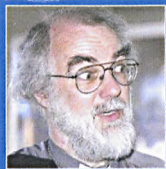


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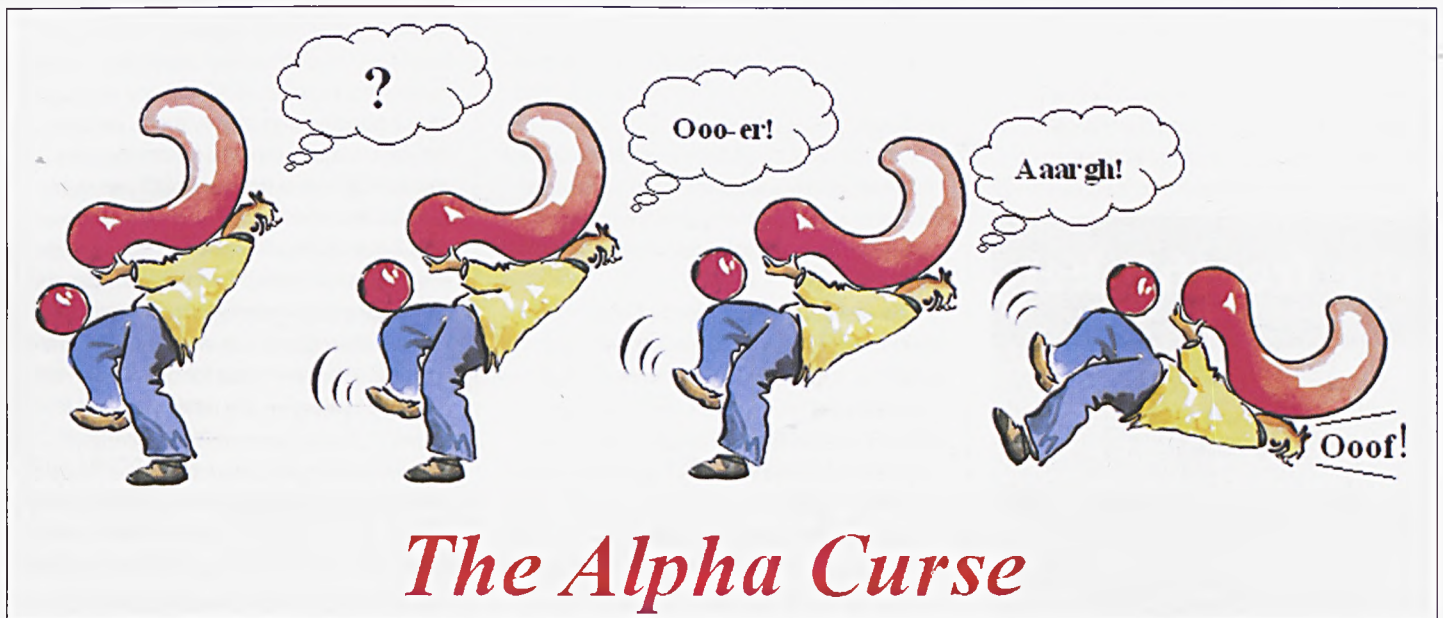
# the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

£1.25 JANUARY 2009 VOLUME 130 NO 1

WWW.FREETHINKER.CO.UK

## NSS attacks Alpha Course's infiltration of UK schools



The fundamentalist Christian Alpha Course is being operated in state schools up and down the country, drawing in children to its particular brand of literalist religious dogma – and all with the schools' approval and support. The National Secular Society reports receiving increasing numbers of complaints from parents who are alarmed by the number of evangelical groups that are being allowed into schools to spread intolerant religious teaching, but the Alpha Course is by far the most organised and widespread.

The *Times Educational Supplement* last month reported the growing influence of the Alpha trend. It cited Archbishop Blanch Church of England High School in Liverpool, where "Youth Alpha" courses have been running for three years and had 300 pupils participating. Each runs for eight weeks at lunch-time and is promoted throughout the school on notice boards and in assemblies.

Liverpool has one of the highest rates of homophobic crime in Britain. According to Liverpool city councillor Steve Radford, it has the second highest proportion of pupils in faith schools after Wigan, with around half of all schools in the area attached

to a religious denomination. He added that the churches are still powerful in the city, which has a sizeable Catholic population.

The course was set up with the headteacher's backing by Reverend Kate Wharton, the Bishop of Liverpool's appointee on the school's board of governors. She claims that the Alpha Course is a "balanced introduction" to Christianity.

What she does not mention, says the NSS, is its homophobia and the final sinister "holy spirit" session that encourages participants to speak in tongues and behave hysterically.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "This is real fundamentalist stuff all wrapped up in reassuring words and delivered by a bloke in a jumper with a permanent smile who looks remarkably like Tony Blair. This is not a 'balanced introduction' to anything; it is a carefully planned attempt to push people in a very specific direction. It is deeply manipulative and has no place in schools paid for by the taxpayer."

Quoted in the TES, Jonathan Bartley of the Ekklesia Christian "think tank" said the courses deal with doctrine rather than Christianity as a way of life. "It's about sin, hell and resurrec-

(Continued on p5)

# Putting the Vogelenzans in perspective

**BARRY DUKE ON A CASE THAT SHOULD NEVER HAVE COME TO TRIAL**

If it weren't so damned difficult to pronounce, the word "Vogelenzangstered" would now be in common usage in the UK, along with "Google" and "iPod" and the likes.

To be "Vogelenzangstered" would mean that you'd been subjected to a tirade of faith-based abuse – something I've grown quite accustomed to in my long years as a militant atheist. But not once has the thought ever crossed my mind that being "Vogelenzangstered" might classify me as the victim of a "hate crime" who could justifiably have had the abusers brought to book for the offence.

Not so Ericka Tazi, a convert to Islam, who scurried off squeaking to the police in high dudgeon after her new-found faith received a mauling at the hands of a daft pair of Christian fundamentalists who run what appeared to be a Basil Fawty-type establishment in Liverpool.

I guess you all know the story of Ben and Sharon Vogelenzans by now; last month it received wide media coverage when the two rude nutters were charged with "religiously ag-

gravated and threatening behaviour" towards their hijabbed Muslim guest, and hauled before the beak. In my opinion, and that of millions of others, the case was a disgraceful waste of police time and taxpayers' dosh.

Anyway, the Christian Institute, of which the Vogelenzans are said to be members, thought all their Christmasses had come at once. They waved placards and sung hymns and prayed before television cameras. And they crazily waved "free speech" placards. Not since the heady days of the Festival of Light rallies were so many loons seen by so many on TV.

And then came the rejoicing, and declarations that their prayers had been answered. For, thanks be to 'im Upstairs, the case was thrown out of court after a two-day trial.

Among the many newspaper columnists who felt duty-bound to comment on the case was *The Sunday Times'* Ron Liddle, who had me howling with this piece:

"Outside the courtroom the Volestranglers' Christian society supporters held a spontaneous party, singing *Oh Happy Day* etc at this victory for Jesus over the dark forces of god-less legislation.

"The rest of us should simply cringe: Volestranglergate epitomises almost everything that is hideous about Britain, in microcosm; its spite and pettiness and self-righteousness, its po-faced and now institutionalised political correctness, its magnificent lack of common sense.

"What happened was more or less this: The born-again-Christian Volestranglers run a hotel in Liverpool called the Bounty House, which accepts lots of local authority bookings. Ericka Tazi, a Muslim convert, and her husband booked to stay there, on the advice of their local council.

"When they came to check out on the final morning, with Tazi wearing her headscarf [for the first time], they were subjected to some sort of interrogation as to their religion. It was not conducted on a terribly elevated philosophical plane: 'You Muslims, then? That Mohammed bloke, he was a warlord, he was, a right bad 'un. They're all terrorists?' Perhaps not those exact words but something to that effect, it seems.

"Tazi objected to this outburst, as well she might. When I slump down to reception after a night in a hotel room, I expect to have a brief argument about the bottles of Jack Daniel's consumed from the mini-bar and maybe an unpleasant and embarrassing haggle over the cost of their adult video: *Harriet Does Harlesden*. I suppose that neither of those conversa-

tions was probably going to happen in the case of Tazi and her husband. But what I mean is that standing there with my credit card in my hand and the minicab revving outside the door, I don't expect to have to defend my religion, argue about the likelihood of transubstantiation or re-enact the crusades.

"Quite clearly, the Volestranglers were rude and Tazi was entirely within her rights to have objected to her treatment. You wonder what happens when Rastafarians try to check out from the Bounty. 'Good morning, sir, any extras? Now pardon me, but looking at your hair and that spliff in your left hand – a religion that thinks Haile Selassie is a god? Highly Unlikely if you ask me, ha-ha! Back to Africa indeed – off you go, Marcus Garvey'.

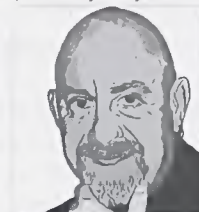
"The Volestranglers were treating their guests not in the manner you might expect from decent, hospitable hoteliers but in the manner you might expect from self-righteous and pig-ignorant Christian bigots. Tazi was absolutely entitled to lodge a complaint with the local council, hoteliers' association, hotel inspectors, Good Hotel Guide and so on, and advise people never to stay there, despite the 'free use of sauna and swimming pool and double rooms from only £80 per night, crucifixions extra'.

"But how did it come to court? By what process did this fairly mild, if unpleasant, spat end up before a magistrate with the proceedings – which stretched across two days, with barristers and the like – paid for by you and me?

"Can you imagine any other time in our country's history when this staggeringly fatuous exchange, conducted in the lobby of some mid-market Liverpool hotel, would have ended up in the law courts – any time other than now, with our hair-trigger sensitivity to real or entirely imagined slights against our race, our religion, our gender and so on?

"Clearly the Crown Prosecution Service thought there was a case to answer here, otherwise it would not have been brought. Both the CPS and the Old Bill decided to proceed with a case which was based on nothing more than a sliver of rudeness, a prosecution motivated by the fabulously inane anti-hate legislation we have seen enacted in the past five or six years, which is of absolutely no use to man nor beast, except to provide a moment's cheer for supporters of the ghastly Volestranglers."

Liddle has always been one of my favourite columnists, and this offering demonstrates precisely why I am such an ardent admirer.



**BARRY DUKE**  
FREETHINKER  
EDITOR

## the freethinker

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Founded in 1881 by G W Foote  
UK ISSN 0016-0687  
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher.

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### Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to Freethinker, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield.

# 'People with God in their bloodstream should not be treated as oddballs'

Dr Rowan Williams said ministers were wrong to think that Christian beliefs were no longer relevant in modern Britain and he criticised Labour for looking at religious faith as a "problem" rather than valuing the contribution it made to society.

The Archbishop also suggested that the "political class" was too remote from the concerns of most people, who still had God in their "bloodstream". In his only interview in the run-up to Christmas, he called on ministers to be more willing to talk about their own beliefs.

"Dumbledore" Williams told *The Daily Telegraph*: "The trouble with a lot of Government initiatives about faith is that they assume it is a problem, it's an eccentricity, it's practised by oddities, foreigners and minorities. The effect is to de-normalise faith, to intensify the perception that faith is not part of our bloodstream. And, you know, in great swathes of the country that's how it is."

His comments risked reigniting the public row between the Church of England and Labour over the state's treatment of faith groups. A Cabinet member was recently forced to deny there was a "secular conspiracy" to silence them.

The Archbishop's claims that religion was seen only as something for minorities echoed those of a Church-backed report, which accused the Government of paying



Dr Rowan Williams: 'Don't call us oddballs'

"lip service" to Christianity while "focusing intently" on Muslims.

Asked if he believed political leaders should be more open about their religious beliefs, the Archbishop replied: "I don't think it would do any harm at all. I think part of establishing their human credentials is saying, 'This is where my motivation comes from. I'm in politics because this is what I believe.' And that includes religious conviction."

Despite the Church of England's influence and its position as the established religion in the country, there have been repeated claims in recent years that Labour has tried to keep faith out of the public sphere.

The tendency was summed up by Alastair Campbell when, as spokesman for Tony Blair, the former prime minister, he said: "We don't do God."

However, fears over the development of home-grown Islamic terrorism led the Government to pour more than £50 million into projects aimed at preventing radicalisation in mosques.

The Archbishop's claim that the Government only saw religion as a problem was backed by the Rt Rev Stephen Lowe, the former Bishop of Urban Life. He said: "He's absolutely on the ball. Religion is seen as being a problem because of the connection between radical Islam and terrorism that has tainted all religions."

"What seems to be forgotten is the contribution of religion in the mainstream to social action. It's quite clear that within the Government and the Opposition there are people of faith. The problem is that somehow the connection between what they see as their private faith is allowed to marginalise the significance of the contribution of faith communities to the life of this nation."

In the interview, the Archbishop also dismissed the Pope's bold invitation for disaffected Anglicans to cross over to Rome as "theologically rather eccentric", and predicted that few would take up the option because they could not accept papal infallibility.

## Pope shares Irish child abuse outrage

THE Pope shares the "outrage, betrayal and shame" felt by Irish people over a report that said clerical child abuse was covered-up, the Vatican said last month.

In a statement, issued after Pope Benedict XVI met Irish church leaders, the Pope was said to be "disturbed and distressed".

An investigation found church leaders covered up child abuse in Dublin for decades.

"The Holy Father was deeply disturbed and distressed by its contents," the Vatican statement said. "He wishes once more to express his profound regret at the actions of some members of the clergy who have betrayed their solemn promises to God, as well as the trust placed in them by the victims and their families, and by society at large."

The Pope summoned the Primate of All

Ireland, Cardinal Sean Brady, to Rome after the Vatican was criticised for failing to respond to the Murphy inquiry.

The Murphy report, which was published in November, laid bare a culture of concealment within the Dublin archdiocese and found that four consecutive archbishops prioritised the church's reputation above the welfare of children who were being physically and sexually abused.

Instead, paedophile priests were moved from parish to parish, free to repeat their actions on new victims.

Immediately after the publication, Cardinal Brady said he was "deeply sorry and ashamed" at the abuse of children described in the report.

Archbishop Martin was praised by victims

for his willingness to co-operate with the inquiry which was ordered by the Irish government, unlike his four predecessors who had failed to report paedophile priests to the civil authorities.

The Murphy Commission said the Pope's ambassador to Ireland, Papal Nuncio Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza, had failed to respond to extracts of its draft report. Leanza was then forced to defend himself against allegations that he had treated the investigation with contempt.

As we were going to press, we learned that Dr Donal Murray had resigned as Bishop of Limerick.

The Murphy report found his failure to deal properly with a paedophile priest, Fr Tom Naughton, was "inexcusable".

# Retired archbishop turns down peerage

WHEN it was announced last year that former Archbishop of Westminster, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, was poised to become the first Roman Catholic bishop in the House of Lords since the Reformation – as part of a drive by the Prime Minister to appoint senior leaders of all the main faiths to sit alongside Church of England bishops – the National Secular Society made representations to Gordon Brown against Murphy O'Connor being “ennobled”.

One of the reasons the NSS gave was his complicity in the cover-up of child abuse when he was Bishop of Arundel.

But a rift among Catholics eventually led to the former Archbishop of Westminster rejecting the offer of a life peerage.

He told the *Daily Telegraph* last month that he declined the honour after consulting with the Vatican. In secret meetings of senior clerics held to canvass opinion, concerns had been expressed over the implications of the cardinal accepting the offer.

While the cardinal says that the final decision rested with him, there was strong opposition to the proposal from Catholic bishops in England and Wales.

Some of the bishops who were consulted were against the move on the grounds that it could compromise the Church's freedom to be an impartial and critical voice.

Others argued that canon law forbids clergy from taking any office that might involve the exercise of political power.

The Church of England has 26 “lords spiritual”. Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, was ennobled earlier this year, and there have been reports that Muhammad Abdul Bari, the head of the Muslim Council of Britain, would also be given a peerage.

The cardinal's refusal of a peerage is a setback to Mr Brown's attempt to make the Lords' chamber more representative of the nation's religious diversity.

Some senior clerics urged the former archbishop to accept a Lords seat, arguing that there was a need for a stronger Catholic voice in Parliament on issues such as euthanasia, gay adoption, church schools and abortion.

The Prime Minister had publicly praised Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor in February and signalled that a seat in the upper chamber was likely.

“He is widely respected across the world for his interest in international development,” he said in an interview with *The Tablet*, the Catholic weekly.

“He has shown great leadership on those issues, such as world poverty, where people look to the Church for leadership.

“I think he has shown great integrity right throughout the period in which he has been Cardinal and that has earned the respect of people far beyond the Catholic Church and right across the country.”

But NSS President Terry Sanderson said in his letter to Mr Brown that “we believe that the Cardinal is an unsuitable candidate for a peerage. He would bring the Vatican's

O'Connor's diocese to the place where he could do most harm and with the least chance of being discovered.

“Hill was appointed a chaplain at Gatwick airport, where he – entirely predictably – abused even more defenceless children. The police eventually brought his reign of terror to an end, but not before this monster had ruined the lives of countless children and young people, some of them disabled.

“All this could have been prevented if the Cardinal had not swept it under the carpet.

“As you can see from the press reports, it is also clear that Murphy O'Connor ignored three warnings that Hill was likely to offend. There have been strong suspicions that other priests in the Arundel and Brighton area had also been involved in child abuse while under the wing of Murphy O'Connor, but for some reason the investigation into the Cardinal's culpability came to an abrupt halt.

“The BBC, which was investigating the matter, inexplicably dropped the story and the police enquiry fizzled out when the Catholic Church accused the media of “persecuting” Murphy O'Connor.

“The victims of the crimes committed under the leadership of this

man, who is slated to be given privileged access to our lawmaking body, certainly don't think he was persecuted; they think the real scandal is that he got off scot-free.

“Murphy O'Connor's defence is that ‘the decisions he made at that time were not irresponsible and that there was a genuine ignorance among bishops, priests, and society at large about the compulsive nature of child abuse’. For a bishop of an organisation purporting to be a moral authority to claim to be ignorant of something everyone else knew can only be stupidity and/or dishonesty of a stunning degree. Neither commend him for a seat in the Lords.

“We ask you not to reward Cardinal Murphy O'Connor for these unpardonable actions with a seat in the House of Lords. To do so would be taken as a gesture by the Government that it did not care about the many whose lives have been ruined as a direct result of Murphy O'Connor's actions.”



*Murphy O'Connor appeared to have been fast asleep too when action was needed to curb the activities of paedophile priest Michael Hill*

reactionary, homophobic, misogynistic and manipulative agenda right into the heart of our parliament.

“But worse than that, the award of a peerage would be to reward someone with a soiled record over child abuse. We are referring to Cormac Murphy O'Connor's conduct when he was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton in the 1980s.

“Not only was there abuse on a massive scale, of which the Cardinal was aware, money was paid by the Roman Catholic Church to victims in his diocese to hush the matter up. I am not aware of any apology or explanation for this by the Cardinal.

“He was aware that one of his priests – Michael Hill – was a dangerous paedophile but did nothing to prevent his access to children. When the abuse came to light, Hill was moved by Murphy O'Connor's diocese from one parish to another, where his activities continued. Finally, and after multiple warnings about Hill's likelihood to reoffend, Hill was moved in Murphy

# Bishop apologises for remarks praising Taliban

THE Church of England's Bishop to the Forces has been forced to apologise for "incredibly insensitive" remarks he made in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*.

The Rt Rev Stephen Venner had warned against demonising the Taliban and argued that the attitude towards insurgents in the conflict-ravaged country had been "too simplistic".

He told the paper: "There's a large number of things that the Taliban say and stand for which none of us in the West could approve, but simply to say therefore that everything they do is bad is not helping the situation. The Taliban can perhaps be admired for their conviction to their faith and their sense of loyalty to each other."

One MP accused him of offering "comfort and succour to our enemies" with his remarks.

Bob Russell, Liberal Democrat member for the garrison town of Colchester in Essex, said: "Why did he not talk about the loyalty of our troops? The bishop would have been well advised to concentrate on boosting the morale of our armed forces rather than boosting the morale of our enemy."

And Col Richard Kemp, a former commander in Afghanistan, said in that the bishop was being naïve.

"We clearly need to understand our enemy but that is more of a military issue rather than a religious one. Elements in the Taliban do not act from a religious perspective and it is important to turn them around. But there are many others who will not be persuaded. Their central creed and ethos is about vio-



Bishop Venner

lent oppression."

He added: "In many ways it is a mistake to compare their faith of extreme holy war with the kind of religion of peace and understanding that the bishop follows. They wouldn't show understanding of his faith."

In apologising, Venner said it was "one small phrase in quite a long interview" intended to suggest that not all members of the Taliban were "equally evil".

He told the BBC: "If that has caused offence, I am deeply grieved by it because that's the very last thing that I would want to do."

The bishop also issued a statement condemning the Taliban's tactics and expressing his backing for UK forces.

"The way that the Taliban are waging war in Afghanistan is evil, both in their use of indiscriminate killing and their terrorising of the civilian population. No religion could condone their actions. I give my full support to the British and allied troops who are engaged in the country, seeking to work with the Afghan government to bring stability, democracy and an enduring peace."

He added: "I acknowledge that long-lasting peace will not be achieved without both defeating the Taliban militants and, over time, by encouraging them to forsake the path of war and to be involved in the future of Afghanistan."

"We have also to distinguish between the militant Taliban and those of their number who are fighting because they have been coerced into doing so and who fear for their lives if they do not. Clearly, it is only those who reject military action with whom we could talk."

Bishop Venner was recently commissioned in his new role by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

## Televangelist Oral Roberts dead at 91



ORAL Roberts, who snuffed it last month, was a pioneer of televangelism, and he profited handsomely from it. He learned at an early age that desperately sick people are willing to part with their money in exchange for some hope.

Roberts had a talent for lying to hundreds of thousands – millions! – of people through the miracle of television, and by taking cheques in the mail.

His show, *Oral Roberts Presents*, was a forum for healing the sick and dispossessed through God's power, but God doesn't work for free. Roberts famously told his viewers in 1987 that God was going to "call him home" if he didn't raise \$8 million. The death threat worked: after climbing up into a "prayer tower" and going on a hunger strike – a "fast" – until he got his money, Roberts hit the target.

He claimed to be able to raise the dead, but sadly, he couldn't pull the trick off when his son Ronald committed suicide in 1981 after struggling with drug problems. But his talent for gulling people never diminished. People who suffered similar tragedies sent Roberts more money than they could afford, based on his toxic and preposterous lies.

Other toxic and preposterous lies: a 900-foot-tall Jesus appeared before him and commanded him to raise \$120 million to build a hospital. The devil tried to strangle him in his bedroom, only to be driven away by his wife. Special holy water sprinkled on a billfold will bring prosperity.

In addition to a legacy of fraud and theft, Roberts left the world Oral Roberts University, a Christian educational institute that served as a playground for his son Richard, who ran it, and his wife. According to a 2007 lawsuit, Richard's wife spent school money to remodel their home 11 times in 14 years, employ "under-aged male" friends, spend thousands on clothes, and fly their daughter to Orlando for spring break on a private jet. The couple also allegedly forced professors and students to do their daughter's homework.

## Alpha Course

Continued from page 1

tion and what people must do to get to heaven. I would be very worried about the adult content being used in schools unless it has been heavily modified." He said that governing bodies of "faith schools" (who are mostly representatives of the local diocese) are "overstepping the mark" in pushing these courses in schools.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, told the TES: "We have pupils, a captive audience, funnelled into hardline proselytising on school premises. These schools should be seeking permission from parents, but I'll bet they aren't."

# Times Religious correspondent kids featured in humanist ‘Do

The happy expressions on the faces of the two children chosen to front the British Humanist Association’s latest poster campaign were put there by Jesus. Apparently.

Writing in *The Times* last November, religious correspondent Ruth Gledhill fancied she’d dropped a bombshell when she revealed that “the two children chosen to front Richard Dawkins’ latest assault on God could not look more free of the misery he associates with religious baggage.

“With the slogan ‘Please don’t label me. Let me grow up and choose for myself’, the youngsters with broad grins seem to be the perfect advertisement for the new atheism being promoted by Professor Dawkins and the British Humanist Association. Except that they are about as far from atheism as it is possible to be. *The Times* can reveal that Charlotte, 8, and Ollie, 7, are from one of the country’s most devout Christian families.”

Their father, Brad Mason, does precisely what the BHA exhorts people NOT to do: he brands the two kids “Christians”.

“It is quite funny, because obviously they were searching for images of children that looked happy and free. They happened to

choose children who are Christian. It is ironic. The humanists obviously did not know the background of these children.

He said that the children’s “Christianity” shone through.

“Obviously there is something in their faces which is different. So [the BHA] judged that they were happy and free without knowing that they are Christians. That is quite a compliment. I reckon it shows we have brought up our children in a good way and that they are happy.”

Gerald Coates, the leader of the Pioneer network of churches, which Mr Mason and his family used to attend before they moved to Dorset, added: “I think it is hilarious that the happy and liberated children on the atheist poster are in fact Christian.”

The BHA said that the children’s background was of no consequence. Andrew Copson, the association’s education director, explained: “That’s one of the points of our campaign. People who criticise us for saying that children raised in religious families won’t be happy, or that no child should have any contact with religion, should take the time to read the adverts.

“The message is that the labelling of children by their parents’ religion fails to

respect the rights of the child and their autonomy. We are saying that religions and philosophies – and ‘humanist’ is one of the labels we use on our poster – should not be foisted on or assumed of young children.”

The images of the children were sourced from istockphoto.com, on which photographers upload images for sale to designers, in return receiving a portion of each download fee.

The kids’ dad is a web designer and photographer, who has been supplementing his income for years by providing photographs to agencies who sell them on to newspapers and advertising campaigns.

Among those who welcomed the campaign were the magician and illusionist Derren Brown and the author Philip Pullman, who said: “It is absolutely right that we shouldn’t label children until they are old enough to decide for themselves.”

The billboard was first unveiled in Northern Ireland – a humanist campaign “first” in the province. Located on one of Belfast’s busiest routes, the poster was a follow-up to the BHA’s hugely successful atheist bus campaign in the UK. Humanist and atheist organisations in many parts of the world followed suit, with slogans of their own.

Religious leaders across Northern Ireland were furious, and hit out at the BHA, accusing it of arrogance and hypocrisy.

Reverend David McIlveen from the Free Presbyterian Church ranted: “It is none of their business how people bring up their children. It is the height of arrogance that the BHA would even presume to tell people not to instruct their children in their religion.

“I would totally reject the advertisement. It is reprehensible and so typical of the hypocrisy of the British Humanist Association today. They have a defeatist attitude and are just trying to draw attention to themselves. I think it is totally arrogant, presumptuous and sparks of total hypocrisy. I believe this doesn’t deserve a counter campaign. I will be expressing my public position on it in my own church on Sunday. I will be saying that this advert is another attack on the biblical position of the family and will be totally rejecting it.”

And he grumpily added for good measure: “It is a wasted campaign that will

## ‘Immodest’ cyclists upset Hasidic Jews

A CYCLE lane “war” broke out in the New York Hasidic enclave of Williamsburg last month. The lanes, covering 14 blocks of the neighbourhood, were sandblasted after Jewish zealots complained that scantily-clad “hipster” cyclists were distracting them from holy thoughts.

It was reported that cyclists attracted to the area made it difficult for the Hasids to stick to religious laws forbidding them from staring at members of the opposite sex in various states of undress. The riders, they grizzled, also disobeyed the traffic regulations.

Furious over the removal of the lanes, cycling vigilantes immediately set about repainting them. Two cycling advocates were apprehended by the Shomrim Patrol, an Hasidic neighborhood watch group, as they repainted a section of bike lane. But when police arrived, no one was arrested and no summonses were issued.

Said neighborhood activist Isaac Abraham: “These people should apply for a job at the Department of Transportation. You put it on, they take it off – and they will probably do this again.” Abraham also insisted that the bike lanes put children at risk of getting hit by cars or bicycles as they exited school buses.

A Department of Transportation spokesman said: “We will continue to work with any community on ways we can make changes to our streets without compromising safety.”

A source close to Mayor Bloomberg said removing the lanes was an effort to appease the Hasidic community just before an election last year.

But Baruch Herzfeld, who has tried to bridge the gap between “hipsters” and Hasids with a bike-rental programme, said safety is not the issue so much as xenophobia.

# It falls into the trap of labelling Don't label Me' poster campaign



have no impact on family life in Northern Ireland."

Father-of-four Sheikh Anwar Mady from the Belfast Islamic Centre added this depressing tosh to the pot: "We believe that every child is born as a Muslim. Religion is not given by the family, but it is a natural religion given by our God at birth. The role of the family is to teach the traditions of the faith. But that faith is implanted at birth."

The BHA said the billboards had been unveiled to coincide with Universal Chil-

dren's Day.

Richard Dawkins, BHA vice-president, added: "Nobody would seriously describe a tiny child as a 'Marxist child', an 'anarchist child' or a 'post-modernist child'. Yet children are routinely labelled with the religion of their parents. We need to encourage people to think carefully before labelling any child too young to know their own opinions and our adverts will help to do that."

Dean of Belfast Dr Houston McElvey said the humanist poster would have little

impact on Christian believers.

"I am glad to live in a society where people have the right to express their point of view on a God which I believe doesn't need defending."

But Fr Gary Donegan, from Holy Cross in north Belfast, said he hoped the campaign would open up debate on religious issues. "One positive thing that could come from this is if it opens a debate on faith. I am not offended by it, but perhaps the money used for it could have been channelled better into a humanitarian cause."

## Obama Nobel Prize acceptance speech pleases fundies

US President Barack Obama's defence of the "just" war principle in Oslo this week, where he received the Nobel Peace Prize, has drawn praise from many Conservative Christian nutters, including Sarah Palin, who may run for President in 2012.

She seized on the opportunity to plug her book, said to be a breathtakingly dishonest memoir, called *Going Rogue*.

Said Palin: "I liked what he said. In fact, I thumbed through my book quickly this morning, saying, 'Wow, that really sounded familiar.' I talked in my book, too, about the fallen nature of man and why war is necessary at times, and history's lessons when it comes to knowing when it is when we engage in warfare."

Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention said Obama's speech followed in the tradition of past presidents.

"The President's eloquent defense of America's role in the world as chief defender and guarantor of freedom and human rights over the last six decades should be reassuring to every freedom-loving person in the world and gratifying to all of those men and

women and their families who have served and sacrificed in our armed forces to make that defense of freedom possible."

Land added: "Further, the President's trenchant defence of the fact that there is evil in the world that must be confronted by armed force should reassure all Americans



as we confront a deadly worldwide terrorist threat from a death cult that has taken root within Islam.

"It [the speech] could have been given by Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush, Clinton or (G W) Bush. In other words, it was squarely in the bipartisan American tradition of defending freedom against totalitarianism that has united our foreign policy during the entire Cold War and beyond."

The President said in his acceptance speech that he admired the non-violence teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr but that he "cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaida's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

## RELIGION'S LINGERING INFLUENCE

## On Incest

The correspondence in the *Freethinker* last year about incest set **DAVID TRIBE** thinking about how the Bible has shaped society's attitudes towards sex and sexuality in general

I had been following the *Freethinker's* interesting correspondence on incest from May of last year, without intending to enter the fray, though I was intrigued by Greg Marshall's "morally ambiguous" comment (June). Not that I was squeamish about the topic. After all, several years ago I'd written a longish piece on paedophilia at a time when virtually nothing serious on the subject was being written. The word itself didn't then quite qualify as a taboo one, as it was beginning to appear alongside "child rape" in sensational reportage of "predatory monsters".

Like murder and adult rape, paedophilia is a "homely" crime; that is, it's much more likely to be committed by someone close to the victim than by a random serial offender. At the time of my article "someone close" was thought to be almost entirely a family member, especially a stepfather or mother's boyfriend, and they still probably constitute the bulk of cases.

But media reporting and crime fiction are spreading the net to include neighbours and relatives of the child's school friends during "sleepovers", and particularly adults in *loco parentis*, notably Roman Catholic and Anglican priests in "faith" children's homes, boarding schools and other religious institutions. Despite recent publicity, I believe that, because of fear and unjustified shame in victims, misplaced loyalty of other family members and parishioners/acquiescent bishops, the crime is still under-reported.

Why do I call paedophilia a crime, in opposition to certain 1960s and 1970s "gay rights activists" with "their broad alliance of oppressed sexual minorities" (Diesel Baalam, June)? Even when it doesn't involve rape as ordinarily understood, it can never be regarded as truly consensual. The adult is exploiting his (sometimes her) position of physical, financial, psychological and/or emotional power; in other words, exercising undue influence. Further, while a few precocious brats do solicit adults and not *vice versa*, overwhelmingly the act is instigated by adults. And, if it doesn't occasion actual physical harm, transmission of sexual dis-

eases or unwanted pregnancies, it frequently inflicts psychological harm which may be immediate or become manifest several years later as the victim matures sexually.

On the topic of age, paedophilia isn't "sex with minors" (Jim Hawkins, July, and Marshall, August). It's sex with someone below the "age of consent". Perhaps this is where "moral ambiguity" begins as this age differs widely in time and place. Both terms are legal definitions and rarely coincide. "Minor"

Few people today read the Pauline epistles and even fewer, outside Orthodox Jewry, the Torah; and their pronouncements on incest, homosexuality and bestiality would be of little but historical interest were it not for their lingering influence on canon and criminal law and fundamentalist social attitudes

used to mean under 21; now it's under 18. It indicates an economic-legal status (signifying contracts, inheriting without restrictions), rather than a citizenship status (enlisting, publicly consuming alcohol, driving a vehicle, marrying without the consent of parents or magistrates, voting), though the two statuses may in part coincide. The age of consent is less likely to coincide with either. In Europe's distant past (*Romeo and Juliet*)

and in some countries today, it's been set at the putative age of puberty. This, of course, differs widely from individual to individual, but on average is two years earlier for girls than for boys. Hence, till very recently, the sexual difference in the age of consent in virtually all cultures.

There may be, and usually has been, also a difference between heterosexual and homosexual consent. When it was all right for a boy to marry a girl when she was 16 and he was 17 or 18 for most of history in England, homosexual activity was illegal at any age; then, following the Wolfenden recommendation, over 21 even after the age of majority was reduced from 21 to 18; then legal after 18 and finally after 16. (Of course it must still be "in private", curiously and restrictively described, but that's another story.)

"Incest" is commonly understood to mean heterosexual sex between family "adults", however defined, and should be considered in at least three categories: mother-son, father-daughter and brother-sister. Other close relatives may also be "embraced" in the definition. In *Nucleoethics; Ethics in Modern Society* (1972), I wrote "the only provision that all people at all times have agreed on is that it is wrong to marry your mother". Indeed, in his 1967 Reith Lectures Edmund Leach had identified that as the only universal taboo. This attitude is reflected in the Oedipus story, Freud's (mistaken, in my view) "Oedipus complex" and the creation by American college students in the 1960s, when they still called a filthy, basinless toilet a "bathroom", of "mother fucker" as the ultimate obscenity.

I'd like to know on what authority William Harwood describes Ikhenaton (Akhmaton) as "siring Tutankhamen on his mother, Tiy" (August). Akhnaton is usually said to be Tutankhamen's father-in-law, though he could of course be both. Incidentally, I'd also like to know why he attributes to Australian boundary riders the recreation of "tapping a kangaroo". Whether or not this is legal or moral it could prove both difficult and dangerous; not like the supposed close relation between New Zealand shepherds and their sheep.



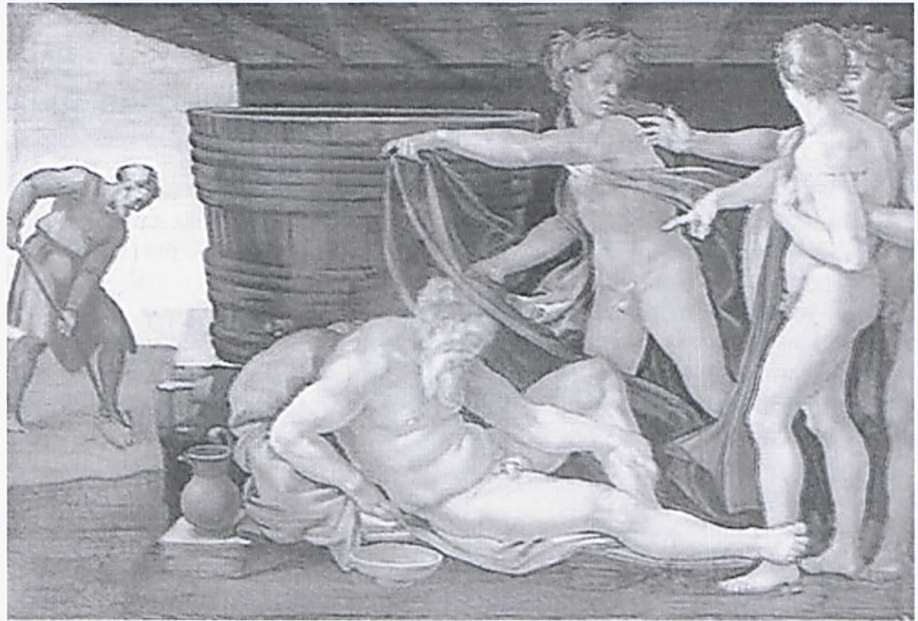
Incest overall is described by Hawkins as “comparatively rare” (July). Again, what is, or could be, the evidence? Admittedly without the benefit of statistics, I’m sure it’s much commoner than he believes.

What really induced me to enter this discussion was Marshall’s reporting that Terry Sanderson had told him that “the NSS categorically has no interest in pursuing the abolishment of the incest laws, whatsoever” (August). That set me reflecting that, to the best of my knowledge, the NSS has never had a policy on incest. While strongly agreeing with the NSS President’s elaboration that “the NSS does not automatically take an opposing viewpoint to the Bible”, in this context further elaboration could be of interest.

*The Oxford Cyclopaedia to The Schofield Reference Bible* (Authorised Version) divides its entry on incest into “incest condemned” and “cases of incest”. Some of the references cited are ambiguous, especially in Leviticus, the book of Judaic law. In dealing with various degrees of kinship, most of the “incestuous” texts actually name “uncovering their nakedness”, which, as distinct from “lying with”, meaning bonking – seems to imply no more than it says and to be just another example of Judeo-Christianity’s equating of sinful (here prurient) thoughts with criminal or immoral conduct (here copulation). Hence Jesus’s extended definition of adultery. In Leviticus 18, peeking at a diversity of relatives is prohibited, but only gay bonking, bonking a neighbour’s wife, and male or female bonking of beasts, are censured.

Things get nastier in Leviticus 20. Here male or female lying with close relatives and beasts, gay sex and adultery are all capital offences (as in strict Islamic countries today). Female homosexuality isn’t mentioned, and so lesbianism has never been illegal in Christian countries. Deuteronomy 22:30 and 27:20 censure only lying with one’s father’s wife. Presumably this means one’s mother as well as stepmother, but the offence is so phrased here and in Leviticus, as the crime is deemed to be against one’s father. Ezekiel 22:10–11 names an odd selection of sexual sinners: those who “discovered” their naked father, “committed abomination with” a neighbour’s wife, “lewdly defiled” a daughter-in-law and “humbled” a sister.

Yet it’s peeking that incurs the farthest-reaching consequences in Genesis. When Noah fell into a drunken stupor and disrobed, his youngest son Ham, the father of Canaan, had a good look and told his brothers Shem and Japheth about it. Instead of



Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Drunkenness of Noah* 1509

imitating Ham, they decently approached their father backward with a cloth to cover him. On coming to, Noah “knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (Genesis 9:24–25). This farcical text has been used to justify black slavery and apartheid, since Ham is the legendary progenitor of Negroes, Shem of Semites and Japheth of Caucasians.

In other parts of the Old Testament incest appears to attract divine condonement, if not approbation. Thus Cain “knew his wife” (Genesis 4:17), who must have been either his mother Eve or an unnamed sister; Lot’s two daughters made their father drunk to “lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father” (Genesis 19:32); Abraham married his half-sister Sarah (Genesis 20:2,12); Israel’s son Reuben “lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine” (Genesis 35:22); Tamar’s brother Amnon “forced her, and lay with her” (II Samuel 13:14); Amram “took him Jochebed his father’s sister to wife; and she bare him Aaron and Moses” (Exodus 6:20).

In the New Testament censure returns. John the Baptist condemned Herod Antipas for marrying his brother Philip’s wife Herodias (Mark 6:17–18) and Paul rebuked his Corinthian converts for “such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife” (I Corinthians 5:1).

Few people today read the Pauline epistles and even fewer, outside Orthodox Jewry, the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament); and their pronouncements on incest, homosexuality and bestiality would be of little but

historical interest were it not for their lingering influence on canon and criminal law and fundamentalist social attitudes.

Should secularists get involved in such issues? Clearly we have views on their supposedly divine origin, but should we have views on their consequences? Reflecting on this question, I returned to Balaam’s advice that “we should only pick fights that matter and fights we can win” (June), which I’d originally skimmed with an approving nod. On reflection, however, I was much less convinced.

By analogy with triage (prioritising medical attention) on battlefields, most campaigning organisations are likely to echo this advice. But do they, and should they, follow it? In the first place, “that matter” is a highly subjective clause. Throughout popular freethought literature until the mid-20th century, “homosexuality” was hardly ever mentioned and “gay rights” (or historical terminology) never. Worse than not “mattering” because only a (“perverted”) minority was affected, the issue was deemed disreputable. In *The Hall of Science Libel Case* (1895), whose background is outlined in my *GODLESS and Glad of It* (2007), the founder of this magazine, G W Foote, called frolicking young men in a secularist hall “obscene wretches” largely “belonging to well-known Christian families”. Living in such a holier-than-thou environment, no wonder poor James Thomson, secularist poet and bachelor, had turned to drink. Foote’s initial attitude, and particularly that of “father of secularism” G J Holyoake, to the public promotion of birth control was no more

# Cornflakes – the

**Dr Robert Stovold** reacts to the news that a new edition of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* has an 'unfit' introduction by creationist Ray Comfort.

Creationism's latest attempt to insinuate itself into science classes comes in the form of a new 150th anniversary edition of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. The catch? Darwin's work survives, but is saddled with a decidedly unfit introduction, penned by US creationist Ray Comfort.

Those familiar with creationist scholarship will know what to expect. Those unfamiliar may glean something from two facts: much of Comfort's introduction was plagiarised, and four entire chapters of Darwin's work were "accidentally" omitted from the first 30,000 copies of the revised Creationist edition. Omitting four of Darwin's strongest chapters improves things

considerably from a creationist standpoint – which is rather ironic given the creationist claim that copying errors never result in improvements.

Ray Comfort is the author of a piece called *The banana – the atheist's nightmare*. He claims that the banana is intelligently designed by God for human consumption, noting for example that the banana "Is curved towards the face to make eating process easy".

Comfort's introduction is available on the web: <http://assets.livingwaters.com/pdf/--OriginofSpecies--.pdf> and opens with a quote from Darwin himself: "A fair result can be obtained only by fully stating and balancing the facts and arguments on

both sides of each question."

Weighing up the pros and cons sounds reasonable enough – and it is, provided one considers the quality of the arguments as well as their quantity. A sound logical argument backed by evidence deserves to be given a great deal of weight. Lies, half-truths and misrepresentations, on the other hand, are about as weighty as a helium balloon.

The two arguments most frequently employed by creationists are the "Argument from Design" and the "Argument from Omitting Half of Darwin's Theory". Sure enough, Comfort couples the two. First he likens the useful information stored in an organism's DNA to a meaningful sequence

liberal. For seven years (1877-84) Bradlaugh and Besant's defence of the contraceptive manual *The Fruits of Philosophy* (1832) managed to split the British secular movement. Clearly, some leading secularists of the day thought these issues didn't "matter", weren't "fights we can win" and, moreover, weren't fights we should sully ourselves with. These fights have been largely won, and I hope no secularists today think they didn't matter and shouldn't have been fought.

What about "fights we can win" in the 21st century? In the 1960s the NSS revived a struggle that had long languished and finally lapsed in 1964 when the Secular Education League was wound up, ostensibly because the issue was a "lost cause". As all readers will know, it had – and has – two prongs: (1) removal of acts of worship and tendentious religious education from state schools; (2) cessation of public funding for religious schools, which would in effect precipitate the closure of most of them. Don't quote me on this, but I believe (1) is ultimately achievable but (2) never. Does that mean we shouldn't continue to advocate both in the interests of true education and social cohesion?

Returning to the topic of incest, I don't recall ever being asked about, or volunteering an opinion on, the subject, much less requested to promote its decriminalisation. My silence wasn't occasioned by considerations that the issue didn't matter or couldn't be won. Simply, I hadn't thought about it.

What are the objections? Mindful of the randy Greco-Roman pantheon, Harwood

## On Incest

(Continued from p9)

made the colourful suggestion that "marrying a sibling was more than hubris. It was a declaration of equality with the gods that will bring down the thunderbolts of Zeus on the offenders" (June).

Atheists can dismiss that one. More significant is the widely held belief that genetic abnormalities and diseases in individuals and/or their descendants will result from inbreeding, usually confined to small isolated communities and royal circles at times when other royals are deemed the only suitable spouses. A mutated gene is usually recessive and masked by an unmutated dominant one in offspring. But if through inbreeding two recessive genes come together with much greater frequency, the phenotype (resultant individual) emerges with that gene's usually adverse characteristics. The best known example of this is the spread of haemophilia throughout Europe's royal houses by intermarriage among Queen Victoria's offspring. As with any other case of a sexually transmitted disease, the family history of an incestuous couple might suggest the wisdom of childlessness. Alternatively, every foetus should be rigorously tested. Evolution could not, however, have occurred if all mutated genes were deleterious. Ancient Egyptian dynasties seemed to prosper with sibling incest. And every type of incest has been arranged by livestock breeders.

Whatever its incidence, "prosecutions for

consensual incest are rare" (Balaam, June). Yet this shouldn't indicate the issue doesn't "matter". So were in fact, in Britain, prosecutions for homosexual activity in private when it was illegal. So, for that matter, were prosecutions for blasphemy. That didn't negate the possibility of such prosecutions, the threat they posed of blackmail and censorship/self-censorship and the social injustices of non-acceptance.

Balaam mentions the "yeeeeuch!" reaction, usually called the "yuck (yuk) factor" and an indication increasingly recognised by psychologists and moralists as a prime determinant of personal morality and social mores. Presumably on this basis he'd list any attempt to decriminalise adult incest among "campaigns that could only harm our cause" (June). An NSS media release and public forum on the issue would certainly attract bad (and probably good) publicity, but that hasn't finally deterred us in the past, even before the broad secular-humanist position became relatively respectable.

It would, however, be best first to raise the topic at an NSS AGM, where any need for reform and fear of possible "collateral damage" could be discussed. There are many issues of greater urgency and relevance to secularism, and not too much time, effort and money should be devoted to this one. Of course, I wouldn't presume to offer advice to NSS officers, who may feel that, regardless of the merits or demerits of decriminalising incest, a fine NSS campaigning record with an extensive list of issues could be impaired if another, more sensitive cause were added to the list.

# Theist's Nightmare

...n's *On the Origin of Species* has been published – with a 'decidedly comfortable, universally known as 'Banana Man'

of letters written in a book, then he asks the reader to "consider the likelihood of all the intricate, interrelated parts of this 'book' coming together by sheer chance" (p 9).

This is a classic creationist argument. Is evolution random (a matter of "sheer chance")? Well, half of it is, and half of it isn't. So we'll flag up the bit that is (genetic mutation), ignore the bit that isn't (natural selection), knock down the straw man version of evolutionary theory we've created, and claim victory. Hallelujah! When creationists ask educators to "teach the controversy" in science classes, this is the kind of thing they have in mind.

Such misinformation is best countered by means of a simple analogy. "If design requires a designer", I ask creationists, "is it true to say that order requires an orderer?"

"Yes".

"So why is it that all the small cornflakes tend to settle at the base of the box? Do you think it's because God put them there?"

"No – it must be, well, gravity pulling the small flakes down".

"Wouldn't gravity have pulled the large flakes down as well? Why do the small flakes fall further?"

"I don't know".

"It's because small flakes fall through large gaps, but large flakes can't fall through small gaps. The flakes sieve themselves. Random shaking of the box coupled with a non-random filtering law (which we might call 'the furthest-falling of the smallest' or 'the persistence of the largest') leads to an ordering of flakes over time, with no intelligent input required. Random shaking is analogous to random mutation, and 'the survival of the fittest' (Natural Selection) is analogous to 'the persistence of the largest'. Cornflakes and living things are both self-ordering systems, filtering out smaller flakes and deleterious mutations respectively. Cornflakes become more organised over time, and organisms become better-adapted."

Some people queried this analogy when I posted it on the *Freethinker* blog (On the Origin of Specious Arguments, November 11, 2009). One reader asserted that cornflakes "need an outside influence – they do not settle on their own". An outside



influence is certainly required, but there's no need to posit an intelligence source. A lorry engine is an outside influence in the case of the cornflakes, supplying the necessary energy to shake the box – but it's not trying to settle the flakes. Gazelles are an "outside influence" on lions, but gazelles try very hard not to supply the lions with the energy required for growth and reproduction.

Creationists often claim that evolution violates the second law of thermodynamics. True to form, Comfort refers to "the Law of Entropy – that all things deteriorate over time" (p 30). How is it that cornflakes can become more ordered then? They must violate the laws of thermodynamics! Can I have the Nobel Prize for Physics, please?

As informed scientists are well aware, the law of entropy only applies to closed systems (ones to which no energy is supplied). Neither a shaken cornflakes box nor a reproducing lion is a closed system, since energy is obtained from the environment in both cases.

Cornflakes and lorries are both the result of intelligent (human) designers. Lorries contain suspension systems designed to minimise shaking, but the flakes get shaken anyway – the ordering of cornflakes happens against the will of the Creator! Similarly, Mr Kellogg probably disliked the fact that stuff resembling sawdust collects at the bottom of his cornflakes box – the fine flakes would be less conspicuous were they more randomly-distributed. So order increases even against the will of the Creator, as evidenced by the disclaimer on the side of every cornflakes packet: "Settling of contents may occur during transit".

The very first organism was either assem-

bled (like a car, watch or book), or arose by reproduction (by something that was similar to the organism, but not actually alive). All organisms today originate as a result of reproduction and not assembly, so the burden of proof lies with creationists to prove that the first organisms were any different. The analogy likening an organism to a book is suspect, because books can't reproduce, but organisms can. Cornflakes don't reproduce either of course, but the cornflakes analogy wasn't being used to determine the origin of the first flakes – it was being used to deter-

mine the origin of a more orderly arrangement within existing flakes. The cornflakes analogy is not, therefore, open to the same objection as the book analogy.

One problem with the "God did it" hypothesis is "Who created God?" Theists must assume that God is eternal (a statement for which there is no empirical evidence). As critics from Hume to Dawkins have repeatedly pointed out, postulating God as the cause of complexity creates a bigger problem than it solves. Theologians such as Alvin Plantinga counter that God should be regarded as simple (a spiritual unity) rather than complex (a collection of physical pieces). This is rather contrived (intelligent animals and powerful computers are both complex and physical), but if simple spiritual explanations are the order of the day, you can't beat atheism – a god consisting of no spiritual parts is simpler than a god consisting of one!

So the god hypothesis fails to offer a convincing argument for the origin of complexity. But there's another problem with it that I've never heard mentioned. If I say that a person writes a book, that statement in itself only tells us that complex ideas got translated from a person's mind onto some paper – it tells us nothing at all about how the complex ideas arose in the first place. The idea that God's creativity was created by God is circular. Religion cannot explain the origin of creativity – the best it can do is to assert (again without evidence) that such a thing has always existed.

Human beings create new ways of doing things by modifying existing methods ("descent with modification", to use Darwin's phrase). We also try out random combina-

# Cornflakes – the Theist’s nightmare

tions and see which ones work (random mutation coupled with survival of the fittest). Computers use evolutionary algorithms to complete complex tasks such as pattern recognition. Insight Learning (the application of the laws of logic to currently-understood models of the world in order to deduce new conclusions) requires both the laws of logic and an existing model of how the world works, so it can’t be said to have created the first model or the first laws. While the flashes of inspiration that we experience from time to time do not appear to be the result of working things through or trying things out, such processes may well go on at a subconscious level. Perhaps our conscious mind, like an incomplete fossil record, does not record all of the transitional forms, and so gives rise to the misleading impression that there’s an intelligent designer at work?

My claim that human intelligence is not quite as intelligent as we like to think sounds very worrying, but it shouldn’t be. What matters about our intelligence is not the cause of it, but its results. Do our ideas work? Many scientific discoveries (the

discovery of penicillin, for example) were accidental, but are no less true, or less useful, or less meaningful for being accidental.

One commenter on the *Freethinker* blog said of the cornflakes analogy, “I don’t believe order needs an orderer like design needs a designer.” Well, the Victor Meldrew approach (“I don’t believe it!”) isn’t very objective, but it does raise an interesting question: might there be an objective way to distinguish complex “designed order” from simpler “non-designed order”? Intelligent Design advocate Michael Behe believes to have found such a way. In his book, *Darwin’s Black Box*, Behe coined the term “Irreducible Complexity”, applying it to: a single system which is composed of several interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, and where the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning.

Behe’s argument is that if the removal of a part causes the whole to cease functioning, it couldn’t have evolved. The hidden assumption here is that evolution only works by adding parts. That’s another straw man argument, because there are other

well-known evolutionary mechanisms which Behe ignores. Suppose we wished to construct an irreducibly complex bridge gradually. Could it be done? Yes.



The bridge on the left consists only of one part. Can’t get much simpler than that! The bridge fragments into two, giving the bridge in the middle, and then fragments again to give the bridge on the right. The bridges in the middle and the right are both irreducibly complex – remove one part and the whole ceases to function. Evolution works not just by adding elements but by modifying existing elements. Suppose a new part of a system, though not at first essential, is gradually modified such that it becomes more and more useful, until eventually it becomes essential? Again we see that Irreducible Complexity is no barrier to evolution. Creationists like to portray irreducible complexity as a modern biochemical challenge to evolution. In truth its existence was predicted and explained by a Nobel Prize-winning geneticist over ninety years ago. [Muller, H J (1918) *Genetic variability, twin hybrids and constant hybrids, in a case of balanced lethal factors*. *Genetics* 3:422-499].

If Irreducible Complexity indicates any kind of design at all, it’s Stupid Theological Design (STD) – an intelligent designer builds robust systems, not ones that collapse if a single part fails.

Another favoured creationist tactic is the Argument from Authority. To see how weak this can be, we’ll look at an example employed by Comfort (p10-11): Francis Collins, the scientist who led the team that cracked the human genome, believes it provides a rational basis for a Creator – “When you have for the first time in front of you this 3.1-billion-letter instruction book ... I can’t help but look at those pages and have a vague sense that this is giving me a glimpse of God’s mind.”

“A vague sense of a glimpse”? How weak and unscientific an argument is that? I’ll bet Richard Dawkins is quaking in his boots! Statements of scientists are not always statements of science, and Collins’ views are a case in point. But creationists will quote authorities such as Collins anyway; they love the Argument from Authority, possibly because it echoes theism’s subservience to an authoritarian father figure, and possibly because it saves them the

## Christian registrar Ladele loses ‘religious discrimination’ appeal

LILLIAN Ladele, the Christian registrar who was told to perform same-sex civil partnerships or face dismissal, has lost her religious discrimination case at the Court of Appeal, but lawyers acting for Ladele say she intends to fight on, and will appeal to the Supreme Court. She originally won a religious discrimination case against Islington Council at an employment tribunal in July 2008.

But that success was overturned months later by the Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) who said Ladele had been treated badly – but it did not amount to religious discrimination. Master of the Rolls at the Court of appeal, Lord Neuberger, last month upheld the EAT’s decision.

Lord Neuberger said: “It appears to me that, however much sympathy one may have with someone such as Ms Ladele, who is faced with choosing between giving up a post she plainly appreciates or officiating at events which she considers to be contrary to her religious beliefs, the legislature has decided that the requirements of a modern liberal democracy, such as the United Kingdom, include outlawing discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services on grounds of sexual orientation, subject only to very limited exceptions.”

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, commented: “This is an extremely important decision for the protection of the rights of gay people in this country – and the right one. It establishes – we hope definitively – that because a person has strong religious views, it does not give them the right to discriminate against and deny services to others of whom they disapprove.

“Parliament has decided that gay people are entitled to civil partnerships and that their right to such a service be protected in law, so there should therefore be no opt outs on any grounds, religious or otherwise for public servants from performing these ceremonies. Christian conscience should not be a blanket licence to discriminate against others.”

trouble of having to think for themselves.

Another deceitful creationist ploy is the redefinition of existing words. Comfort notes, “Species do of course change over time by adaptation and natural selection, but some disagree that this indicates Darwinian evolution” (p 20).

Er, well – creationists may disagree, but no-one else does. If “change over time by adaptation and natural selection” isn’t an example of Darwinian evolution, what would it be an example of?

Like most creationists, Comfort accepts the reality of small-scale evolutionary change (microevolution), but denies the existence of large-scale change (macroevolution). Crucially though, he contradicts himself as to where one kind of variation ends and the other begins. Hence the distinction is too vague to be of any scientific worth. One minute Comfort defines microevolution as “variations within species”, the next he cites two different species (the horse and the zebra) as an example of microevolution within the horse family. If today’s diversity within the horse family arose since Noah’s Flood (which biblical chronology places at about 4,300 years ago), creationism actually entails rates of evolution about 200 times higher than those posited by evolutionary biologists!

When scientists advance microevolutionary change in support of Darwinian change, creationists like Comfort dismiss it as irrelevant (“Darwin’s theory of evolution is instead based on the concept of macroevolution” – p 20). Yet when racists advocate their own nasty brand of (micro)evolutionary change, it’s used as a stick with which to beat Darwin (p 32)! When was the last time you heard a white supremacist complaining about whether black people have arms or wings? Racists are only interested in the kind of evolution which creationists like to pretend don’t matter.

According to Comfort, macroevolution entails “the creation of entirely new features and body types” (p 20). However, we also read that “virtually all the major animal forms appeared suddenly” in the Cambrian period (p 18). So by creationist logic, all evolution since the Cambrian (including the transition from ancient fish-like animals to human beings) is actually microevolution!

The evolution from a chimp-like ancestor to a human doesn’t entail the creation of “entirely new features and body types”, yet would certainly be classed as macroevolution by creationists. Such contradictory statements betray the bogus nature of creationism. A page on the ever-helpful TalkOrigins site [www.talkorigins.org/faqs/homs/compare.html](http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/homs/compare.html) does a wonderful job of debunking creationism. It details some of the transitional hominid fossils, and

makes the following very telling point: “Although creationists are adamant that none of these are transitional and all are either apes or humans, they are not able to agree on which are which”.

No creationist work would be complete without the classic creationist *ad hominem* attacks on Darwin (Darwin was a racist, Darwin was a sexist, and so on). Surprisingly though, Comfort also notes, “An atheist wrote and said, ‘What do Darwin’s personal views on race have to do with our modern understanding of evolution? Nothing. Absolutely nothing, Ray. Even a fool knows this.’ Indeed, Darwin’s racism has nothing to do with the credibility of the theory of evolution. It should stand or fall on its own merits. However, the theory itself teaches that all men are not created equal. Darwinian evolution doesn’t say that human beings are made in the image of God and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”

Evolution predicts that races diverge over time. However, it doesn’t predict that one race should necessarily be better than another, so a belief in evolution cannot be a sufficient cause of racism.

Science is descriptive, not prescriptive. It seeks to describe the world as it is, not as it ought to be. As comedian Robin Ince quipped at the National Secular Society’s

“Bye Bye Blasphemy” party: “No Darwin, no Hitler”. That’s a bit like saying “No Isaac Newton, no falling over and banging your knee!”. No Pythagoras, no Toblerone!

I missed the bit in the Bible referring to people being “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”. Perhaps it’s Romans 9:20–21: “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”

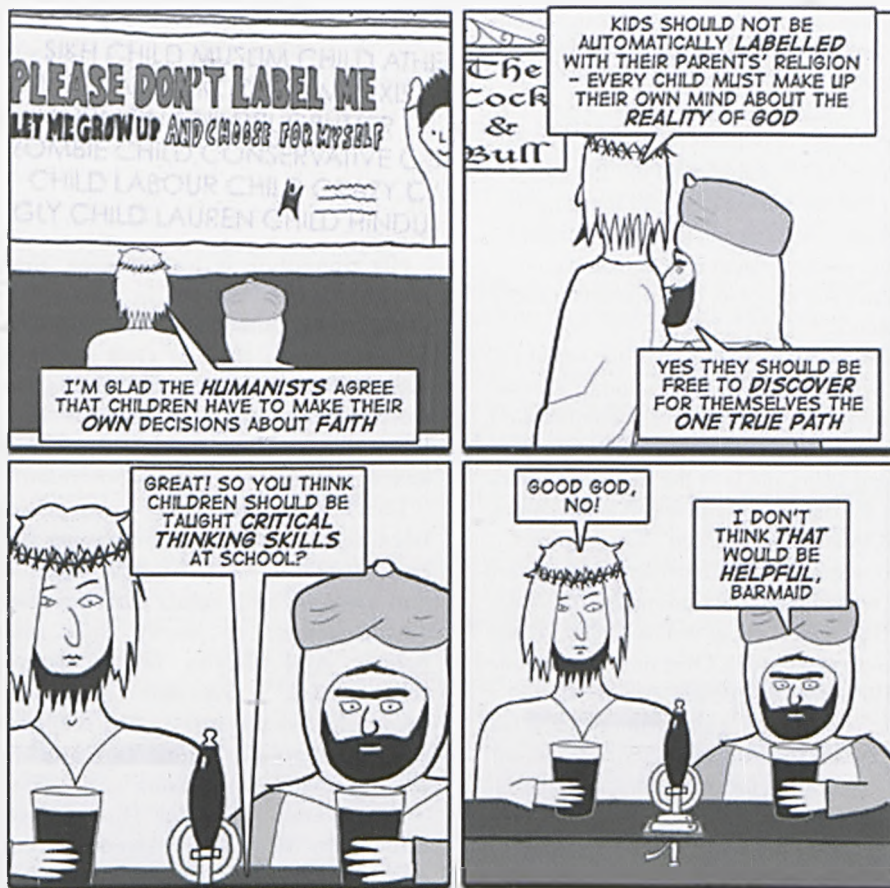
Comfort quotes Jennifer Eberhardt, Associate Professor of Psychology at Stanford, as saying (p 58): “It’s a legacy of our past that the endpoint of evolution is a white man ... I don’t think it’s intentional, but when people learn about human evolution, they walk away with a notion that people of African descent are closer to apes than people of European descent.”

Comfort adds, “I wonder where they get that notion from?”

Well, let’s see. The idea of evolution as goal-directed is certainly not present in evolutionary theory itself. It’s almost as if a correct understanding of evolutionary theory has been subverted by the superstitious idea that there’s some kind of conscious supernatural intelligent agent around?

I wonder where they get that notion from?

## Jesus & Mo



# points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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THE POSTAL ADDRESS IS POINTS OF VIEW, FREETHINKER,  
PO BOX 234, BRIGHTON BN1 4XD.



## THE CONCEPT OF GOD

IN *The Credulity Principle* (Freethinker, December) John Radford demolishes Richard Swinburne's arguments for the rational acceptance of God – eg the existence of the universe, conformity to order, men and animals displaying consciousness and morality, etc. These, Swinburne thinks, tend to confirm the existence of God. What they do not do is answer the question, which John Radford and others consistently fail to ask, why is there a concept of God in the first place?

Swinburne argues backwards from (comparatively) newly found knowledge of the universe to the pre-existing hypothesis of the single creator God, without explaining why this Judeo-Christian God should fit the bill any better than, say, the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

The answer is that it is taken for granted that the god hypothesis has the authority of revelation, reinforced by the assumption that the human quest for meaning in existence indicates an affinity for a higher being, whose reflection in human nature elevates and ennobles our otherwise tawdry existence.

Not so. All monotheism in the world today, with the arguable exception of Zoroastrianism, has a single source, the Judaic God of Abraham (TGOA), adopted by Christianity and Islam, and later the model or inspiration for Baha'i, Sikhism and Rastafarianism. TGOA was not "revealed". The Judahites who wrote the Old Testament were Canaanites, worshipping the Canaanite pantheon, El, Baal, Ashera etc, as well as YHWH (later Jehovah or Yahweh). Over time they elevated YHWH, first as supreme amongst all the gods, as a focus for a nationalist political faction, and then as the only God, as a tool of self-justification for their political ambition which had led to the destruction of the twin kingdoms of Israel and Judah. They rewrote their propaganda – that it was all the fault of the unbelievers provoking YHWH – as his-

tory, what we now call The Old Testament. And that is the origin of the god hypothesis.

The implications are quite remarkable,

George Taylor  
Herts

## WHINGEING WILLIAMS

SO the Archbishop of Canterbury has had another gripe at the Government, this time for its treating faith as a "problem" and believers as "oddties" and "eccentric". And this about a Government that funds faith schools, furthers belief with BBC propaganda, and each day starts Parliamentary procedures with a prayer!

Is he never satisfied?! Dr Williams' latest worries are not remarkable; what is, though, is when he says most people have God "in their bloodstream", because it's yet more evidence that he's losing his grip on the English language.

His metaphor is unfortunate, for it implies God is soluble in water. Does Dr Williams think, then, this is how believers get the idea of God into their heads? Not from indoctrination, nor from electromagnetic rays or invisible spirit-stuff emanating from outer space, but through the bloodstream?

That's a new one. But unsurprising, because increasingly believers are having problems with biblical language and are searching vainly for new words and meanings to justify their inane beliefs. And they're losing ground: science has irrevocably encroached into religious territory and usurped its traditional role of controlling and mediating what people think and believe.

Voices and visions of God are now known to be misperceived auditory and visual hallucinations, and manifestations of neural malfunctioning;

likewise, spiritual, mystical or religious experiences are neurological in origin, as are all sensations.

Because the brain is the only processing matrix of environmental "information" (measured, like computer download speed, in bits/sec – ref Tor Norretrander's *The User Illusion*), explanation of mystery is coming from human insight and calculation using the language of science, not that of religion – however inventive Dr Rowan Williams tries to be.

Graham Newbery  
Southampton

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

SO the BBC still lacks the good grace to include atheists on its *Thought for the Day* radio slot.

Maybe this isn't entirely a bad thing as it does highlight some unsavoury characteristics of religious people.

Each broadcast exposes them as being in favour of inequality and discrimination, happy to benefit from privilege, content to silence opposition, and downright selfish individuals.

R M Atkinson  
Edinburgh

## THE SECULAR LEFT & WOMEN

I AM disappointed that Peter Brietbart can say that "... the secular left, who are so unthinkingly complicit in the protection of fanatical patriarchal domination" (*Does God Hate Women?*, November).

Even if this applies to some of the secular left (and I have not come across them), it is certainly not true of the vast majority in this country.

Trade unions, for instance, have for many years now been in the forefront of the struggle to get equal rights for women, eliminate the use of sexist language and

ensure proper representation of women within their own organisations. And many other left organisations were pioneers in giving feminist views and policies prominence.

Although I hold no brief for Respect, which is sometimes criticised for its support by Muslims, it claims, at least, to be opposed to discrimination based on gender.

If Peter Brietbart is referring only to organisations in Muslim countries, perhaps he could make that clear or, if not, quote some evidence in support of his view.

**Martin Wright**  
Sale

## EVIDENCE FOR THE FLOOD?

IF, as Ken Ham of the Creation Museum says, dinosaurs and humans coexisted, where is the geological/fossil evidence of the Flood that would confirm his beliefs?

**W K Harper**  
Stoke-on-Trent

## JESUS AND PAUL

I AM not necessarily endorsing Dr Merryweather's letter (*Points of View*, October), since I am not quite sure which side he is on.

But I must correct a factual error. He attributes 1 Corinthians chapter 13 to Paul of Tarsus. Scholars are near-unanimous that the whole of chapter 13 is an interpolation not written by Paul.

As for Paul speaking "on behalf" of Jesus: absolutely no element of the religion invented by Paul had any resemblance to anything taught by Jesus. Paul actually humanized gentiles, and for all practical purposes posthumously invented a Jesus who was not even a Jew.

To Jesus, all persons outside of his cult, and that would have included the Christians if any had existed during his lifetime, were dogs and pigs with whom he instructed his Nazirites/Ebionites not to associate (Mat 7:6; 10:5b). Paul was as paranoid as Jesus, but less racist. See God, Jesus and the Bible, chapters 14 and 15. For the author-breakdown of "epistles" verses, see *The Fully Translated Bible*.

**Dr William Harwood**  
Canada

## POWER OF THE INTERNET

IF I had a pound for every time I've heard the lament "If only atheists could organise themselves better ..." I would have enough money to live out my retirement in much greater comfort.

But the complaint is heard less frequently these days, for it seems that atheists are organising themselves far more effectively

than in any other period in the past.

One factor alone, I believe, has made this possible: the internet, which has made it virtually impossible for religious organisations or repressive regimes to carry out inhumane practices or enact barbaric laws under a cloak of secrecy.

It also makes the silencing of dissident voices almost impossible – even in countries crippled by censorship, and notorious for crushing the free exchange of ideas.

Let me give you a recent example – that of Uganda. Under the spell of (mainly) American evangelists who travelled to that country with the express intention of whipping up hatred of homosexuals, a draconian Private Members Bill, supported by the government, was tabled. It carried a sentence of death, or lengthy periods of imprisonment.

Within days of the Bill being tabled, the world knew of the government's intentions via the internet, and the Ugandan authorities were left in no doubt that the planned legislation was seen as nothing short of barbaric. At the time of my writing this letter, it appears as if the death sentence has been dropped from the Bill, and, if world pressure is kept up, the Bill itself may be scrapped.

On December 17, The European

Parliament adopted a resolution strongly condemning the Bill. Joining widespread international outcry from the British, French and Swedish governments as well as the White House, the European Parliament officially called on Ugandan authorities "not to approve the Bill and to review their laws to decriminalise homosexuality".

Atheist organisations played a big part in exposing Uganda's vile plan, and shortly after, religious groupings too began expressing their outrage.

Last year we saw the launch of the Atheist Bus Campaign in the UK – and within hours of the first buses taking to the streets, pictures of the campaign posters appeared around the world. Within weeks secular groups were organising highly successful campaigns of their own. This would never have been possible without the internet.

I honestly believe that the internet is the best tool we have in our uphill battle against the forces of irrationality and superstition, and I would encourage everyone to seize the opportunity to harness it in the furtherance of our cause.

The world has never needed the voice of rationality more than it does now.

**Jonathan Harkness**  
Spain

## Obituary: (Andrew) Neil Blewitt (7/8/1930 – 21/10/2009)

A FORTNIGHT before he died in October last year, Norfolk-based Neil Blewitt submitted an article to the *Freethinker* entitled *Let Me Tell You ...*

He asked whether it was possible to include it in the December issue, as Christmas was the theme of his humorous piece, and we were pleased to oblige.

As always, Neil used humour as a cover for a piece which made serious points, and it was his talent for this form of meticulously-researched presentation that made all of his contributions to the FT a delight; in all he had around 40 articles accepted by three *Freethinker* editors, over several decades.

And there may be more to come. His widow, Ruth, informs us that Neil left a wealth of unpublished material. We look forward to reading these pieces, with a view to including them from time to time in future editions.

Neil was born in Erith, Kent on August 7, 1930, the son of a police sergeant. He was educated at Erith Grammar School, and spent most of his working life in public administration. He took early retirement in 1983 due to health problems, and devoted a great deal of his time honing his writing skills.

Another of his passions was classical music. "He felt that listening to radio and CDs was almost as important as food," said Ruth.

At one time he conducted the Belvedere Male Voice Choir, near Erith.

Neil also had a passion for poetry. He wrote a great deal of verse – mostly humorous – which earned him prizes in competitions. A number of his poems have also been published in the *Freethinker*.

Neil was brought up in the Church of England, but his questioning nature led him to abandon faith during his teens and early twenties, and he became a staunch atheist. But, Ruth emphasised, "he would not attack the faith of others unless he was provoked".

He was a great admirer of secularist writers, such as Charles Bradlaugh and especially Chapman Cohen, who edited the *Freethinker* from 1915 to 1951.

Indeed a quote from Cohen concluded Neil's secular funeral in Norwich on November 2, 2009: *The dead feel nothing, but grief is part of the price we pay for affection.*

# the freethinker

## EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

**Birmingham Humanists:** i Tova Jones 021454 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, 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. Sat, Jan 9,  
New Year Lunch. Phone for details.

**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

**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 Pinet 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, Wood-  
street 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.  
Jan 13. Dr Mark Savage of the Secular Medical Forum.

**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 Wednesday  
of the month at 8pm (except Jan, July and Aug) at the HAVS  
centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. No evening meeting on Jan  
13. Instead, a lunch (12pm for 12.30pm) at Wetherspoons,  
02 Centre, Finchley Road. Non-members welcome.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagamba@hotmail.com

**Humanists of Havering:** i Jean Condon 01708 473597.

Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore Cres, Gidea Park. Meet-  
ings on first Thursday of the month, 8pm. Jan 7, Rabbi Zvi  
Solomons: *Everything You Wanted to Know about Judaism, But  
We're 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 briamcclinton@btinternet.com.

w www.nirelandhumanists.net

**Humanist Association Dorset:** Information and pro-  
gramme 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, glas-  
gow@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 Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780

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

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

w www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk i Ian Abbott,  
Waverest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde,  
Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 e ian@ianzere.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. Jan 21. Barbara Chandler: *Legal Abortion,  
UK – Victim of Its Own Success?*

w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com

**Liverpool Humanist Group:** i 07814 910 286.  
w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e lghhumanist@googlemail.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, 197 Brook Hill, Sheffield. Wed Jan 13, 8pm. Annual Quiz  
& Buffet. Advance booking, £12.

**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 Gwinnett on 01935 473263 or

e edward.gwinnett@talktalk.net

**South Place Ethical Society.** Weekly talks/meetings,  
Sundays 11 am 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.

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  
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