sentence would ultimately have to be approved by Lt. Gen. Robert Cone, Fort Hood commander, and President Obama.

Scientology: the cracks are starting to show

think of no other word. Silence is consent, Tommy. I refuse to consent.”

Haggis also addressed the Scientologists’ practice of ‘disconnection’ which Davis publicly denied in a recent CNN interview.

“We all know this policy exists. I didn’t have to search for verification – I didn’t have to look any further than my own home. You might recall that my wife was ordered to disconnect from her parents because of something absolutely trivial they supposedly did twenty-five years ago when they resigned from the Church ... Although it caused her terrible personal pain, my wife broke off all contact with them. I refused to do so. I’ve never been good at following orders, especially when I find them morally reprehensible.

“I am only ashamed that I waited this many months to act. I hereby resign my membership in the Church of Scientology.”

In a *Guardian* article (October 31) entitled *The internet has done for Scientology. Could it rattle the Christians, too?* Marina Hyde amusingly wrote:

“Draw near, infidels, for these are dark days for the Knights of Hubbard. Do not despair entirely – the Church of Scientology remains insanely rich, has excellent and rapacious lawyers, and according to the *International Scientology News*, ‘every minute of every hour, someone reaches for L Ron Hubbard technology ... simply because they know Tom Cruise is a Scientologist’.

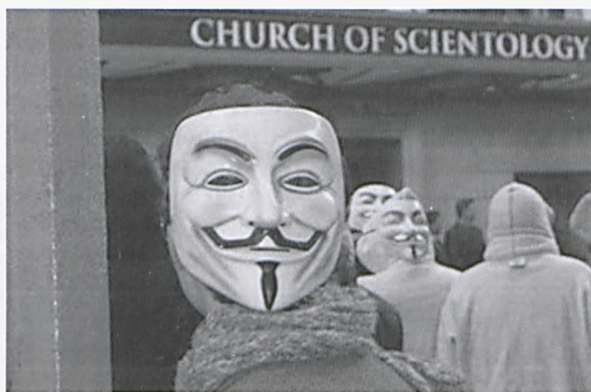
“So unless the world’s supply of troubled fools is melting away quicker than the Arctic ice cap, they can probably hold off trying to lure disaffected Kabbalists into their cultish communion, after the fashion of Pope Benedict and the Anglicans. And yet, all things considered, it has not been the best of weeks for our operating thetans.

“In France, Scientology was found guilty of defrauding its followers after a judge effectively debunked the idea of the Church’s trusty e-meter, a crude polygraph whose readings are used to encourage Scientologists to purchase everything from books to extreme sauna courses. In Los Angeles, the Oscar-winning (even if it was only for the abysmal *Crash!*) director Paul Haggis cut his ties with Scientology in protest at what he branded their tolerance of homophobia, adding for good measure that the Church’s claim that they do not tell people to ‘disconnect’ from unsupportive family members was untrue – his own wife had been ordered to do so. Meanwhile,

Continued from page 1

Scientology’s chief spokesman Tommy Davis stormed out of a television interview with Martin Bashir, after the latter pressed him on what we might delicately term ‘certain articles of faith’. The alien stuff, basically.

“What has caused these synchronous events? Naturally, one’s initial assumption is that the everlasting battery which provides the force field which holds the intergalactic tyrant Xenu captive in an unspecified mountain here on Earth is not as everlasting as billed, or was perhaps commandeered when the battery went in some vast cosmic remote control. In humanoid households,



Members of the world-wide anti-Scientology group Anonymous protesting outside a Church of Scientology building

of course, a TV remote is the appliance for which all other batteries must be yielded up – including those in the smoke alarm – and the same hierarchy holds true on a galactic scale.

“And yet, despite this seeming the most convincing answer, the truth is rather more prosaic. It is the internet wot dun it. Did I lose you on the intergalactic tyrant stuff? Then Google it immediately, as you are fortunate enough to be able to do these days.

“During his lifetime, the religion’s inventor L Ron Hubbard deemed the chief enemies of Scientology to be tax inspectors and psychiatrists (it is not desperately difficult to figure out why).

“Even a sixth-rate science fiction writer such as himself would not have been able to predict that it would be the web that would pose the gravest threat to his church since its inception, facilitating everything from the circulation of whistleblower accounts and cult-busting advice to videos of Tom Cruise chuckling maniacally while

repeating ‘KSW! Keep Scientology Working!’ Strangely, there are times when ‘Lol!!’ – normally the seal-honk of the internet’s least self-aware halfwits – really is the most eloquent dismissal on earth.

“Similarly, if you haven’t seen the Bashir interview, you can do so on YouTube.

“Challenged on the old Xenu chestnut, Davis knows how utterly loony-tunes it sounds, and walking out evidently seems less damaging than even having the discussion.

“And so with the French court case. How could the Scientologists possibly have argued that the readings from their Fisher Price-style Play’n’Polygraph machine justified a penny in the collection tin, let alone hundreds of euros worth of books?

“Yet there is the rub. In France, Scientology is deemed a sect as opposed to a religion, which is why they are required to produce evidence for their claims, where recognised religious leaders are not. For those of us who believe that all religions are full of tall tales, this might seem slightly unfair. Admittedly, it costs more financially to be lied to by Scientology than it does to be taken on an equally evidence-free journey by other faiths, and we should not for a moment gloss over the cruel and repulsive way in which the Church has hounded their critics.

“But when I think of Mel Gibson building his \$42m church compound in Malibu, blithely telling interviewers at the time of the *Passion of the Christ*’s release that his then wife would unfortunately be going to hell because she was Church of England ... well, I can’t find it in myself to find him any less barking than Tom Cruise.

“Clearly, Scientologists should be forced to justify their doctrinal lunacies – the only sadness is that other religions are apparently exempt from having to do the same.

“Imagine for a moment a Bashir-type interviewing some senior cardinal. ‘So,’ he might inquire, ‘you’re saying that by some magic the communion wafer actually becomes the flesh of a man who died 2,000 years ago, a man who – and I don’t want to put words into your mouth here – we might categorise as an imaginary friend who can hear the things you’re thinking in your head? And when you’ve done that, do you mind going over the birth control stuff?’

“What a shame that we see rather fewer of these exchanges, however amusing and useful a sideshow Scientology may be.”

Muslim academics and students are increasingly rejecting Darwin's theory

Muslims in many countries are increasingly rejecting Darwin's theory of evolution, under the influence of conservative elements in Islam, a science conference was told last month.

Nidhal Guessoum, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, told the conference, held in Egypt by the British Council, that in too many places students and academics believed they had to make a "binary choice" between evolution and creationism, rather than understanding that one could believe both in God and in Darwin's theory.

Dr Guessoum, who is a Sunni Muslim, said that in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and Malaysia, only 15 per cent of those surveyed believed Darwin's theory to be "true" or "probably true". This stand was equally prevalent among students and teachers, from high school to university. Most alarmingly, he claimed, science teachers were misrepresenting the facts and theories of evolution by mixing it with religious ideologies.

"We cannot allow people to go into the 21st century with no understanding of science"

A survey of 100 academics and 100 students that he conducted at his own university showed that 62 per cent of Muslim professors and students believed evolution to be an "unproven theory", compared with 10 per cent of non-Muslim professors. "The rate of acceptance of evolution and of the idea of teaching evolution was extremely low," he said. "I wondered, who are all these educated people rejecting evolution? They are even rejecting the fact that it should be taught as scientific knowledge."

Evolution did not contradict Islamic beliefs, Dr Guessoum said, unless a literal reading of the texts were adopted. "Many Muslim scholars, from the golden age of Islam to today, adopted an evolutionary world view," he said.

Addressing the conference in Alexandria, organised for the bicentenary of Darwin's



Nidhal Guessoum, left, meets Yusuf al-Qaradawi, right, in Qatar last year

birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, he said that concerns among Muslims about evolution were being fuelled by Christian creationists. People in Muslim countries would find creationist theses on the internet and, not realising that these were on the fringes of scientific debate, assume that creationism had scientific credibility in the West.

"It is a serious problem," he said. "It would be like going to my students and telling them the planets are not related to the stars, there is no relationship between them and gravitational pull or radiation, and they were all created on one day. We would not dream of describing the cosmos in such a ridiculous manner ... We cannot allow people to go into the 21st century with no understanding of science."

Last year, at a conference in Doha, Qatar, entitled *Science, Cultures and the Future of Humanity*, said: "When Koranic verses are turned into equations and physical quantities are numerically derived from the Holy Koran, one must look at such approaches carefully and critically." He suggested that the key to a positive relationship between the two domains was for science "to give up its imperialistic dreams" and for religion "to be less dogmatic and more open to contributions from other fields."

To the surprise of everyone present, the opening session of the conference was attended by lunatic hate-preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, described by some as "one of the most influential theologians in the Islamic world." After the session ended, al-Qaradawi congratulated Guessoum on his remarks.

Benefits of church schools overplayed

A NEW report published by organisations supportive of church schools has admitted that there is presently little evidence that the ethos they create has much educational benefit.

The think-tank Theos and the Christian educational charity the Stapleford Centre, in a review of the existing literature, found some grounds to think that Christian-based schools have a positive impact, but cautioned that the evidence is "very limited" and that it is difficult to distinguish between the effect of schools and the impact that home and the family might have.

The report's main call is for more research to be done into the impact that church schools have.

The findings are a further blow to the often extravagant claims made by faith school providers for the educational merits of institutions run by religious bodies but mostly or wholly funded by the taxpayer.

The Accord Coalition, which campaigns for fully inclusive schooling, commented last month: "It is hard to disagree that further study is always helpful. However, it is wrong for the government to allow widespread discrimination against teachers and students through current faith school admissions and employment policies."

The Coalition has also cited the need for broad civic assemblies in place of compulsory collective worship and for the balanced teaching of beliefs within all schools.

An Accord spokesperson added: "While evidence of the positive impact of Christian-run schools overall has been hard to come by, there have been many who have raised concerns about issues such as community cohesion and social segregation."

Accord has recently published a dossier setting out the findings of a number of independent studies on the social impact of faith schools.

Trevor Cooling, the research supervisor of the new report commented: "Given the high level of investment in Christian-ethos schools on the part of government, churches, religious organisations, and parents, the lack of available evidence is a cause for concern".

The Theos report was written by Dr Elizabeth Green, a graduate of Oxford University. She taught at secondary level for a number of years.

Catholic Church steps up its w

When Catholic bishops gathered last month in Baltimore for a four-day conference, they did so against a backdrop of mounting anger over what many in the US see as their increasing interference in America's political processes.

Just days before the start of the conference, for example, the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington threatened that it would stop joint aid projects with the Washington authorities if the city passes a law to legalise gay marriage.

The capital's Catholic authorities demanded to be exempted from part of a proposed same-sex marriage law that would also ban discrimination against gay men and lesbians.

In a statement, the city's archdiocese warned that the rules "could prevent social service providers such as Catholic Charities from continuing their long-term partnerships with the District government to provide critical social services for thousands of the city's most vulnerable residents",

Programmes at risk include adoption and foster-care services and could affect 68,000 people who use the services each year, the Church said.

"Religious organisations and individuals are at risk of legal action for refusing to promote and support same-sex marriages in a host of settings where it would compromise their religious beliefs," the Church said – but city council members weren't budging.

The marriage legislation is expected to pass this month, and has the mayor's support.

Jane G Belford, Chancellor of the Washington archdiocese, wrote to Councilman Phil Mendelson in November, asking for an exemption to protect the church's religious freedoms, but Council member Tommy Wells said it would be dangerous to let the Catholic Church start writing DC laws, a sentiment endorsed by Mendelson and other members.

"Allowing individual exemptions opens the door for anyone to discriminate based on assertions of religious principle", Mendelson said. "Let's not forget that during the civil rights era, many claimed separation of the races was ordained by God."

Catholic Charities halted its adoption programmes in 2006 in Boston because Massachusetts banned discrimination against same-sex couples who wanted to adopt children.

Ahead of the bishops' conference, *Time* reported that the Church intended hammering home the message to Americans that marriage as an institution should never include gay couples. Bishops, said *Time*, would

get "a sneak peek at how that fight will be waged in the coming year. Videos aimed at priests and deacons are being produced in English and Spanish to give the pastors better tools to reach their parishioners, especially young people, whom the Church fears need reminding about its basic teachings on marriage, love and sex. Indeed, the Catholic hierarchy in the US is increasingly unapologetic about engaging in the debate over the issue."

In Baltimore, the Church's continuing opposition to gay marriage will be part of a discussion by the bishops as they finish a formal letter on "married love" and reproduction, a document that will also spell out its position against abortion and in vitro fertilisation. A draft of the document makes the case that marriage has been under assault for decades by secularists, feminists and others who see it as a social construction easily morphed into new shapes or ignored altogether.

Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, who leads the US Church's efforts to prevent the legalisation of same-sex marriage, was encouraged by the recent referendum in Maine, where a referendum overturned a law passed just seven months ago that made Maine the US's second state to permit same-sex couples to wed.

Kurtz said the Church opposed discrimination against and ill-treatment of homosexuals. "The Church truly desires to be a defender of human rights," he said. He admits that many Americans do not share Catholic teachings about marriage. Nevertheless, he says the Church believes that the "defence of truth," as God, nature and human history have revealed it, cannot be separated from the pursuit of justice. You can't have justice, he argues, if the truth of marriage between one man and one woman as a cornerstone of human society is denied.

Some critics have faulted bishops who have argued that Catholic politicians who support abortion rights, for instance, should be denied Holy Communion. But Kurtz denies that the Church was overreaching its bounds by taking a side in the controversy. "Our efforts in advocating for traditional marriage and our engagement in public policy debates is entirely consistent with the law," he says. "We're not attempting to cross that line. But we do seek our rightful place in enunciating the principles we hold as essential cornerstones for good society and the common good."

The activist stance, Kurtz says, is tied to Catholic anxieties about the state of marriage as a whole. "We are aware that some of the statistics that were presented to us shows

that, I am told from the 1980s to mid-2005, there's been a decrease of 40 percent to 50 percent of couples turning to the Church for sacramental marriage," said the Archbishop. "We had an awareness of marriage becoming an increasingly private affair, whereas of course the Church believes it is anything but a private affair. Obviously it is very important

But bluster RC Church t

The Vatican has erected a fortress around itself that is so formidable that it seems impregnable. Making any impact on that protective shield is almost impossible, but one man who succeeded in badly denting it was Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, who berated the Vatican earlier this year at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Following our report last month on Wood's attack, the November issue of *New Humanist Magazine* carried a first-hand account of his address. Wood, speaking as a representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, launched a fusillade that attempted to get the Catholic Church to face up to, and admit, its responsibilities in relation to child abuse.

Wood wrote: "As far as we are aware, no one else has ever berated the Holy See from the floor of a United Nations body. I had very little time but a lot of complaints to make, so I jumped in without ceremony. I pointed out straight away that it was not the child abuse itself, but the Church's handling of it that I was addressing. I complained about the 15 years of reports, mandatory under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that the Holy See had failed to produce.

"Victims' suffering had been compounded by being told they were liars, and if they had received any compensation it had been minimised. Senior clerics had been complicit in perpetuating the cycle of abuse by moving offending priests around like sinister chess pieces, and shielding them from civil authorities and likely criminal sanctions.

War in the US on same-sex unions

to the husband and wife who are getting married, but it is also of great importance to the Church and to society.”

Even as Catholic prelates are contemplating more extensive political engagement, grassroots gay activists are now debating how aggressive they should be in their pursuit of changing the laws regarding marriage. Chris

Hartman, executive director of the Fairness Campaign in Louisville, Kentucky said more ordinary gay and lesbian people are going to spread their message themselves, rather than leaving it to national gay-rights-campaign officials and full-time activists. “People are getting angrier,” Hartman says. “More and more people are beginning to feel empowered

to take the fight for their rights into their own hands, and I believe we will see them confront their legislators face-to-face with greater frequency and urgency. I believe that is the type of confrontation that will emerge – people no longer willing to sit idly by and leave the fight for their rights in the hands of lobbyists and special-interest groups.”

Over gay marriage won't shield the Church from its own appalling abuse record

“The Church had done everything in its power, right to the very top, to cover up a massive problem that has been around for decades – some say centuries. I demanded full openness over abusers by the Church worldwide and for it to bring the reporting up to date.

“The Holy See claims ‘its jurisdiction over a territory known as the Vatican City State serves solely to provide a basis for its autonomy and to guarantee the free exercise of its spiritual mission’. It is this enigmatic nation status that affords it the maximum influence with the minimum accountability – the very antithesis of secularism and a permanent ‘get-out-of-jail-free’ card. The only law to which it is subject is international law and, as I showed at the UN, it breaks this with impunity.

“Clearly it has many friends in high places.

“So, I concluded by calling on the international community to hold the Holy See to account – something that it has predictably, but shamefully, failed to do.”

Wood’s attack from the floor of the UN-CRC had to be kept fairly brief, but his longer report, published by the UN, was much more specific and hard-hitting; this “charge sheet” detailed, for example, five Articles of the Convention he accused the Holy See of breaking, and demonstrated that the roots of the problem go to the very highest level of the Church.

“From 1981 until his promotion, Benedict has been in charge of Church discipline. Bernard Law, the former Archbishop of Boston (the largest American diocese), was heavily implicated in massive cover-ups and life became too hot for him in the US despite the personal, and foolish, inter-

vention of John Paul II. So, since 2004, he has been holed up in Rome where he also enjoys Benedict’s patronage. Despite the huge scandal that forced Law from office, he remains a cardinal and a member of the Pontifical Council of the Family. Revealingly, no bishop or cardinal has ever been laicised (sacked) in connection with child abuse matters.

“A few hours after I sat down, the Holy See exercised its Right of Reply, which was widely regarded as complacent, duplicitous and arrogant. It thought, for example, that the addition of just one paragraph on abuse by priests in this report that is 15 years overdue would suffice.

“The rebuttal then went on to claim, falsely, that US Protestants have an even worse record on child abuse. It said the abusers weren’t paedophiles but homosexuals – Benedict’s new bogey men. The reply wilfully missed the point that sex – indeed physical or mental abuse of any kind – by anyone in authority against someone in their charge is an abuse of that authority on top of the wrongs of the act itself.

“The rebuttal was an obvious attempt to deflect attention from the charges I had levelled at the Vatican by introducing other issues that had never been mentioned in the original speech. Most significantly, not one of my many charges did they even attempt to deny – because they couldn’t.

“The Holy See soon realised that Archbishop Nuncio Tomasi – who had written the rebuttal – had made a spectacular misjudgement with his evasiveness and lack of compassion for the victims. No wonder this Right of Reply was conspicuous for its absence from the Vatican’s website.

“Its press officer told a newswire’s Vatican

correspondent: “the Vatican had chosen not to publish it, in order not to ‘add gasoline to the fire’ on a volatile topic.”

“The only other reaction from Rome was to describe my intervention as ‘a very hard and unjust attack’.

“The media reaction, though, was far harder. American Public Radio, for example, covered the matter in a detailed article on its website which concluded: ‘Let Archbishop Tomasi have the limelight and the microphone all to himself. It is hard to imagine what the Church could possibly do to look worse than it already did in the face of a global scandal that has cost it \$2 billion in settlements in the United States alone. Hard to imagine ... and yet somehow, that’s precisely what it did.’

“Neither Benedict, Tomasi nor their colleagues have yet realised just how much the Church’s previously unquestioned authority has been eroded. They need look no further than the 50 newspapers and major blogs in 15 countries around the world that covered this exchange, with hardly any disagreement with the stance I took. *The Tablet* even ran a lead editorial lambasting Tomasi.

“I want to expunge the unspoken rule that the Holy See is above criticism and encourage the international community to take its responsibilities in this respect more seriously. The needs of children should have been the prime concern, rather than massaging the Vatican’s ego or indulging its unquenchable appetite for power.

“Clearly, the Vatican has shot itself in the foot, and I am very happy to have given them the bullet with which to do it. The hundreds of thousands of victims of the Church’s cruelty deserve no less.”

SWINBURNE EXAMINED

The Credulity Principle

JOHN RADFORD challenges philosopher Richard Swinburne's claim that the existence of God can be supported by reason, revelation and religious experience

Richard Swinburne, born 1934, is a philosopher and theologian, former holder of several distinguished chairs and a prolific author. Perhaps his best known work, quoted by many religious writers, is *The Existence of God* (revised edition 1991).

Heythrop College in London, which specialises in theology, has six well-thumbed copies. Most of the thumbs have no doubt been those of students required to read the book. The same ground is covered more briefly in *Does God Exist?* (1996). The existence of God, Swinburne says, can be supported by reason, revelation, and religious experience. I will concentrate first on experience, as it seems to me that in the end, that is what religious adherents fall back on.

Swinburne identifies five kinds of religious experience, though other authors give different lists. Two are public: something that is reportedly seen or experienced by more than one person, such as a "weeping" statue, or a natural phenomenon that is seen as divine, such as thunder in pre-scientific societies (all the examples are mine, not his). These are in principle verifiable. Private experiences are not objectively verifiable. They may be reportable, such as a vision of Jesus, or not reportable, either too difficult to put into words, or too inchoate, simply an "awareness".

Should we rely on these as evidence of God? Here Swinburne formulates two principles, of credulity and of testimony. The first states that a self-report of an experience is *prima facie* evidence for the subject to believe it true. The second states that we should generally believe what others say in the absence of convincing evidence to the contrary. "Credulity" is an odd choice of word, but he uses it throughout. "Credulous" means "too ready to believe" (*OED*); what is presumably intended is "credible", "worthy of belief".

Thus, if someone tells us they have experienced something, we should believe them, unless there is good reason not to. Swinburne lists four sorts of possible reason not

to. One is that the witness may be known, or likely, to be unreliable. They might be a frequent liar, or suffering from some disorder, or under the influence of drugs. Second, the report is of something that is clearly very unlikely, such as seeing a giraffe on the top floor of Harrods. Third, what is reported is definitely known not to be the case. Fourth, whether or not there was something there, it was probably not the cause of the experience. These points are applied to experiences of God thus. First, many people have reported such experiences who are not regular liars, or drug

God has made himself known by his actions at various times, for example in guiding and preserving the Jews. Not very well in Nazi Germany and many other places. Perhaps the Jews were only preserved until they had produced Jesus, when they became expendible, which could explain the Diaspora

addicts, and so on. Second, if God exists, he exists everywhere, so it is never unlikely that he should appear. Third, for this to apply it would be necessary to prove that God does not exist, which, Swinburne claims, cannot be done. Fourth, if God exists, he is the cause of everything. Thus he is the cause of all experiences including those we may have of him (presumably he is also the cause of false experiences).

The principle of credulity seems to me to confuse a subject's honesty with his reliability. A self-report is indeed *prima facie* evidence, but that is not sufficient. If I say I am famished, but then refuse all food, you may doubt that I was really hungry. People

may insist, entirely honestly, that they saw something, yet be mistaken. They are not regular liars, or under the influence, what they report is not impossible or even unlikely, and what they report may arise from something that was there.

Nevertheless the report is false, they are mistaken. Studies of eye-witness testimony offer numerous examples. Furthermore the human mind/brain is capable of entirely subjective experiences that are, to the subject, indistinguishable from reality. They may arise from physical causes such as drugs or deprivation, or from psychological ones such as stress or meditation, or even spontaneously. If someone reports seeing God, or Mr Smith, we may accept that they had some experience, even that they saw something, but we are wary of the report if there is any doubt, especially if much hangs on it. For example, if Mr Smith is accused of burglary, and there are others who assert he was elsewhere. Much (presumably) hangs on seeing God, and many people would have doubts about it. The Roman Catholic church (Swinburne is Greek Orthodox), worries incessantly about whether reported visions are divine. One might ask whether we should accept the testimony of those who have experienced Zeus, or Krishna, or a thousand others. But I suppose the answer would be that the existence of those deities is not likely, whereas that of God is.

The upshot of Swinburne's discussion of the validity of religious experience is, in fact, that it all depends on how likely the existence of God is. If it is very unlikely, we should be dubious about claims to have experienced him. But if it is likely, on a balance of probabilities, then we should accept them (subject to the witness being reliable, not a drug addict, etc).

In the shorter book Swinburne summarises the various reasons he details in the earlier one to demonstrate that probability: "The existence of the universe, its conformity to order, the existence of animals and men, men having great opportunities for co-operation and acquiring knowledge and moulding the universe, the pattern of his-

tory and the existence of some evidence of miracles, and finally the occurrence of religious experiences, are all such as we have reason to expect if there is a God, and less reason to expect otherwise”.

I am not a trained philosopher, and I may not have grasped all the implications of Swinburne’s arguments, but this is how it appears to me. First the existence of the universe. This is the “why is there something rather than nothing?” argument. But there seems to be no logical reason why something should be more, or less, likely than nothing. There are two grounds for calculating probability, theoretical and empirical. The first rests on the mathematical laws of chance, the second on data (as in estimating life expectancy). Both involve populations, theoretical or actual. You cannot calculate the probability of a unique event, which, as far as we know at present, is the case with our universe. Multiple universes would not help. We should need a set of “nothings”, some of them producing “somethings”. On the other hand, it seems to me, if “something” is less likely, and thus needs explaining, this surely applies also to God, who must be something, not nothing.

But Swinburne may mean, not probable in a strict sense, but just that “nothing” seems more likely to him. (Some have argued, from the principles of physics, that something is actually more likely than nothing, but I don’t know enough to comment.)

Second, conformity to order. This is the old argument from design, so frequently refuted. Swinburne’s version is that order is better than chaos, so it would be preferred by God, and order is not likely to arise by chance. His idea that things started from chaos probably derives from the Book of Genesis, though it appears in other creation myths also. Cosmologists would hold that the universe started from matter (however that originated), and became more complex, which implies order, through the operation of normal physical laws. Contrariwise, one could suggest that at the everyday level, the world seems pretty disorderly, or undesignated – for example, unpredictable natural disasters, or reproduction involving multiple young of which only a few survive, or the human body with a useful two kidneys but only one heart, and so on.

Third, animals and men, with their various capacities, including consciousness and morality. The argument is that humans in particular exist to worship God, to marvel at his created world, and to have moral knowledge and free will. As all these are



God and Richard Swinburne

good, they are what God would create. This is hardly evidence that he, or anyone, did so, nor is it clear why they are good, or who has decided that they are. Worship in particular looks odd. Since God is omniscient, he must know that he is perfect. Why does he need a few billion “poor bare forked” animals so that some of them can tell him so (while others ignore him completely)? I think Swinburne’s answer would be that gratitude is good, and we owe that to our creator, but we can be, and indeed are, grateful to each other. And some people really have tragically little to be grateful for.

Fourth, the pattern of history. God has made himself known by his actions at various times, for example in guiding and preserving the Jews. Not very well in Nazi Germany and many other places. Perhaps the Jews were only preserved until they had produced Jesus, when they became expendable, which could explain the Diaspora.

God also influences individuals. Swinburne thinks this is more likely than not, given God’s nature, which seems to mean that he wants us to choose the right path, and every now and then gives a small nudge in that direction. We have to suppose, presumably, that God nudged John Wesley, who was already almost obsessively devout, when he had his revelation of being saved in 1737, but he refrained from nudging Stalin, Pol Pot, and other mass murderers.

Lastly, Swinburne thinks there is some evidence for miracles, which he defines as suspensions of the natural laws created by God himself. They are things like saving oc-

casional individuals from death, but God does not save large numbers from natural or human disasters, as we would not then have a chance to deal with them and show compassion for the victims. Presumably he did not prevent the Holocaust because six million people would not have had the chance to be courageous when the cyanide was thrown in. Jesus is a special case of intervention, and apparently the only authentic case of revelation. Swinburne thinks that God may have realised the need at that point for human atonement through sacrifice, but felt it was unfair to single out one individual, so he created a special, perfect one for the purpose. (Sacrificial rituals often demand a perfect specimen. On a previous occasion, of course, God followed the opposite plan and killed off everyone, except Noah and his family, though he did promise not to do it again.)

It seems to me that if all this were presented as new ideas from one individual, it might well be dismissed as the product of a disordered mind. If it were reported of a culture remote in time or distance, it would be an anthropological curiosity, as it may one day become. But it is within the framework of a dominant religion accepted by millions. Many adherents feel that Richard Swinburne has convincingly supported their belief in (the Christian) God.

Well, you pays your money and you takes your choice. My bet is the other way. And acceptance of Swinburne’s conclusions does indeed seem to demonstrate a principle of extreme credulity.

'Let me tell you ...'

NEIL BLEWITT claimed he obtained a copy of this sermon preached by the Rev Harry Frederick at St Vincent's Church, Korris, last December

My text tonight comes from Enoch. Not from one of the sacred books of that name, but from the character who played the part of Enoch, the stage-hand, in the radio programme called *Happidrome* which I'm sure will be remembered by the older members of this congregation. As will several other catch-phrases from the show. Who can forget, for example, Mr Lovejoy, the manager, and his exasperation with Enoch which always culminated with him instructing his assistant to "Take him away, Ramsbottom!"

But the quotation I wish to use for my text was Enoch's – and I shall not attempt to imitate his broad Lancashire accent – "Ee, I don't know!" And I have to say, on this last Sunday in Advent, when I consider the Christmas story, I have to confess, along with Enoch, that I don't know either.

I have preached the traditional Christmas story for over 50 years now and we have heard it told again this evening in our readings and carols. But, if I am honest, I have to ask myself, having spent many hours critically examining the reports of the events surrounding the Nativity, if they are not like the 18th-century poet's description of a young lady: "...Part fact, part fiction ... and all a contradiction."

But let me put my thoughts before you – and where better to start than with our first reading this evening: "*Behold a virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel...*" I wonder if this has ever puzzled you? Jesus was never called Emmanuel.

Gabriel, who told Mary she would bear a son, instructed her to call him Jesus – which she did. And here, I think, one is bound to ask if Gabriel knew of this prophecy? If he didn't, ought he to have been aware of it? But if he did, why would he have ignored it? Was it because it didn't actually refer to Jesus? There are those who say this is the case. I wonder what you may think.

To divert for a moment, Gabriel went on to say something I find difficult to reconcile. He told Mary that she would be impregnated by the Holy Ghost, but that God would give her son the throne of his father David. That seems to suggest that the Holy Ghost was descended from David.

But that could not be.

And that brings me to the genealogical tables in Matthew and Luke. Both show Jesus to have had the most distinguished ancestry; in Matthew's book through David to Abraham and in Luke's back even farther – to Adam. But both tables insist that Joseph was Jesus' father and not the Holy Ghost; and Luke, later in his gospel, wrote of Jesus as Joseph's son and Joseph and Mary as his parents. Paul agreed with the two evangelists in his letter to the Romans. He wrote that Jesus was born of the seed of David according to the flesh. And to add to this curious mix, the Book of James reported that Mary, and not Joseph, was of the House of David – which would make more sense. But why should Luke have been so reluctant to refer to the Holy Ghost as Jesus's father? He couldn't have believed that the Holy Ghost had acted dishonourably in the matter.

But could it have been that he thought his readers would not have accepted the idea of a miraculous birth? I don't think so. His contemporaries would have been well aware of the reports of others claiming divine origins, that their births had been brought about miraculously.

They would have accepted accounts, legendary though they may have been, of gods born of celestial fire, a crown of feathers, cow's milk, a pomegranate and even a corpse. I doubt, therefore, if there would have been any difficulty in their accepting a birth involving the intervention of a Holy Ghost. The circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth cause us no problems today because each week we re-affirm our belief that Jesus was incarnate by the Holy Ghost. Luke's attitude, then, is something of a mystery to me.

You may find it strange that only two of the evangelists – Matthew and Luke – mentioned Jesus' birth: one of the defining moments of his life. But equally strange is that only two – Matthew and John – mentioned the third defining moment: the ascension.

But to return to the genealogical tables. Those of you who have examined them will have realised that they do not agree with each other. Nor, in fact, do they agree with the tables in the Old Testament.

There is another point which troubles me. I am not a historian, but I have read

people who are and they tell me that there is a discrepancy between Matthew and Luke over the time of Jesus' birth. Matthew placed it in the reign of Herod and Luke when Quirinius ordered the taking of a census. But it seems that Herod died in 4 BCE and the census was not taken until 6 CE. So here we have a single event, happening twice at least ten years apart. Can you wonder, my friends, that I am troubled? Well – "*let me tell you*" (to quote Enoch again) – I am. Seriously so.

But let us move on to the place of Jesus' birth and what happened afterwards. As I have said, Mark and John were silent. Matthew and Luke were agreed that it took place at Bethlehem, but Matthew implied that this was his parents' home anyway. Luke insisted that the family home was at Nazareth and that they travelled to Bethlehem to take part in the census and it was there that Jesus was born. There is a further discrepancy here between the two evangelists. Matthew wrote that the family fled to Egypt after the birth and returned only after Herod's death, settling in Nazareth. Luke, by contrast, wrote that the family went to Jerusalem after the birth and from there directly back to Nazareth. One of these accounts – at least – must be wrong.

Perhaps I may mention here another matter that gives me cause for concern. In Matthew's account, Joseph is said to have dreamed on four occasions of an angel of the Lord instructing him what to do next in the events surrounding Jesus' birth. And all three of the wise men who visited Jesus were contacted in dreams too – and identical ones at that – and advised not to return to Herod and disclose the whereabouts of the infant. But how can anybody give credence to an instruction given in a dream? How did Joseph or the wise men know it was an angel of the Lord? How, indeed, would they know what such an angel looked like? And why did God not send Gabriel to communicate with Joseph and the wise men personally? He had proved an able messenger in Mary's case and there is no indication that I can find that he was otherwise occupied at the time.

There is also some dispute as to the exact place of Jesus' birth. Matthew described it as a house or inn and Luke as a cattle-stall. But James and the Arabian Gospel of the Infancy opted for a cave. It could be, of

course, that Matthew and Luke had no idea where it was any more than James or the author of the Arabian gospel. But I can't help wondering if they knew that other divinities were reported to have been born in humble surroundings. Ichthyus and Hermes, for example, were said to have been born in manglers while Krishna and Bacchus were believed to have been born in caves. Did the Christian writers calculate that it had to be one or the other and simply took a chance?

Now just a word about the star which Matthew reported as having stopped over the place where Jesus lay. I find this difficult to comprehend. I don't really care to mention the name of Charles Bradlaugh in a holy place but he once pointed out that if one looked up into the sky on a starry night and tried to imagine over which town (let alone building) a star shone, one might experience no little difficulty. I have to agree with that.

Next to Jesus' visitors. Matthew recorded that wise men came from the east. He doesn't say how many but, as they presented three gifts, the assumption has always been, reasonably I think, that there must have been three of them. Luke apparently knew nothing of this but he did record that shepherds were directed by an angel to go to Bethlehem. In his turn, Matthew, it seems, knew nothing of this. For his visitors James had wise men, a midwife and a woman called Salome. Another gospel, not in our Bible, had wise men visiting the child, but not until two years after the birth.

The Arabian gospel recorded, as visitors, wise men, shepherds and a midwife, while the Armenian gospel adds Eve to the list and a fourth gift from the wise men – a Testament Adam gave to Seth. Using the assumption I mentioned earlier, four gifts would seem to indicate four wise men but the Armenian gospel recorded only three. It added that the wise men were also kings and gave their names and kingdoms – India, Persia and Arabia. I can't help wondering how and where they met up.

I must return to Salome for a moment, for in my ministry I have conducted many marriage ceremonies and each time I have read from the Prayer Book that the first miracle that Jesus wrought was at Cana of Galilee where he turned water into wine. But this is incorrect if the non-biblical gospels are to be believed – and, although they weren't selected for inclusion in our Bible, they are similar in content to those that were and might easily have found a place there. Salome provides an example of this.



Card by 10% of Los Angeles. It should be pointed out that an "It's a girl!" Christmas card was first produced by former National Secular Society President Barbara Smoker in 1973 and has appeared in various forms ever since.

She had a withered hand and when she touched one of Jesus' swaddling-clothes she was healed. One will recall a similar miracle from the Bible where a woman with an issue of blood was healed by touching the hem of Jesus' garment. Incidentally, the swaddling-cloth that healed Salome was reported to have been taken back to the east by the wise men where it was found to be proof against fire.

One other point occurred to me. It is not particularly important – simply a curiosity. What happened to the gifts of the wise men? None is referred to again in the gospels and nor does a claim seem to have been registered for their having turned up since. Hundreds of objects from biblical times are reported to have been found: many portions of the cross, for example, Mary's girdle, a cruet containing Jesus' sweat and blood, John the Baptist's head, Aaron's rod, two of Peter's fingers, some of the stones which slew Stephen – and many others. But, as far as I know, not the gold, frankincense, myrrh or Adam's Testament.

But that is something of an aside, although it is one more aspect of the Nativity story that bothers me. I hope, this

evening, that I have given you all something to think about but, as you will have gathered, I am finding it difficult to reconcile the various versions of the story; and it is painful for me to face up to the consequences of this, particularly after 50 years of preaching, mostly uncritically I'm afraid, the traditional account of the Nativity.

In view of all that I have said, and to continue with my theme of quotations from *Happidrome*, I shall not conclude my sermon with the traditional ascription, but with something Mr Lovejoy would say when he was beset by problems – usually caused by Enoch. It reflects something of what I feel now but, again, I shall not attempt to imitate the Lancashire accent. His words were: "Ee, if ever a man suffered!"

Postscript

Along with the copy of the Rev Frederick's sermon, Neil Blewitt also received a cutting from the *Korris Free Press*. It is reprinted below:

It is with great regret that we record the passing of the Rev Harry Frederick, Vicar of St Vincent's, Korris. It occurred last Sunday evening after his traditional Christmas service when he preached what proved to be his final sermon.

As readers may recall, there was a storm last Sunday evening and one member of the congregation recalled that, although the sermon was punctuated by thunder which tended to rattle the windows, it did not deflect the Vicar. However, as he left the church after the service with the organist, Mr Cecil Robinson, a bolt of lightning struck the church steeple and dislodged the ancient weather-vane – a golden cockerel – which, unfortunately, fell on the vicar and injured him ... fatally as it turned out.

Your reporter asked Mr Robinson if the vicar was able to say anything and he replied: "Yes. He said two things. The first was "I rather think I spoke a little too freely, Cecil." Then, just before he lapsed into unconsciousness, he turned to me, smiled and said: "Take me away, Ramsbottom!"

Shortly before going to press, we learned with sadness that Neil Blewitt, who had contributed a impressive array of humorous articles and poems to the *Freethinker* and other free-thought journals over many decades, had died in October. An obituary will be published in the January issue

Hitchens & Fry v the Catholic Church

Peter Brietbart attended an historic debate in London in October – and grabbed the opportunity to interview hard-hitting atheist Christopher Hitchens, who helped defeat a motion that read:

The Catholic Church is a Force for Good in the World

There are few experiences more pleasing than watching Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Fry utterly demolish opponents in a debate. And in October, in the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, they squared up brilliantly to Tory MP Ann Widdecombe and Nigerian Archbishop Onaiyekan, who were tasked to defend the motion that *The Catholic Church is a force for good in the world*.

Before the debate – organised by Intelligence Squared – 678 people supported the motion, while 1,102 were opposed. The “don’t knows” totalled 346. This is how it changed after the debate: For: 268. Against: 1,876. Don’t know: 34. In other words, after hearing the speakers, the number of people in the audience who opposed the motion increased by 774!

One highlight included hostess Zeinab Badawi asking the Archbishop if Jesus actually said anything about homosexuality, and him replying “That’s not the point.”

Another was Fry’s noting that the Church was obsessed with sex. He made the comparison with food, claiming that only two kinds of people were obsessed with food: the anorexic and the obese. In a religious context this boiled down either to celibacy or child abuse.

And to see Stephen Fry finally speak his mind on the topic of religion was a pure delight.

But the masterstroke – the *coup de grace* – came from Christopher Hitchens, whose breadth and depth of knowledge meant that the debate was no longer a mere discussion, but a devastating prosecution of the Catholic Church for crimes against humanity.

Within minutes of Hitchens’ opening, the full realisation of the evils of the Church became apparent to all but the most obstinate of believers. The institutionalised rape and torture of children; the teaching that condoms can cause AIDS; the historical atrocities; the endorsement of dictators; the justification of slavery; the subjugation of women; the suppression of Enlightenment thinking; the torture and murder of heretic scientists and the bullying and hatred of homosexuals, were

but a few of the issues covered. Hitchens suggested that the Archbishop should not have come here to debate, but to beg for forgiveness on behalf of his wicked organisation.

I caught up with him after the momentous victory, and he was visibly eager to speak to the *Freethinker*.

PB: How would you respond to the religious apologists who would say that the majority of religious activity is benign in nature?

CH: Well, I have a standard reply, I hope you don’t mind. I’ve evolved it over a lot of debates, and put it to a lot of religious believers and spokesmen, and I’ve never yet had a reply: Name for me a moral action or a moral statement ever made or committed or uttered by a believer, that a non-believer couldn’t have made.

No-one’s ever come up with one. Name for me now a wicked thing done or an evil thing said because of their religion – you’ve already thought of some.

There’s wickedness in print and in action, directly so with religion. Goodness can be found in the giving of yourself to other fellow creatures. And for its own sake, I should add, not so you’ll spread the word, sign up more people so you can keep on saying your number is a billion. That’s not a good motive for charity. So, although it’s a question one has to ask, I think it is a fatuous question.

PB: What would you say to those who level accusations of racism against those who criticise Islam? It’s an increasingly popular stance on the Left.

CH: Indeed. The creepy word “Islamophobia” has been coined to give the idea, without actually saying so, that quarrelling with Islam involves a dislike of Muslims – the majority of whom are darker skinned than I am. But that’s absurd because Islam promises to be a religion of universality. It at least does say that. Some religions aren’t accessible to all. Judaism, for example. Well, you can convert, but it’s not quite the same.

PB: Rather more painful to join.

CH: Quite so. There’s always a special preachment. For a long time you couldn’t be black and be a Mormon, for example.

In America you could, but you couldn’t be a deacon, and you didn’t really have a soul. That kind of thing. Islam, at least, doesn’t do that. So it’s pathetic to say that there’s any racial prejudice in criticism of Islam, as pathetic as it would be to ask Ann Widdecombe if she thought that being against Catholics meant being against Italians. Which, incidentally, at one point in America, it probably slightly was.

PB: Bush, we discover, told Jacques Chirac that the biblical demons Gog and Magog were at work in Iraq. Have you heard about that? What are your thoughts?

CH: Yeah, I don’t believe Chirac. I don’t know what the truth of the matter may be, but I do know that Jacques Chirac is an untrustworthy scumbag. And anyway, that’s not the way Bush talks. I don’t believe the Palestinian guy who said that Bush told him that God told him to invade Iraq, either. Bush is a Methodist. What he’s said, and he’s said it often, is that once you’ve worked to a certain point, you can do no more – it’s in God’s hands. That’s fatalism. Actually he’d make a very good Muslim. And if he’d been born in Saudi Arabia, he would be one, just as he’d be a Protestant if he was born on the right side of Belfast.

PB: Here’s another – a chance to be a little more witty. Voltaire once said that the religion of one age becomes the literary entertainment of the next. What do you predict for the future of religion?

CH: Yes, Voltaire is right, of course. But that doesn’t mean that the thing won’t keep on mutating. I mean, I do think we are mammals and primates. We are in some sense programmed to look for patterns, we’re easily scared, and we often put up with a crap theory over no theory at all. And we’re afraid of dying. And we’re only partly rational. Our pre-frontal lobes are too small, our adrenaline glands are too big, because we’re adapted to the savannah, from which we fled. So I think religion is not eradicable, but then, I wouldn’t want it to be eradicated.

I’d be sad, in a way, if it did die out, because it is human. But I think it can be domesticated in the same way as our violent tendencies. We have other anti-social or superstitious tendencies which we can,

at least for a while, rid ourselves of. It's the job of civilization to bring superstition under bounds and keep it there.

PB: If all writings from throughout human history were to be destroyed, and you could choose to save the writings of a single author, who would you choose, and why?

CH: That's a very good question. Well, here's what I would look for. I'd look for the author from which you could reconstruct the work of many, many other writers because of references, quotations, allusions that one is supposed to get.

PB: That's a cunning answer. Very tactical.
CH: Yes, well, that would put Shakespeare very high, for example. From that there's a great deal of biblical stuff, classical, Italian renaissance, history, mythology ... there's a huge amount of other learning in it. I don't think there's any other writer of bodies of canon in that way. So from that we could work out quite a lot about what we were before, as a species. But for that reason, not because of its extraordinary beauty and wisdom. Otherwise it would be Darwin. It would have to be Darwin. His work, too, is full of great references, and teaches us a great deal about the natural world. He was a literary type.

PB: Ah, I had hoped you might say Dar-



Christopher Hitchens at the debate in London.
 Photo credit: Michael Eleftheriades, of Intelligence Squared

win. That might just be my choice, too. Next, what can we do, as individuals or groups, to further the cause - if you can call it that - of reason and unbelief?

CH: Well, it may sound like a religious, or confessional answer, but you have to start with yourself. We all have to overcome

our own irrationalities and superstitions first. That's a lifetime of education, and it's worth having. I try and do it every day. I expose myself to other people's opinions, writings and so forth, so that's the main thing. Oh, and if you do well enough, you might just get asked your opinion.

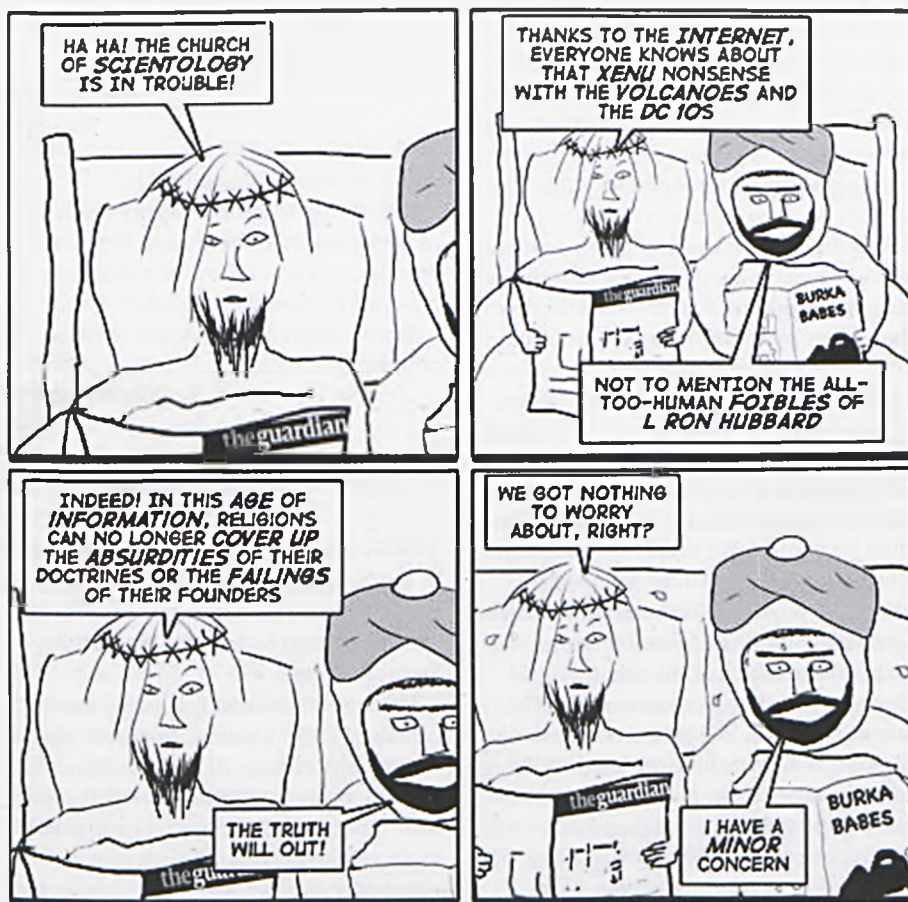
The other thing is not to give anything the go-by. You have to get up and say no when someone suggests there should be a tax break for churches, or that the bishops should sit in the House of Lords, or anything like it. Oppose anything that trespasses on the secular line of the separation of church and state, because civilisation begins where the separation of church and state begins. There are no exceptions to that in any country. So it's in the general interest, as well as your own, that we patrol that line with great vigilance.

PB: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

CH: You're very welcome!

For those of you who have not attended an Intelligence Squared debate, let me say that these events are very well organised, and are worthy of my highest recommendation. Check out the details of their next event at www.intelligencesquared.com.

Jesus & Mo



Peter Brietbart, 21, is a student of politics and philosophy at the University of Sussex where he is chair of the Secular Society



points of view...



A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS LETTERS TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK.
THE POSTAL ADDRESS IS POINTS OF VIEW, FREETHINKER,
PO BOX 234, BRIGHTON BN1 4XD.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

The two letters on Science and Religion (*Points of View*, November) use definitions of religion and science drafted to support their argument. Such definitions need to be tested against religion and science as they actually are; those who know something about them know it is notoriously difficult – one is tempted to say, up to now almost impossible – to formulate satisfactory definitions of either.

The incompatibility of religion and science is falsified by the existence of believing scientists and engineers. At the time of the scientific revolution, which took off in the mid-16th century, religious belief was as good as universal, not just among the population at large but among intellectuals.

C P Snow wrote in *The Two Cultures and a Second Look* (1963): “Statistically, I suppose slightly more scientists are in religious terms unbelievers, compared with the rest of the intellectual world – though there are plenty who are religious, and that seems to be increasingly so among the young”. So Snow, who was certainly not a Christian, thought it possible to be a scientist and a believer, as did, to take just one other example, Richard Feynman.

The conflict thesis of the relationship between science and religion which we are discussing and which proposes inevitable conflict between them is not widely endorsed by historians of science, who advocate a more nuanced position (that is, seriously qualified). There is not space here to expand on qualifications to Draper’s and White’s work. While their descriptions of the cases they quote would have been modified in the light of a century’s subsequent historical scholarship, they are often condemned as anti-religious, whereas both were religious believers – read their books and their obituaries, if you don’t believe this.

Scientists are not judged by whether they are religious believers, they are judged by their results and on whether they offer natu-

ralistic explanations. While the latter is often described as methodological atheism, this does not require them to be philosophical atheists; this transition is a bigger leap than we as freethinkers are inclined to believe.

Likewise, science teachers are judged by what their students know and can do, and whether their students understand the difference between science and non-science. Science teachers may be believers, but while they may wrestle with conflicts (if any) between their scientific conclusions and their theological beliefs, their own conflicts are a matter of indifference to everyone else unless they seek to foist their own theology upon others.

A British Council survey conducted this year across ten countries showed 53 percent of adults thought creationism and intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution

in school science lessons.

This is rather more serious than addressing where schoolchildren from believing backgrounds are coming from. Dr Fern Elsdon-Baker, head of the Darwin Now programme, said her feeling was that the debate about Darwinism has been portrayed as very polarised: atheistic science against theistic religion. A previous survey had suggested a majority of people in each country felt it was acceptable to have faith and to think evolution happens by means of natural selection, and she thinks the polarisation of the arguments has confused them about how science works as a process. So it was necessary to communicate science in a less dogmatic, more sophisticated way, she said.

Colin D J Mills
Amersham

THE SEXUALITY OF JESUS

I WAS a bit surprised to find nearly two pages of letters in the November issue of the *Freethinker* devoted to Jesus’ sexuality.

As atheists, presumably most of us would agree that if Jesus existed at all, he was probably a Jewish lay preacher who operated some 2,000 years ago.

As George Broadhead points out, the only source of information on anything Jesus might have said is the gospels, which cannot be verified. We simply do not know and cannot possibly establish whether he said (or did) anything attributed to him.

Granted, Jesus might have said things which indicated he had an orthodox Hebrew approach to homosexuality and adultery. Even this, however, would give no indication at all as to his own sexuality. It is quite possible for an individual to make homophobic public utterances while (secretly) engaging in homosexual acts – any number of religious people, Conservative MPs and others have been caught

doing so over the years.

Speculating as to his sexuality, or sex life (if any) cannot however serve any useful purpose, unless of course one wishes to wind up religious homophobes.

As an historical or academic exercise, it is pointless.

Graham Livingstone
London

CLERICAL SEX ABUSE

YOUR item on the Leeds child abuse vicar in the November edition reported that he was responsible for helping to draw up the child protection code of the Worth Valley Steam Railway.

There is, however, an interesting quote contained in the report on the same case in this month’s *Heritage Railway* magazine. A spokesman for the Worth Railway Railway said “None of the offences had anything to do with the railway. He was mainly a member of the civil maintenance team *and, because he was a man of the cloth*, we invited

him on to the young persons and vulnerable adults policy group". (My emphasis.)

Why is the assumption so often made that because there is a dog collar around the neck the individual inside is purer than pure?

Hopefully the revelations from Ireland will begin to challenge this. If only people knew more of the abuses and horrors contained in that little black leather-bound book that clerics usually have about their person!

Peter Morgan
Ashford

DISBELIEF IN A NUTSHELL

WHILE we are accusing the obvious culprits (the Vatican, capitalism etc) and the all-too-passive conservationists regarding the world's demographic disaster, what about the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and its bizarre logic when it comes to campaigns, donations and the like?

Can an army really have ever marched through a channel conveniently slicing through the Red Sea? Can any female remain a virgin after giving birth? Must grown women hide their shameful faces and hairdos, so that butch males shouldn't lose their minds and have to rape the girlies? How come the Lord upstairs listens to praying believers, yet doesn't strike dead us doubters?

Other peoples' religions are fairy tales, obviously, whereas our own are based on facts, right? Recall what we did in the Crusades, and how we still gape with ignorance at the resentment felt toward us ever since. What's wrong with our brains?

If one man kills another, that's sinful and punishable. Men slaughtering one another in wars, however, are so praiseworthy that we give them medals. Enemies are 'terrorists', we're heroes.

While we're at it, we massacre literally millions of enemy civilians too; men, women, children, infants, dogs, cats, canaries, parakeets. (Think of Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Afghanistan etc.)

Generation after generation, God-blessed patriots say nothing about all this, show no indignation, utter not one word of repentance. There's money to be made in warfare. Yet religions bring grace?

Men massacring in wars is perfectly OK, but not women, not since Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* anyway. Is this because they are superior to men, not needing to display their Darwinian superiority to one another as males do?

Or, can it be there is some sort of phallic substitution in shooting off guns?

Certain elderly gents claim they can absolve us of our sins merely by waving their fingers through the air. Is this an encour-

agement to commit further sins, showing how easy it is to squirm out from under guilt? Purified by those same sprinklings, are infants thereby authorised to sin later and get away with it?

Does there exist deep beneath us a Hell inhabited by bad souls in a molten stratum our geologists can't locate? Does a Paradise inhabited by good souls exist above us, in ether our astronauts have pierced? Why doesn't God hurl a lightning bolt against us

demented few who disbelieve in his existence? Is it to prove He is Love?

If veils can be outlawed, shouldn't skull-caps, turbans, gold crosses, halos, winged angels, Santa Claus, Christmas decorations in streets also be forbidden? Logically....

Oh, I beg your pardon. For a moment I forgot there are things we're not supposed to query logically, ever, ever, ever.

Leslie Schenk
France

SIX WAYS OF ATHEISM: A DIFFICULT BOOK TO REVIEW

I HAVE not responded to many other reviews of my book, *The Six Ways of Atheism*, but Barry Thorpe's review (*Freethinker*, October 2009) raises several points that should be challenged. In doing so I acknowledge he makes a couple of reasonable points. I also admit the book is very difficult to review because it really requires both comprehensive knowledge to know which arguments and points are original, and expertise in logic to assess whether the logical arguments are correct – a subject which is likely to be debated and cause disagreements for many years to come.

The worst aspect of his review is that he is continually kow-towing to non-theists rather than challenging them – eg "In practice, the subjectiveness of 'good' is that of God, or rather what the priests say God means by it."

I have news for Barry – every society in history has had a notion of good and many of them are independent of God or gods (eg in Buddhist societies in the East). Good needs to be understood and appreciated in a secular, universal way, and the concept of God measured against it, not the other way around.

He also complains that I have not dealt with the notion of a transcendent God, to which my response is Euclid never dealt with the concept of a square circle! You wouldn't get far in a maths examination if you claimed that your answers are correct because they transcend all known mathematics and all consistency! Concepts of God should not be accepted at face value just because some theologian mouths it (any more than a square circle is to be accepted).

They must be examined for their coherence, meaningfulness and significance (and whether they can be distinguished from other things like nature) even before one can take them seriously as possible notions of God – and modern redefinitions of God generally fail these initial tests

Barry even suggests that the name of the book should have been changed out of sensitivity to religious fundamentalists – I say no way.

As far as Barry's discussion of the defining qualities of God, he exaggerates the significance of that because they are not all required for any argument. None of my six arguments hinges on more than three of those qualities and the best innovative argument, the Universal Uncertainty Argument, is so economical in its premises that it hinges on part of just one of those qualities, omniscience (that it is necessary if God exists that he justifiably can know for certain that he is God – which is only part of omniscience – and no entity, including any potential god can actually be certain of that).

Finally, to put the book into perspective, it simply cannot be an introduction to arguments for theism as it rejects three of the four most popular current intellectual arguments for atheism as being logically flawed, and considerably amends the fourth argument.

However, what it can be and what I think it will be is a seminal, pioneering book that introduces two new lines of argument (Aggregate of Qualities and Universal Uncertainty) that show God is incompatible with logic and so does not exist

Although the book has not, as yet, set the world alight, it is being quite widely read internationally, particularly by people specifically interested in the subject, and, apart from the *God Delusion*, it is now being stocked by more public libraries in the English-speaking world (well over 300 in the UK alone) than almost any other book on atheism. That would be enough to ensure that the new arguments in it are introduced, disseminated, repeated and eventually enter into the main body of arguments for atheism.

Geoffrey Berg
Manchester

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

Birmingham Humanists: i Tova Jones 021 454 4692
w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: i 01273 227549/461404. w <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Dec 2, 8pm. Ken Humphreys: *St Paul, the First Christian Trickster?* Wed, Jan 6, 8pm. Adam Trimmingham: *Living Without Religion*.

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. The Court House, High St & Church Lane, Berkhamsted. Tues, Dec 15, 8pm. Dr Fitzpatrick: *Screening Tests*.

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. w [web www.phil-cork.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/humleft.htm](http://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:

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.

Hampstead Humanist Society: i N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Tel: 0207 328 4431.

w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wed of the month (except January, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow at 8pm. December 9th: Grand Victorian Yuletide Party. Non-members welcome.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagemba@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. Jan 7, Rabbi Zvi Solomons: *Everything You Wanted to Know about Judaism, But Were too Afraid to Ask*.

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 programme 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 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.

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 Vignies, 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, Wavecrest, 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, Catford SE6. Meetings on third Thurs, 7.30pm. Dec 17, Christmas Party.

w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com

Liverpool Humanist Group: i 07814 910 286

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e lghhumanist@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. Wed, Dec 15, 7.30pm. Annual Social with buffet & quiz. Advance booking essential.

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 11 am & 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq, 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

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.

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists: 25 Haughgate Close, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1LQ. Tel: 01394 387462.

Secretary: Denis Johnston.

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

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

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 Tues of the month at Ludlow, Oct to June.

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

Listing & Event Deadlines

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.