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Protests against Pope's state visit to Britain begin in earnest

The first major show of opposition took place on Sunday, February 14, when the Protest The Pope coalition marched through Westminster to the Italian Embassy, where a number of speeches were made. The protest was part of the annual march for a secular Europe but this year was staged specifically to protest against the Pope's recent attack on UK equality measures.

A key element of the protest is a petition launched by the National Secular Society, which, at the time of writing, had attracted over 20,000 signatures.

NSS President Terry Sanderson said: "We thought when we heard the Pope was coming there must be an element of hostility to the visit from the groups he has criticised and made life difficult for, so we decided we would put this petition online. We thought we would get a few hundred signatures but we now have more than 20,000. We have a slot to deliver the petition to Downing Street on March 4.

Sanderson added: "We did a lot of research into how much it cost other countries to host similar visits and we think that's a conservative estimate, particularly given the scale of security needed. We're not saying don't come, but we think it should be a pastoral visit funded by the church and not a state visit funded by the taxpayer."

Pope Ratzinger's visit – Britain's first papal visit since John Paul II's historic Mass at Glasgow's Bellahouston Park in 1982 – is

scheduled to begin in Scotland.

He will fly from Rome to Edinburgh on September 16, where he will be received by the Queen at Holyrood Palace. The pontiff will also visit Glasgow, where he is expected to address thousands of worshippers at an open-air event at Glasgow Green.

A spokesman for the Catholic Church in Scotland said: "This is a state visit at the invitation of the UK Government and so the standard approach is they will fund the cost. There might be some costs to the Catholic Church – that's still to be decided.

He pointed out that there were objections to the visit by the Pope in 1982, "which had no direct impact whatsoever on what was agreed to be a tremendous event for Scotland".

And he dismissed the petition with the words: "Where do the objections come from? The chronic weakness of online petitions is that fictional characters from anywhere can sign. The important thing is to establish the true level of opposition that really exists. It's likely to be minimal and marginal."

Gordon Brown invited Benedict XVI but is understood to have made clear that the Government will not cover all the costs.

A spokesman for the Foreign Office said: "We are still in discussions with the Vatican about the visit programme and it's too early to discuss costs."

A wave of protests are expected to greet the visit since the Pope

Continued on p4)



PROTEST THE POPE

Say **NO** to an official State Visit to the UK!

The Pope opposes universal equality and human rights. He should not be accorded the honour and recognition of a State Visit to our country.

Join the chorus of protest saying "No! The Pope is not welcome!"

Idaho is so much more than mere potatoes

BARRY DUKE LOOKS AT THE STATE THAT LAURA SILSBY PUT ON THE MAP

TO me, Idaho has always conjured up a single image: the potato. But last month I developed a yen to learn more about this US state. And for this sudden burst of curiosity I thank devout Baptist Laura Silsby.

When we went to press, Silsby, 40, from Idaho, was languishing in an Haitian prison, awaiting trial, along with nine other Baptists (two from outside Idaho) on charges of child trafficking.

After the devastating earthquake, Silsby led a mission to bag a bunch of black kids orphaned in the 'quake, but was arrested after trying to sneak 33 of them out of the country.

After Silsby and her cohorts ended up in custody, it emerged that she was the last person on the planet to help children – or anyone else for that matter – for she has a history of failing to pay debts, failing to pay her employees and failing even to follow Idaho laws.

She has been the subject of eight civil lawsuits and 14 unpaid wage claims. The \$358,000 house in Meridian at which she



founded a non-profit New Life Children's Refuge in November, was repossessed last December – and a check of Silsby's driving record revealed at least nine traffic citations since 1997, including four for failing to provide insurance or register annually. Now, if she were still in the land of the living, former Idaho Congresswoman Helen Chenoweth-Hage might now be pulling out all the stops to get the Silsby lot released.

Or perhaps not.

Chenoweth-Hage, also a devout Christian, did not go a bundle on black folk. And when she was elected to Congress, the Ku Klux Klan was jubilant, declaring in their newsletter: "What Rep Chenoweth's election proves is that a race-based campaign is a WINNER. Like David Duke in Louisiana, other far-sighted political leaders see a sea-change in the mood of the White voter towards candidates who offer frank solutions to America's growing non-White chaos. We wish Helen Chenoweth good luck and hope that many others follow in her footsteps!"

In an interview with the *Spokesman-Review* of Spokane, Chenoweth asked the US Forest Service to stop trying to recruit minority employees to work in Idaho. "The warm-climate community – [don't you just love that euphemism] – just hasn't found the colder climate that attractive. It's an area of America that has simply never attracted the Afro-American or the Hispanic."

Mused one US commentator: "One wonders why, if it's colder in Minneapolis ... Milwaukee ... Chicago ... Cleveland ... and Buffalo (where millions of blacks and Hispanics reside without turning into brownies), she would say such a thing. She and other White Idaho racists have little to worry about as minorities are scared to death of even passing through that state – let alone living and working there."

He went on to describe Chenoweth-Hage – who was "so far out in La-La Land that even Newt Gingrich snubbed her in the 1996 election year by passing over Idaho" – as "a nut ... a dangerous, reckless, senseless nut".

Another commentator, Joan Opyre, observed: "For the six long years that Helen Chenoweth held elective office, Idaho's moderates, liberals, and conservatives with common sense, collectively took to their beds. She embarrassed us. She made Idahoans look ignorant, foolish and out of touch. She believed in vast government conspiracies

and black helicopters. She was listed in *The Progressive* as one of The Ten Dimmest Bulbs in Congress – voted in not by Democrats, but by her fellow Republicans."

Chenoweth-Hage also had a reputation for being Congress's top anti-environmentalist, and once infamously declared that she didn't see how salmon could be endangered when she could buy fish in the can at Albertson's.

Then in 2006, Chenoweth became eligible for a Darwin Award. The DA is an internet-based scheme established to "honour those who improve the species by accidentally removing themselves from it".

Chenoweth-Hage died when the four-wheel-drive vehicle in which she travelling overturned in Nevada. She wasn't wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash.

"Why wasn't Chenoweth-Hage wearing a seatbelt? Because she didn't need no stinking seatbelt, never mind the dictates of common sense and Nevada law," wrote Opyre. "Worse, when the SUV in which Chenoweth-Hage was riding rolled over, the ex-politician was carrying an infant child on her lap. In addition to seatbelts for adults, Nevada law requires that children be safely buckled into child safety seats. Thanks only to dumb luck and blind fate, the infant, who was thrown from the vehicle along with Chenoweth-Hage, survived the accident."

Here are some other things you might like to know about Idaho:

It is about as red (as in Republican) as a state can get – but with the added "attraction" of being the *whitest* state. Idaho has a black population of .06 percent, or 25 times less than the rest of America. It is, perhaps, most notorious for being the home state of the Aryan Nations, and host to the annual Aryan Nations Jamboree. It has also become the home state for racist "bad boy" cops. There are communities there filled with police who have been fired for killing, beating and screeching racial epithets at black people while on the job. Nowadays racist cops from all over American now come to Idaho to retire.

Oh, and until recently Idaho was represented by State Senator Larry "I'm not gay" Craig, who, in 2007, was arrested for lewd conduct in the men's restroom at the Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport. He entered a guilty plea to a lesser charge of disorderly conduct.

Will I ever be able to look at the 'umble spud again and not think about crazy Christian fundies and rabid racists? Somehow, I doubt it.



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NSS Secularist of the Year prize won by Southall Black Sisters

The Southall Black Sisters have been awarded the National Secular Society's £5,000 Michael Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year. The award was presented to Pragna Patel, Chair of the organisation, at a prestigious award ceremony in central London on February 13.

NSS President Terry Sanderson said: "Southall Black Sisters was set up to meet the needs of Black and Asian women who are the victims of domestic violence or injustices in the legal system.

"The main aim of the organisation is to empower women in gaining more control over their lives, to be able to live without fear of violence and be able to assert their human rights to justice, equality and freedom. It is right on the forefront of the feminist struggle in this country."

It celebrated its thirtieth anniversary last year, being founded in 1979 during the Southall race riots."

Sanderson said that the group had been chosen to receive the prize because they



Pragna Patel receives the award on behalf of Southall Black Sisters

provide a secular space where women fleeing violence or injustice – often resulting from religious attitudes – can find a safe haven. He said: "The Government's 'cohesion' agenda has put an enormous amount of power into the hands of religious leaders in minority Asian communities. These are almost always very conservative in their outlook and some consider women's rights to be unimportant. The Southall Black Sisters

can provide women with some time away from this all-powerful religious patriarchy for them to sort out their problems in their own way."

Over a thousand women a year contact Southall Black Sisters on issues such as domestic violence, homelessness, immigration, police and racial harassment, health and concerns about their children.

A special campaigning award was also presented to Samantha Stein for her work on setting up Camp Quest, the UK's first residential summer camp specifically for children whose parents embrace a naturalistic rather than supernatural world view.

Previous winners of the Irwin Prize include Maryam Namazie, the Iranian feminist and founder of the One Law for All Campaign and Dr Steve Jones, the biologist who speaks out strongly against the rise of creationist ideas in science, and last year it was won jointly by Lord Avebury and Dr Evan Harris MP for their role in the abolition of the blasphemy law.

Devout Christian jailed in Scotland for sex attack

A SEX attacker who blamed the Devil for making him try to rape a woman has been jailed for four years.

Misrak Eyob, 20, was caught on CCTV pouncing on his 35-year-old victim after she became separated from friends after a night out in Glasgow.

African-born Eyob told the High Court in Glasgow: "I believe in the Bible and

Christ. I abide by the rules. I was drinking and it was Satan that created this situation."

He was convicted of attempted rape. Jailing him, Judge Sean Murphy QC also ordered Eyob to be supervised for two years on his release.

The attack took place as the woman stood alone in a street after leaving a nearby bar in Royston, Glasgow, in July last year.

Eyob was seen repeatedly lifting up the woman's dress and forcing himself upon her in graphic CCTV footage shown to the jury. The incident only ended when the crying victim alerted passers-by. She told the court: "I felt invaded, disgusted."

Eyob, of Glasgow, claimed he had only been "hugging and kissing" the woman. He said the woman had "instigated" sex.

JUST days after a Stoke-on-Trent imam – Mohammed Hanif Khan, 41 – was remanded in custody last month after being charged with serious sexual offences against two young boys, an imam from a small Spanish mosque in El Algar (Murcia) has gone missing after being accused of sexually abusing minors.

A nationwide police hunt was launched for the 47-year-old of Moroccan origin.

He has been accused of sexual abuse by the parents of five children who were in a group of 12 who attended religious classes in the town's small mosque and cultural centre, located seven kilometres from Cartagena.

According to testimony given by the children, the teacher abused them in a room

Hunt launched for sex abuse imam

adjacent to the classroom.

The man arrived at the small mosque in El Algar in September as a substitute for the regular imam, who was absent during the period of Ramadan. He then remained there, continuing to teach religion classes.

The court of Cartagena, which has imposed judicial secrecy on the case, has called for the Murcia juvenile court to intervene.

Meanwhile, an imam at a London mosque has been jailed for 12 weeks after he was convicted of assaulting a nine-year-old boy.

Gulam Hussain punched and kicked the boy and beat him with a bamboo stick.

Walthamstow Magistrates Court heard that Hussain, an Imam at the Jamia Mosque in Leyton, had previously been cautioned in 2005 for inflicting actual bodily harm on an 11-year-old. The Chair of the magistrates, Dr Paul Davis, told Hussain through an Urdu interpreter that he was being jailed "for the protection of the public".

Hussain's mitigation was that "cultural differences" meant he had not realised the beating was wrong.

Hussain punched the boy on the shoulder and kicked him on the leg with the flat of his foot. The victim said he cried to get the defendant to stop.



Pope protests gather momentum in the UK

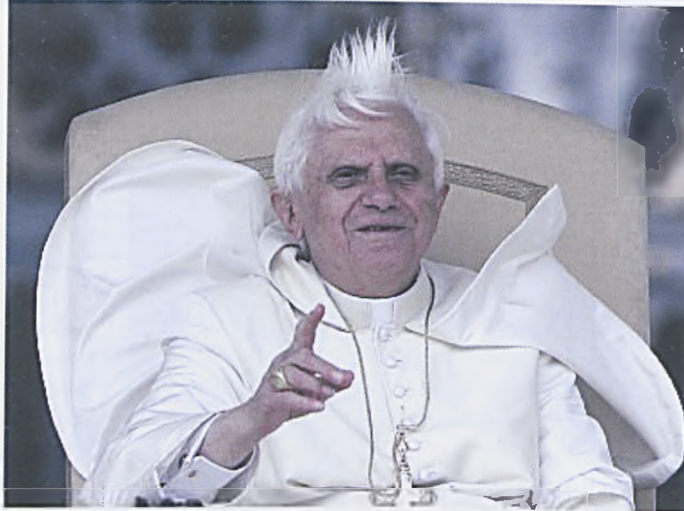
sparked fury among secular and gay rights campaigners when he attacked equality legislation in Britain. He said it ran contrary to "natural law" and imposed unjust limitations on the freedom of religious communities.

The Pope's remarks to bishops of England and Wales were seen as an attack on the sexual orientation regulations which forced Catholic adoption agencies to consider gay couples.

The leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, said: "Scottish Catholics continue to feel the effects of secularisation. That's why the voice of the Church is clearly audible against secularisation and of certain laws that the Government plans."

Sanderson described the visit of "the reactionary head of the Catholic Church" as "dismal news indeed", and he pointed out that "the whole visit will have the full panoply of a visiting head of state, although the Vatican has only a few hundred (all-male) inhabitants.

He added: "Why Britain should seek to laud such a nasty extremist is beyond me. We should not forget that his 'teachings' have resulted in the banning of condoms in developing countries where HIV is decimating the populations. He encourages



Pope Ratzinger: Let the Vatican pick up the tab for his visit

population growth in places where starvation is common. He persecutes homosexuals, treats women as second-class citizens, has colluded in the large-scale cover up of child abuse. His Church interferes illegitimately in politics and undermines democracy. It siphons huge amounts of money out of poverty-stricken economies – what is there to celebrate about such a bigot? The NSS will be joining other groups in protesting against the celebration of this ghastly man's presence here."

Sanderson promised that a coalition of groups that have suffered because of the Pope's teachings will ensure that wherever he goes he will be aware that he has caused

damage and hurt in the lives of real people. He said he was seeking to bring together gay groups, feminist groups, family-planning organisations, pro-choice groups, victim support groups and anyone else who feels under siege from the Vatican's current militancy.

"We hope that the many people who are outraged at the Vatican's apparent indifference to the abuse of children by its priests will turn out to make their feelings clear."

The NSS plans include a festival of films that show the wrongdoings of the Vatican, among them *The Magdalene Sisters* and *The Boys of St Vincent's* – a film about the cover-up of sexual abuse at a Catholic orphanage in Canada.

The Pope was also lambasted last month by Stephen Hughes, a British MEP. Speaking at a meeting of the European Parliament's Socialists and Democrats in Rome, he criticised the Pope's concern that the Equality Bill would restrict religious groups from acting in accordance with their faith.

"As a Catholic, I am appalled by the attitude of the Pope. Religious leaders should be trying to eradicate inequality, not perpetuate it," Mr Hughes said. "Instead of criticising the UK's plans to improve its legislation, the Pope should ensure that existing EU legislation is properly applied in the Vatican."

Naomi Phillips, of the British Humanist Association, also criticised the Pope: "Equality laws do not impose unjust restrictions on religious freedom."

And Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner and gay activist, warned that the Pope's remarks were an attack on the legal rights granted to gay people. "His ill-informed claim that our equality laws undermine religious freedom suggests that he supports the right of churches to discriminate in accordance with their religious ethos.

"He seems to be defending discrimination by religious institutions and demanding that they should be above the law."

The aims of the Protest The Pope campaign are to support:

- Equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transexual people
- Women's equality and reproductive rights
- A secular Europe – immune to the Vatican's agenda
- One law for all, no religious exemptions from the law
- State neutrality in matters of religion and belief.

Vicar tells wives to 'submit and be quiet'

A KENT vicar last month caused outrage when he urged women to "be silent" and "submit" to their husbands. Angus MacLeay, rector of St Nicholas Church in Sevenoaks, Kent, made the comments – which some parishioners thought were more in keeping with a sermon from the dark ages than the modern Church of England – in a leaflet entitled *The Role of Women in the Local Church*.

In it, he said women should "not speak" if asked a question that could be answered by their husbands and should "submit to their husbands in everything".

Using Bible references to justify his comments, he wrote: "Wives are to submit to their husbands in everything in recognition of the fact that husbands are head of the family as Christ is head of the church. This is the way God has ordered their relationships with each other."

In another passage he continued: "It would seem that women should remain silent ... if questions could legitimately be answered by their husbands."

All of this got right up the noses of dozens of women who cancelled direct debit subscriptions to the Anglican church and vowed not to return. But shortly after, the curate at St Nicholas delivered a sermon entitled *Marriage and Women*, which also urged women to submit to their husbands. Reverend Mark Oden blamed the "modern woman" for high divorce rates and urged "wives, submit to your own husbands."

Despite the anger and offence caused, Oden stood by his comments. "I did not set out to unnecessarily offend people, but I stand by what God has said in his word, the Bible."

One female member said: "How can they talk that way in the 21st century? No wonder the Church is losing touch if this is the kind of gobbledegook they want us to believe. I will not be going back to that church and will have to seriously consider my faith if this is the nonsense they are spouting now."

Another said: "What kind of medieval sermon is that? We are not in the 15th century."

'Hijabgate' row erupts in Tower Hamlets

As if a stack of tin cans – erected to represent a minaret outside a mosque in London's Brick Lane – isn't sign enough of abject *dhimmitude* – there is now a plan to erect two giant arches in the form of headscarves, or hijabs, at Brick Lane's entry points, at a cost of £2-million.

And some folk ain't happy.

According to a report last month in the *Guardian*, the plan has been condemned as offensive to Muslim women and a waste of £1.85m of public funds.

The proposed arches, part of a "cultural trail" through the street, have been criticised as "misconceived" and "excluding". Locals have said they risk ghettoising a community that considers itself tolerant and diverse.

Tracey Emin, who lives just off Brick Lane, is one of a number of residents in the east London area who claim that Tower Hamlets council risks inflaming racial and religious tension by trying to force the "hijabgates" – as they have become known – through without proper consultation.

In a letter to the council, Emin wrote: "I sincerely object to these proposals ... the proposed material has no relevance to the heritage of the area or its future. I understand that the Jewish East End Celebration Society does not approve the concept overall and neither do the Spitalfields Trust nor the Spitalfields Society, as stated in the review of the consultation. I am shocked to learn that the scheme is budgeted at £2m and I strongly feel that rubbish collections, vermin control, education and improved policing are more important to resolve."

One local Muslim woman has told the council that the stainless-steel, illuminated arches will "create a stereotypical image of Islam, and endorse the practice of the veil that not all of us are happy with. It is a divisive image and one that in the present climate is highly inappropriate. Tower Hamlets should be seeking to bring communities together at this moment."

The Spitalfields Trust, which helped to save many of the historic Huguenot silk weavers' houses that abut Brick Lane, has urged the council to abandon its "misconceived" idea.

The cultural trail through the area is aimed at celebrating the various migrant communities – including Huguenots, Jews and now Bangladeshis – that have settled there across hundreds of years.

Using planning-gain funds paid to the

council following the development of Bishops Square and Spitalfields market, the trail is intended to bring more tourism into the area and smarten it up. But locals complain that the focus has been too much on the Bangladeshi community, which makes up a third of the Tower Hamlets population.

At the centre of the trail is a 29-metre high-minaret that has been attached to the Brick Lane mosque, a grade II listed building originally built in 1742 as a Huguenot church, then converted into a synagogue and now the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid [mosque]. Tower Hamlets council says the structure "is not a minaret" but a "large steel art sculpture". But this is contradicted on the council's own site. Under the heading *Modern-day minaret will be a Brick Lane landmark*, it said last December: "The eye-catching illuminated steel tower – a modern day interpretation of a minaret – outside the Jamme Masjid Mosque is part of the Brick Lane Cultural Trail."

The seven sections of the 30-metre tower were fitted together and erected last week as part of a major investment in the Spitalfields and Banglatown area.

Broadcaster John Nicolson, who lives off Brick Lane, said: "Throughout history numerous groups have passed through here and made it home. That's what makes Spitalfields so special. It belongs to all of us – atheists, Muslims and Christians, homosexuals and heterosexuals, men and women. The council's latest wheeze – metal arches in the shape of headscarves – is exclusive and excluding. They'd never dream of crucifix-

Faulty goods

AN Arabic ambassador to Dubai discovered to his horror that the woman he married was cross-eyed and had facial hair.

According to the BBC, the woman had worn a niqab on the few occasions the couple had met.

The unnamed envoy told a sharia court her mother had tricked him by showing him pictures of the bride's sister. He only discovered the deception when he lifted the woman's veil to kiss her.

The court annulled the marriage contract but rejected his compensation claim of \$130,000 (£83,000) for gifts he had lavished on his bearded bride.



The minaret Tower Hamlets now insists is a 'sculpture'

inspired gates – nor should they – so why an arch that is both Islamic and representing a specifically conservative form of Islam?"

A spokeswoman for the council said the concept behind the arch was loosely based on the sculptural form of a headscarf, reflecting the many cultural backgrounds that have occupied and sought refuge in and around Brick Lane over the centuries.

She said headscarves were worn not only by Muslims, but for a variety of purposes "such as for warmth, for sanitation, for fashion or social distinction, with religious significance, to hide baldness, out of modesty, or other forms of social convention. Observant married Orthodox Jewish women, for example, are required to cover their hair, often employing scarves for the purpose, and Jewish men will use a kippah or yarmulke to cover their heads for religious purposes. She added: "Many men and women currently wear headscarves or bandannas as a fashion statement, and with Brick Lane being a cultural melting pot both historically and now at the start of the 21st century, this design reference seems appropriate and fitting."

But Will Palin, secretary of Save Britain's Heritage, and a local resident, said: "The headscarf motif is undoubtedly faith-specific to Islam and therefore does not represent the breadth and richness of the borough's history."

At the Beigel Bake, a few metres from the site of one of the proposed arches, Sammy Minzly had been unaware of the proposals.

He said: "I have been here 50 years, and they haven't even told me about it. This used to be a Jewish area, and all my life I have been here. It is disgusting that they have not shown us the respect to ask us what we think."

Catholic Church embroiled in

The Catholic Church is grappling with yet another sexual abuse scandal – this time in Germany. Abuse in Jesuit-run German schools came to light last month, and is said to involve more than a hundred former pupils, according to the head of one of the affected colleges.

The impact on the Catholic order, the Society of Jesus, has been devastating, since the Jesuits have always boasted: “Give us the child for seven years and we will give you the man.” Now, according to *The Times*, it seems the order may lose some of its credibility, in Germany at least, as a pillar of Catholic education.

“I can imagine that we will reach a three-figure number,” said Father Klaus Mertes, head of the elite Canisius college in Berlin, talking of the number of possible victims. He did not exclude a compensation package.

Manuela Groll, a lawyer representing many former pupils, said: “More and more victims are coming forward every day.”

The problems are not confined to the Berlin college, with cases of possible abuse



Douglas Perltz, photographed in 2004

being investigated at schools in Bonn, Göttingen, in St Blasien in southwest Germany, Hanover and Hamburg. At the Aloysius college in Bonn, alma mater of Thomas de Mazière, the Interior Minister, and Stefan Raab, one of Germany’s top TV entertainers, the director has resigned after a parent accused him of complicity.

The claims date from the late 1950s to well into the 1990s, but all, so far, fall under the statute of limitations, meaning that there will be no official criminal prosecution. Instead, the order has engaged an independent lawyer, Ursula Raue, to look into the allegations. Some abuse victims say that she is too close to the Jesuits.

Most cases reported to the order so far occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Catholic priests speaking off the record say that, as leaders of church youth groups during this period, they were confused by the rapid changes in society. Pupils were caught up in the sexual revolution of that time and wanted to discuss their sexuality with the priests, many of whom were in their twenties. Until then, say the priests, Catholic education had an innocence about it. But the problems run much deeper. Many of the complainants say they were put under pressure to masturbate their priests. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* carried an interview with an anonymous 62-year-old who has been active in politics for the past three decades.

He described graphically how, 50 years ago, he would be expected to enter the priest’s room and perform a sex act. The priest left the college two years later, supposedly for health reasons, to a parish in the Tyrolean alps, where he died in 1972.

To judge by the testimony of the victims, this was part of a pattern of covering the tracks of offending priests. Serious sexual and psychological abuse appears to have been tolerated until word leaked out to parents.

The Jesuits have apologised to the victims but the order faces a long period of self-appraisal. Even within the order, the expectation is that the paper trail will show

Rugby international Gareth Thomas accused of ‘thrusting sodomy down small children’s throats’

EVANGELIST Stephen Green, infamous of head an outfit called Christian Voice, last month launched a vitriolic attack on Welsh rugby international Gareth Thomas, who came out as gay last December.

Thundered Green: “Most right-thinking people would be appalled that sex in any form, and sodomy in particular, is being thrust down small children’s throats, yet that is what Gareth Thomas is now promoting.

“It would be understandable if any club associated with him came to be tarred with the same brush. Right-thinking people do not like sodomy being promoted to children.”

He added: “Gareth Thomas is urging children to identify themselves as homosexual, and to inhibit their normal development into heterosexuality.

“That is a wicked thing to do to impressionable young people. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke about millstones being tied around the necks of those who lead children astray.”

Green is appalled that Thomas has now become patron of LGBT History Month.

The bigot explained: “LGBT means ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual’ and the ‘History Month’ is a shameful propaganda exercise run every February by ‘Schools Out’, a gay activist organisation dedicated to promoting sodomy to school-children under the guise of anti-bullying.”

Green concluded: “The tragedy is that there are Christian ministries which help with sexual healing, but apart from the occasional media foray they stay under the radar for fear of reprisals from gay activists. If Gareth Thomas had come across one of those ministries, he might have found fulfilment as a complete man and still be happily married to the woman he says he still loves.”

in yet another abuse scandal

a record of shielding offenders and ignoring signs of child abuse.

Meanwhile, federal prosecutors in the US revealed last month that they now have evidence that the Connecticut founder of an internationally known residential charity for children in Haiti sexually abused nearly twice as many poor and homeless boys as originally suspected. The charity, Haiti Fund Inc, has close links with the Catholic Church.

A federal grand jury in Bridgeport returned a new indictment against Douglas Perlitz, 39, accusing him of travelling to Haiti and engaging in sexual conduct with 18 minor boys. When he was originally charged last September, Perlitz was charged with crimes associated with 10 boys.

Perlitz is accused of assaulting the children between 1998 and 2008. Prosecutors said he tried to block various investigations after allegations of sexual misconduct became public in 2007. Among other things, federal investigators said, Perlitz tried to buy off victims and conceal computer records. He has been denied bail and has been locked up since his arrest in September.

Authorities have said they believe that Perlitz used the cover of the widely known charity to extort sexual favours from the poorest children in the hemisphere's poorest country. They said he threatened to expel children from his charity's housing and return them to the streets if they refused his demands.

Since Perlitz's arrest, senior federal law enforcement officials have pointed to him as an example of what they have called invigorated federal efforts to track down and prosecute US citizens who exploit children on foreign soil.

Perlitz was founder and director of Project Pierre Toussaint in Haiti's north coast city of Cap-Haitien, the country's second most populous city. He offered boys as young as six years homes, food, clothing, shoes, water to bathe in, sporting activities and basic education.

The project was financed over the past decade through the Haiti Fund Inc, a registered Connecticut charity and Project Pierre Toussaint's fundraising arm. Fund directors were appointed by the Rev Paul Carrier, former director of campus ministry at Fairfield University. Authorities said that Carrier is a close friend of Perlitz's and travelled repeatedly to visit him in Haiti.

Donors contributed more than \$2 million to Project Pierre Toussaint between 1997 and 2008. *The Haitian Times* newspa-

per has reported that, when allegations of sexual abuse surfaced in 2008, donations dried up and the operation was forced to close that summer. Children who lived in the charity's residences became homeless once again.

Perlitz is a 1992 graduate of Fairfield University. In 2002, he delivered the school's commencement address and received an honorary degree. Students, faculty and alumni have been major contributors to the Perlitz organisation. Perlitz returned to the Fairfield area after the charity closed and moved to the Denver area last summer.

While in Colorado, federal authorities say, Perlitz continued to speak with people in Haiti and "was wiring money to individuals in Haiti, which the government believes was done to buy the silence of additional children." In addition, they said, Perlitz was using a laptop computer to view internet sites featuring nude, black boys.

In the new indictment, Perlitz is charged with nine counts of travelling outside the United States with the intent to engage in sexual conduct with persons under the age of 18, and ten counts of engaging in sexual conduct in foreign places with persons under the age of 18. He faces up to 30 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000 on each count, if convicted.

The indictment said that he personally "befriended and recruited male street children to attend the school" and live in the residences.

To "entice and persuade" the children to comply with his sexual demands, Perlitz promised them food, shelter, money raised from his donors, and items such as cell-phones, shoes and clothing, the indictment said.

He is accused of "grooming" children for sexual acts by exposing them to homosexual pornography and plying them with alcoholic beverages.

Kent evangelist's despicable attack on renowned fashion designer Alexander McQueen

CHRISTIAN evangelist Bob Hutton is well-known in Kent for pestering people with biblical tracts, and inserting religious leaflets into food packing in supermarkets.

But he recently branched out on the internet to bring the "good news" of Jesus via his *Gospel Truth* blog.

This, predictably, quickly got bogged down in a mire of homophobia – and last month Hutton plumbed the depths of hate-mongering after Alexander McQueen, the world-renowned fashion designer, committed suicide.

McQueen killed himself while in the grip of despair over the death of his mother, Joyce.

Under the heading "Alexander McQueer", Hutton wrote that the designer "led a particularly sinful and godless life. His language was profane and his designs exhibited a desire to 'shock' ... Moreover, he was openly and unashamedly a homosexual who 'married' a lover in 2000."

He added: "While I certainly do not approve of hatred or violence against gay perverts, the Bible is clear – such disgusting behaviour is an abomination. It is bad enough to engage in these vile pursuits, but this man was obviously pleased to be known as a man who willingly, and without the least sense of shame, followed a perverse lifestyle.

"It is virtually certain that he died in an unrepentant state and that, even now, he is bitterly regretting his vileness, his filth and his total disregard for what God's word teaches about sin and its consequences."

• **Editor's note:** Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, once declared: "I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct of revenge, for which no means are venomous enough, or secret, subterranean and small enough – I call it the one immortal blemish upon the human race."

Hutton and his ilk make clear just how spot-on Nietzsche was when he penned those words.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Honest Serving Men

JOHN RADFORD argues that, while science moves on apace, religion remains stationary

"I keep six honest serving-men / (They taught me all I knew) / Their names are What and Why and When / And How and Where and Who."

KIPLING should have written "all I know", but that would not have rhymed (in his day poems rhymed, and scanned).

Religious apologists, in their wrangles with science, are fond of singling out two of the men. Science, they say, tells us How, but only religion can tell us Why. My first objection to this is that I do not regard either science or religion as an agent. Neither tells us anything. It is scientists and religious people who tell us things. Each group consists of individuals who vary widely. And they overlap: some people belong to both. However, scientists are probably more homogeneous than the religious. There is broad consistency among scientists about methods and findings, whereas the religious notoriously disagree.

A second objection is that the religious view of science often seems to be one or more particular disciplines, especially the physical sciences. Science to me is not a set of facts. Rather it is an approach to understanding, which seeks as far as possible to be objective, rational, empirical (based on observation), and preferably experimental (systematically testing hypotheses). This approach can be applied to any problem or any phenomenon, although with varying degrees of difficulty.

Religion I consider a polythetic concept. There are various characteristics such that the label "religion" is appropriate if several are present. One that is perhaps always found in some form is the conviction of contact with some "other reality", though this is again very variously defined, from god or gods to a non-personal state of consciousness beyond normal life. "Religion tells us why", means that some people offer explanations of a religious nature, which may vary considerably. What the "how versus why" proponents generally seem to mean by religion is monotheism, usually Christianity (itself a very mixed bag, of course). The mono-

theist answer to why the universe exists is that it was created by God. That is not the answer of many other religions. For Hindus and Buddhists the universe has always existed, and for Buddhists there is no personal God.

"Science tells us how" means that scientists give, as far as they can, an accurate account of what occurs. But that is not all they do. They also seek to give explanations, that is, why things occur as they do. Very many scientists would say, I think, that they are answering "why" questions.

Scientific method has provided many 'why' answers, though perhaps only a fraction of those still to be found. This is where the religious person steps in, claiming, for example, that there is no scientific answer to why the universe exists

In my view, "science" means any enquiry insofar as it follows the general principles I have mentioned. Historians, for example, strive to be objective, are certainly empirical, and can do experiments in a sense, by stating what could be expected to have been the case given an actual outcome (or *vice versa*), and then searching to see if this was so.

They then seek to say why it happened. Henry VIII's desire to be free of papal control, and to possess the wealth of the Church, tell us why he dissolved the monasteries (though there is more to it). The presence of a particular bacterium tells us why a patient is ill (again more factors come into it, such as the individual's susceptibility and so on).

Scientific method has provided many "why" answers, though perhaps only a

fraction of those still to be found. This is where the religious person steps in, claiming, for example, that there is no scientific answer to why the universe exists. The current "Big Bang" story tells us how, not why. To this there are at least two answers. One is that science, indeed, still has far to go, though we understand vastly more than we did (while the religious answer seems to have remained more or less stationary). Another is that this may be a question that does not require a "why" answer. There is no logical reason to think that existence is less likely than non-existence: maybe the universe just does exist (as God is supposed to).

A more sophisticated version is offered by the religious philosopher Richard Swinburne, and others. He argues that there are two sorts of explanation. One is scientific, or "inanimate", that is, essentially, stating the conditions under which a phenomenon occurs, and showing that they did occur in the particular case. The other is personal, that is, that the event is caused by a rational agent. An analogy (mine) might be why a snooker ball goes into the pocket. The inanimate answer is that it responds to the impact of the cue, or another ball, according to the principles of physics. The personal answer is that the player decides on a shot and how to make it. In fact, the nature of explanation, and particularly scientific explanation, is much more complex than this. But one can agree that both these can be appropriate in some cases. The bacterium case above is the first, Henry VIII's case is the second. But it is false to equate this with "scientific v non-scientific", at least on my view of science. Both inanimate and personal explanations can be either scientific or unscientific. The supposed efficacy of prayer is an unscientific personal explanation of a cure. The once standard method of blood-letting was an unscientific inanimate explanation. A personal explanation need not be rational, it could be the action of a madman.

"Rational" is presumably specified in order that God can be invoked. It would

not do to suggest that God is mad, or even highly capricious, though this would actually make better sense of some events such as natural disasters. (Classical Greek polytheism readily accommodated such wilful or malicious divine actions.) As it is, convoluted arguments have to be produced to show that arbitrary disasters are consistent with a rational (and all-good and all-powerful) being.

It is often not easy to say which sort of explanation is appropriate; or both may be. A scientific account can often not state all the conditions, but only the general principles. Thus viruses certainly cause influenza, but why does X get it when Y, in the same house and similar in age, health etc, does not? The scientific method would enquire further into individual differences in susceptibility and behaviour. A personal explanation on the other hand may be magical: someone has put a curse on X, and a witch doctor must be sought to detect the culprit and counteract the spell. (Which is quite rational, if you believe in witches.) This (it seems to me) merges into religious explanation. God visited Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in response to abortion, or homosexuality, or the United States' presence in Iraq, or its urging Israel to leave Gaza, etc (all found on the internet, though not necessarily the same God in each case).

Swinburne argues that there are some things science cannot explain, even in principle, such as consciousness, or the basic laws of physics (apparently because they are respectively too strange and too all-pervasive). On his assumption that there are just two kinds of explanation, they demand a personal one. One might say, rather than How or Why, we must ask Who? This for him is the ultimate explanation, when the person is God. And it must be, he says, because a simpler explanation is better than a more complex one, and the simplest you can get is a single agent that is eternal, unembodied, omnipotent, omniscient and all-benevolent.

One could suggest that even simpler would be no agent at all. And, as others have pointed out, it is extremely difficult to see how God can be a person and yet be of the utmost simplicity. Personhood is intrinsically complex – acuter feelings, more knowledge, wisdom, intelligence and so on. Complete knowledge cannot be simpler than partial, any more than advanced mathematics is simpler than the two times table. Further, though it is generally desirable for explanations to be



Illustration: Linda Oliver

simpler, that is not sufficient for preferring them. Scientific explanations are selected on grounds not only of simplicity but also, and essentially, of predictive power combined with refutability.

The God theory is not predictive, because God can by definition do anything at all. As Karl Popper pointed out, a concept that “explains” everything, explains nothing. If there were an entity that caused everything, then of course it would be the cause of everything. And there is no way to refute it. Whatever the phenomenon, it is caused by God. There is no alternative to test it against. Further, there is no evidence that God is involved, other than the events for which he is supposedly responsible.

God is simply added, because he seems to Swinburne “the best stopping point”. To be fair, he does argue that the existence of God is “highly probable” on various grounds, too detailed to discuss here. He argues further that “science” can only explain by reference to natural laws, and thus cannot say why there are such laws. They must be created by some agent. And that must be a particular God. As A C Grayling puts it, “We don’t know who did it, so it must be Fred”.

But natural laws are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are not created by a law-giver, but merely systematise the observed regularities of nature. To say that someone

must have ordained such regularities is a version of the hoary old argument from design. This has been endlessly debated, but it is pointed out in particular, first that “design” is a human judgement, not a given, and second that we can only rightly make it when we already have justification for it.

In William Paley’s famous “watchmaker” example, we could infer a maker when finding a watch only because we already know how watches come to be. Someone with no knowledge of marine life might suppose that an intricate sea-shell was made by someone (which of course is what “Intelligent Design” fans do).

Personally, although they are fascinating questions, I don’t know the cause of the universe, or how many universes there are or will be, or whether there is a cause at all, and I don’t think anyone does. I am confident, though, that the only way to find out is to keep asking Why and How and Who, and indeed What and Where and When, and to do so appropriately. Stopping short at an imagined creator will not help.

Kipling’s men serve us very well; we need them all and doubtless always will.

John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London

Freethinking

STUART CAMPBELL, author of *The Rise and Fall of Jesus*, argues that the 'Messiah' was nothing more

The May 2000 issue of the *Freethinker* carried a critical review of my 1996 book about Jesus and the origin of Christianity (*The Rise and Fall of Jesus*). Unfortunately, your reviewer, Jack Hastie, misunderstood the main point of the book: he thought that I was claiming that Jesus deliberately faked his own death. In addition, he thought my thesis too speculative and even absurd and that I had "stepped outside" the field of my expertise (one could respond that he had certainly "stepped outside" the area of his expertise, which evidently was not in New Testament studies).

I attribute the misunderstanding to careless reading and the assumption we all make that, because of our familiarity with the

Gospels, we are all experts on the subject. This convinces publishers that nothing new can be said on the matter; some told me that my ideas "must be wrong", but they did not explain why.

The problem of Jesus is basically historical, with associated problems in ancient languages and religions. But these skills are useless without some insight into the mind of Jesus himself. Albert Schweitzer suggested that every life of Jesus remains a reconstruction on the basis of a more or less accurate insight into the nature of the dynamic self-consciousness of Jesus, and J Middleton Murry believed that Jesus can be known only through intuition. Even the historian needs to make intuitive guesses about the past. Camille Jullian wrote that historians should not avoid making

conjectures when necessary to connect the rare details that remain of the past, although they should carefully distinguish between such conjectures and the data to be handled.

Following Schweitzer, this is what I did. After reading scores of "lives" of Jesus by liberal theologians and freethinkers, whose views and insights I recognise and record, I gained an insight that seems not to have occurred to other writers, even though some have glimpsed part of it.

What was that insight? To Christians, Jesus was (is?) the incarnation of God, sent to save the world from the consequences of their sins. To non-Christians, and even to many Christians, Jesus was a good but naive itinerant preacher who unaccountably fell foul of the authorities. To both groups of

A COUPLE recently complained that they had been inundated by phone callers trying to contact God after a spoof article had given out a number very similar to theirs as that of the Deity.

For a laugh I dialled the offending number.

"Thank you for calling God," said an automated voice. "Calls are monitored and may be recorded for security, quality control and training purposes. Please enter your date of birth. This will be in the form `day,day; month,month; year,year.'" I complied.

"Thank you. Please enter the first and last digits of your mother's maiden name." I did so.

"Thank you. Please enter the first line of your address followed by your post code."

I obeyed.

"Thank you. Please wait while your identity is confirmed."

Silence.

Then, "Please choose from among the following options: If you want to speak to Jesus press 1. If you want to speak to Allah press 2. If you want to speak to Brahma press 3. If you want to speak to Buddha press 4. If you want to speak to the Emperor of Japan press 5. If you want to speak to any other god or goddess please press 6."

Resisting the temptation to dally with laughter-loving Aphrodite, I pressed 1.

Dialling God

By JACK HASTIE

The voice resumed. "To help us to deal with your call effectively please continue to use your keypad. If you want to save a loved one from a terminal illness press 1. If you want to shag Angelina Jolie press 2. If you want to win the lottery press 3. If you want your favourite team to win a major sporting trophy press 4. For a statement of the balance of your unconfessed sin press 5. For any other request press 6.

"To hear these options again press the hash key. To return to the main menu press star zero."

I selected 4. (You better believe it!)

"Thank you. Your call is in a queue. Your call will be attended to as soon as possible."

The Hallelujah Chorus came down the line.

After three minutes: "Thank you for your patience. Your call is important to us and will be attended to as soon as possible."

More Hallelujah Chorus.

Another three minutes later: "All of our lines are busy. We apologise for the delay. Please continue to hold and your call will be attended to as soon as possible."

I had just begun to think that had I been anxious to save a loved one from death I might well be too late when the heavenly

music was interrupted by the ring tone and a male voice with a barely intelligible south-Asian accent addressed me: "Thank you for calling God. My name is Archangel Gabriel. How may I help you?"

"I want to speak to Jesus."

"I am very sorry. Jesus is on the other line just now. Would you like to speak to one of his special advisers?"

"OK."

The familiar automated voice returned: "If you want to speak to the Pope press 1. If you want to speak to the Reverend Ian Paisley press 2. If you want to speak to Sir Fred Goodwin press 3. If you want to speak to Tony Blair press 4. If you want to speak to Nick Griffin press 5."

As Barry Duke was not among the options, I reluctantly opted for 4.

Again the ring tone. Then: "Hi, Jack. Tony here. We've managed to get the waiting times at the call centre down to half what they were under the Tories. I'm a pretty straight sort of guy and Saddam Hussein must have had weapons of mass destruction. How are you doing?"

"I want the Scotland football team to win the World Cup."

There was a long silence. Then: "Oh! You'll have to speak to the Almighty about that. I'll transfer the call."

More Hallelujah music.

Then, three minutes later: "If you want to speak to Jesus press 1..."

I gave up.

ing about Jesus

ing more than a deluded religious fanatic 'who arranged his own arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection'

believers, Jesus' life is a mystery, for one a mystical superstition and for the other a hodgepodge of confusing vignettes.

However, one can construct a coherent and logical sequence of events that explain Jesus' life by making some fundamental assumptions. These are (firstly) that, as Schweitzer insisted, Jesus can only be understood in his historical milieu, as an aspirant Messiah within the Jewish community in Judaea. Secondly, that Jesus was part of a movement with a plan that was connected with the Messianic aspiration and that this movement followed Pharisaic philosophy; ie that men must work to fulfil God's will. It also has to be assumed that the plan failed (Jesus did not become the Messiah) and that the Gospels are partly historical and partly propaganda for the Early Church. Contrary to claims otherwise, these two parts can mostly be distinguished because what suited the Early Church did not agree with history or with what is known of Jewish customs.

One blatant example is the claim for the divinity, and hence the incarnation, of Jesus. In Judaism, only God is divine and the Messiah is a thoroughly human character, God's viceroy. Jesus himself never claimed divinity. The other, even more blatant, is the attempt to blame the Jews for Jesus' death when the evidence that he was tried and sentenced to death by the Romans is overwhelming (crucifixion was a Roman, not a Jewish punishment). It is clear that the evangelists tried to tell a story that was undermined throughout by evidence of a quite different story.

The scenario that emerges from this evidence is that Jesus was a disciple, and/or a close relative, of John the Baptist and inherited from him the leadership of a small Gnostic sect (the Nazarenes) that had worked out, not only the details of the Kingdom of God, but how and when it was to appear. In particular the Nazarenes had plotted (from Scripture) the life of Messiah-ben-Joseph, the first of two Messiahs and one who had to suffer on behalf of his people. Jesus became convinced that he was this Messiah and that he would become the second Messiah, the ultimate ruler of Israel. This explains the record in John of his enigmatic promise to return as a new "Comforter".

As a Pharisee, Jesus had to arrange events



Jesus on the cross: a cunning plan that went horribly wrong

so that they fulfilled prophecy, even to the extent of arranging his own arrest, trial, execution and resurrection. I explain carefully how the Gospels reveal that Jesus arranged his whole life to fulfil what he saw as prophecy. Judas betrayed him only because it was a necessary part of the plan. Jesus facilitated his own arrest knowing that he would be crucified but confident that he had the means to be "resurrected" afterwards. This means was opium, administered during the crucifixion. He must have believed that this substance actually caused temporary death. In fact, as we now know, it can cause the appearance of death (coma), sufficient to convince a Roman centurion that Jesus was indeed dead. This permitted him to be removed from his cross after only a few hours and transferred to a nearby tomb (another part of the plan).

Evidently Jesus had intended that, after "resurrection", he would gather an army in Galilee and march on Jerusalem to claim the throne of Israel as its Messiah. That would have thrown him into conflict with the might of Rome, but he thought his destiny more powerful than Caesar's and that he would rule the Kingdom of Heaven. This kingdom was not in the sky; it was here on Earth.

But the plan failed. Mortally wounded on the cross, his body had to be removed from the tomb prematurely in order to avoid embarrassment. Unaware of the secret programme and kept in ignorance of Jesus' death, the disciples continued to preach in his name and to proclaim an imminent Kingdom. They even thought that they saw him in Galilee, mistaking an old shepherd for their master.

Thus was a new religion born. Christianity is the product of Jesus' failure and the blind obedience of the disciples. Jesus had no intention of founding the Church. Jesus was a deluded religious fanatic, a victim of Jewish fundamentalism. He had no greater insight or knowledge than anyone else and he had no message for the world, certainly not for the modern world or Gentiles.

An Edinburgh agent who read my MS, or a synopsis of it, declared that it "lacks the sensationalism...which is sadly much sought after today". What could be more sensational than claiming that Jesus planned to become world dictator? Or that he relied on a drug to do so, a drug whose derivatives are abused by so many today?

• A revised and updated edition of *The Rise and Fall of Jesus* has just been published by WritersPrintShop.

Superstition: Belief in

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews Robert L Park's examination of a world the

“If things were different, things would not be the way things are. If that doesn't strike you as terribly deep, you may not be suitable material for a Templeton Prize.” The Templeton Prize, in case anyone is unaware, is the richest bribe available to scientists who “say something nice about religion.”

Responding to the argument that the universe is so fine-tuned for human life that it must have been designed for that purpose, Park writes) “But the fine-tuning argument is an example of the ‘Texas-sharpshooter fallacy’: The sharpshooter fires his six-gun at the side of a barn, and then walks over and draws a bull's-eye around the bullet hole.” That passage was extremely reassuring, as it followed a lengthy discussion of the claim that religion and science are not incompatible, an argument on

which Park initially appeared to be on the wrong side. His clarification of the issue was, “Invoking a designer solves nothing. It only raises the additional question of where the designer came from.” And in case there was any doubt that he rejected Stephen Jay Gould's “non-overlapping magisteria,” he observed that, “Teaching intelligent design in a biology class would be like teaching astrology to a class in astronomy.”

Park asks, “Is there a God? As it is impossible to prove there is, so also is it impossible to prove there is not.” Since he refers to “a God,” as opposed to “God,” I must agree. But he is apparently unaware that the existence of “God,” defined as a god with all of the qualities attributed to it by major religions, has been as definitively disproven as the existence of phlogiston.!

In explaining that the initial attraction between himself and his wife of 57 years was that, “our pheromones matched receptors in each other's olfactory system,” he

goes on to declare that, “To keep you from getting excited by your own pheromones, they do not attach to your own receptors. Nor do they attach to the receptors of closely related people such as siblings, who produce similar pheromones. This adaptation has the effect of discouraging inbreeding.” And if he believes that, I have a bridge for sale in Brooklyn that I think will interest him.²

Commenting on the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning that causes millions to believe that an inert process such as prayer or a sugar pill cured them of an ailment that in 80 percent of all cases would have healed spontaneously with no treatment whatsoever, Park writes, “Quack doctors who have a talent for invoking the placebo effect sometimes attract huge followings and wind up on the Oprah Winfrey show.” He refers to Winfrey again later in connection with her role in turning a ridiculous masturbation fantasy called *The Secret*, which claims that just thinking about a desired objective can make it happen, into a bestseller. He did not recommend that Winfrey's kindergarten graduation be revoked, or that she be confined to a cage with padded walls where she cannot pass on her mind-AIDS to the uninfected. And that is unfortunate.

Park discusses several issues at length, including homeopathy. He notes that, “The most important advance in medical research has been the randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind trial, by means of which we can learn what works and what doesn't. No homeopathic medicine has ever passed such a test.” He cites a homeopathic medicine that sells for \$12. “The price represents the cost of guaranteeing that the medicine retains no trace of the active ingredient. Why, you may wonder, are millions of people around the world willing to pay twelve bucks for a guarantee that they are getting nothing? They are paying for the placebo effect—and placebos aren't free.”

Park mentions “Homo erectus, an ancestor of Homo sapiens.” Since accumulated knowledge has long passed the point where any individual could be expected to keep up with the latest advances in sciences other than his own, his unawareness that erectus is now generally regarded as a dead end and not a human ancestor is under-

Jesus & Mo



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f in the Age of Science

world the American physics professor fears is succumbing to more superstition

standable.

The word “hypnotism” does not appear in Park’s index, and the only mention of the concept in the text debunks the claims that it has been used for such purposes as recovering memories of past lives. But in a book titled *Superstition*, the failure to investigate hypnotism suggests that he is unaware that hypnotism is as much a superstition as multiple personality, facilitated communication, and a god that answers prayers.

A study published in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* concluded that an experimental group of prayed-for patients had a higher recovery rate than an un-prayed for control group. Park details how, when the study was exposed as a fraud, JRM succeeded in covering up the truth for three years before it was compelled to admit that it had been hoaxed. He then reports that a later, properly-conducted study proved that

prayer did not influence recovery rates, so definitively that any further study is most unlikely. He reports that Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ tested magician Yuri Geller for “psychic power,” and swallowed his schoolboy conjuring tricks, hook, line and sinker. And he reports that searches for evidence for a “soul” or “heaven” did not succeed in finding any. What he does not do is add any useful information to books by Kendrick Frazier, Martin Gardner, Joe Nickel, James Randi, and others, that make all of the same points more effectively.

I am not aware if Park has ever written any fiction. But he clearly has never learned the difference between fiction writing and nonfiction writing. Consider his opening sentence: “Almost a year had passed since the tree had fallen, but it was not hard to find.” As gripping as that might be at the start of a novel, it is grossly inappropriate as the beginning of a work of science. Jour-

nalists adopt such a style to make the point, “Look how clever I am.” For a scientist it should be an absolute no-no.

In most respects this is an accurate book. But it is not a good book.

Footnotes:

1 “I am not proving that all conceivable gods do not exist. I am simply showing beyond a reasonable doubt that a God with the specific hypothesized attributes does not exist.” (Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, Prometheus, Amherst NY, 2007, p 228)

2 See chapter 4, “Incest: The Abolition of Endogenous Marriage,” in *God, Jesus and the Bible: The Origin and Evolution of Religion*, World Audience, NY, 2009.

• *Superstition: Belief in the Age of Science* is published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton NJ 08540, ISBN 978-0-691-13355-3, 238 pp, hc, \$24.95

Relic worship risks replacing authentic faith with superstition

A VATICAN theologian said last month that veneration of relics ran the risk of replacing authentic faith with irrational superstition.

The warning came as pilgrims began queuing to pray before the 13th-century remains of St Anthony of Padua, one of the Catholic world’s most popular saints. The skeleton of the saint, who is credited by many Catholics with miracle-working powers, went on display in mid-February in a glass case at St Anthony’s Basilica in Padua to mark the transfer of his remains to their final resting place in February 1350.

February 15 is also known as the Feast of the Tongue because, when St Anthony’s coffin was opened 30 years after his death, his tongue was found to be “miraculously” incorrupt. This was seen as a “divine” tribute to his gift of preaching.

The remains, last displayed in 1981, stayed on show for a week and were viewed by around 200,000 pilgrims from all over Europe. Monsignor Pietro Principe, a theologian whose biblical commentaries are published by the Vatican, said that the “display of the mortal remains of saints and the cult of relics are part of our tradition. However, we nowadays run the risk of crossing the boundary from popular devotion to superstition.”

Monsignor Principe, an adviser to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Dean of the College of Cardinals and former Vatican Secretary of State, said the veneration of relics stretched back to the origins of Christianity. But there was a temptation to “compensate for empty churches with a boom in religious happenings, substituting miracle-performing sensationalism for authentic faith”. He added: “To pray before the body of a saint or his relics means to thank God, who supported his path towards sainthood. The object of adoration, however, must remain God, not the saint”. Relics were “not fundamental for belief, but they can help”.

At one of his weekly audiences last month, Pope Ratzinger said that St Anthony was “venerated not only in Padua, where a splendid basilica was built which houses his mortal remains, but in the whole world. Anthony contributed in a significant way to the development of Franciscan spirituality, with his outstanding gifts of intelligence, balance, apostolic zeal and, mainly, mystical fervour.”

In his preaching St Anthony had shown that he “knew well the defects of human nature, the tendency to fall into sin”, the Pope said. “That is why he constantly urges us to fight our inclination to covetousness, pride and impurity, and to practise the virtues of poverty and generosity, humility and obedience, chastity and purity.”

The saint’s concern for the poor remained relevant today, “when the financial crisis and serious economic imbalances are impoverishing not a few people and creating conditions of misery”, Pope Benedict added. Last autumn the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux, a 19th-century French Carmelite nun, went on a month-long tour of Britain, attracting more than 200,000 queuing pilgrims, including Tony Blair.

points of view..



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RADFORD'S REVIEW OF EAGLETON'S BOOK

HAVING reviewed Terry Eagleton's *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* for *The Journal of Freethought History*, I read with interest John Radford's review (*Freethinker*, February).

I think Professor Radford misses a number of points. When they were in the International Socialists, Eagleton and Hitchens were great drinking buddies and as often happens they have fallen out. While Hitchens is using his writing talents as an exponent of the new atheism, Eagleton has lapsed into a sentimentalised version of childhood Catholicism combined with what Marx called feudal socialism.

Capitalism is heartless and godless, says Eagleton, so let us return to the Middle Ages when the priest dispensed blessings and threats of Hell, Hell being made real by the fires which burned heretics.

Humanists, alleges Eagleton, buy their rejection of religion on the cheap. Yet even a cursory glance at the writings of Bradlaugh, Foote, Cohen and more recently Ridley, reveals the tremendous effort and scholarship that went into their work. And Dawkins and Hitchens are far from superficial.

Eagleton suggests that Jesus was some kind of pioneer of socialism and champion of the poor and oppressed. Yet since Christianity became the Roman state religion, it has been an integral part of the establishment. Runaway slaves were told to return to their masters. Christianity was more the work of Paul than Jesus, and Paul wanted to tailor the new religion to serve the needs of the Roman ruling class.

Eagleton is a fan of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, a critic of both the analytical method and postmodernism. Badiou, an atheist, describes religion as anti-philosophy. It is, perhaps, because he has written a book on Paul that Eagleton admires him.

For Eagleton, the Jewish and Christian scriptures have much to say about some vital

questions on which the left has maintained and embarrassed silence. Yet what can the left, or any rational beings, learn from the fantasies of iron-age savages and myths about a messiah who may not have existed?

Eagleton holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own. But if there is one thing humanity needs to dispossess itself of it is the ignorance and superstition of religion.

Unlike John Radford, I did not find the book interesting and worth reading. Reading it was a penance and it saddened me that Eagleton has regressed so far from the revolutionary Marxism of his youth.

You can't buy the works of F A Ridley, a brilliant Marxist critic of religion. They are sadly long out of print. But for £15 you can buy Jack Conrad's *Fantastic Reality*, a first-rate modern Marxist polemic.

Terry Liddle
London

'WORDS WITHOUT MEANING'

OWEN O'Neill's February article "Words without meaning" is persuasive, but in my opinion fundamentally flawed. Though his contention that religious words are void of meaning is generally true of religious adjectives ("divine", "sanctified" etc), so it is of many non-religious adjectives (such as "intelligent" or "beautiful").

On the other hand, religious nouns, such as "God" or "revelation", can easily be defined in meaningful everyday words; and frequently are, in a variety of interpretations. Moreover, secularists need to pin their religious opponents down to particular definitions before gainsaying the ideas behind them.

For instance, if "God" is described as creator of the universe, personal and purposeful, with attributes that include both

omnipotence and benevolence, he (or, less probably, she) is disproved by all the suffering we perceive in the world, and is no more possible than a square circle.

If, on the other hand, our theist sticks to defining God as "the supreme being", with no alleged characteristics, the only valid line of argument against its existence is that it lacks objective evidence and explains nothing.

Barbara Smoker
London

BAN THE BURQA

AFTER reading Barry Duke's editorial in February, I, like many, others, I suspect, was unable to make my mind up whether or not France should go ahead with its proposal to ban the burqa (or hijab) in public places.

Then I stumbled on a piece written by Bernard-Henri Lévy, the French philosopher and writer, published in US by *The Huffington Post*. His words, which I paraphrase here, clinched it for me.

"People say, 'The burqa is a dress, at most a costume. We're not going to make laws about clothing and costumes'. Error. The burqa is not a dress, it's a message, one that clearly communicates the subjugation, the subservience, the crushing and the defeat of women.

"People say, 'Perhaps it's subjugation, but it's done with consent. Get it out of your mind that malicious husbands, abusive fathers, and local tyrants are forcing the burqa on women who don't want to wear it'. Fine. Except that voluntary servitude has never held water as an argument. The happy slave has never justified the fundamental, essential, ontological infamy of slavery. And, from the Stoics to [19th century thinker] Elisée Reclus, from Schoelcher to Lamartine to Tocqueville, all who rejected



slavery provided us with every possible argument against the minor added outrage that consists of transforming victims into the authors of their own misery ...

"If the burqa is really, as I am saying, an affront to women and to their secular struggle for equality, it is, moreover, an insult to the women who, at the very hour I write these words, are demonstrating bare-faced in Iran against a regime of assassins who claim the burqa among their symbols.

"This symbol would divide humanity between those of a glorious body, graced with no less glorious a face, and those whose bodies and faces are an outrage in the flesh, a scandal, a filthy thing not to be seen but hidden or neutralized. And that is why, if there is even one woman in France, just one, who enters a hospital or the city hall imprisoned in a burqa, she must be set free ...

"I am in favor of a law that clearly and plainly declares that wearing a burqa in the public area is anti-republican."

I support Lévy to the hilt. Ban full-face Islamic coverings in France. And do the same here!

Linda Parfitt
Maidstone

THE French are, of course, right. Faces are uniquely important. To cover them with a burqa is demeaning for the wearer – what have they got to hide? – and insulting to the viewer. The humanity of the wearer is destroyed.

David K Gorringe
Herefordshire

TUPPING KANGAROOS

I WOULD like to draw David Tribe's attention to Oedipus and Akhnaton, by Immanuel Velikovsky, possibly the only book by that raving fruitcake in which he got anything right.

While Mr Tribe ("On Incest"), January, stopped short of suggesting that the inventors of the incest concept were aware

of the possible consequences of intensive inbreeding, he offered no alternative to the logical explanation that emulating the gods' preference for marrying siblings was deemed hubristic.

Boundary riders tugging kangaroos was hyperbole. Of course they preferred ewes, cows and mares.

William Harwood
Canada

SMOKING BAN

I HAVE been receiving the *Freethinker* for more years than I care to think and I have enjoyed Barry Duke's writing immensely. However, I have to question his "bitterly resent ... Britain's insane smoking ban" comment in February.

Surely not? I remember Isaac Asimov, when asked by an adjoining customer in a restaurant if it was OK if he, the customer, smoked. Asimov said 'Yes, if I can pee in your drink!'. Does he really believe it is his right to force others to inhale smoke?

Jack Lavety
Aberdeen

Editor's reply: No, Mr Gorringe, I certainly do not think it is anyone's right to inflict tobacco smoke on others. Equally I do not believe that smokers, who contribute billions in taxes, should be treated as pariahs.

When I penned that remark, I was still suffering the shock of returning to nanny-state Great Britain after a spell in Spain, where the needs of smokers and non-

smokers are still comfortably accommodated. There bars and cafés have the *choice* of whether or not smoking should be allowed, and those premises which do permit smoking have clear notices on their windows that say "el fumar permitido".

It was interesting to note that those establishments that chose not to allow smoking were like morgues, while the smoking ones were jumping.

IGNORANCE IN TEXAS

HAVING just seen the results of a new poll conducted by the University of Texas, I can confidently state that I shall not be settling there any time soon. According to the poll, nearly a third of Texans believe humans and dinosaurs roamed the earth at the same time, and more than half disagree with the theory that humans developed from earlier species of animals. Fifty-one percent disagreed with the statement, "human beings, as we know them today, developed from earlier species of animals."

David C Mason
San Francisco

Obituary: Margaret McIlroy (1923-2009)

THOUGH long anticipated, the death last December of Margaret McIlroy brings great sadness to all who knew her. Our deepest sympathy goes to husband Bill and daughters Helen and Ruth, who, for many years, helplessly watched the progression of multiple sclerosis, with its false dawns of remission.

Margaret and Bill met in the Communist Party when she was a trainee teacher specialising in languages, and he was working in a CEC factory in Coventry. At that time it wasn't uncommon for idealists to turn to communism as the perceived answer to war and oppression; but, earlier than most converts, they saw the reality was very different from the dream, left the party and turned to the National Secular Society, whose executive committee they became members of.

As her early experiences of religion

weren't abrasive, she wasn't attracted to the aggressive, backward-looking "Hyde Park school" of secularism, and was wary when I, as a Hyde Park stump orator, was nominated by that school for the NSS presidency in 1963.

But when she saw I had reformist intentions she became a staunch supporter through the Society's turbulent mid-1960s with constitutional changes and avant-garde cultural initiatives that offended some dedicated older members.

Bill had meanwhile been appointed general secretary and became the victim of more vicious attacks than myself. Margaret loyally stood by him during this unhappy period. When later approached to become *Freethinker* editor, he was at first reluctant. But his colleagues knew that innate ability was more important than academic qualifications (say, a PhD in "creative writing"), and with his

wife's strong support he accepted the challenge.

Margaret pursued a career as a dedicated teacher, and as a private tutor who accepted fees only from those who could afford them. She also found time – though not enough – to write for the *Freethinker* a number of well-crafted, insightful articles and book reviews, especially on social issues.

As she became unable to look after herself, the support she had lavished on her family was amply repaid by them. When Bill was unable to provide the full-time care she needed, Helen and her husband Brian in Sheffield took over.

In her later years Margaret was befriended by Quakers and came to accept much of their philosophy; but she remained in the best sense of the word a freethinker.

– David Tribe

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

Birmingham Humanists: i Tova Jones 021454 4692
w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Friends Meeting House, George Rd & St James Rd, Edgbaston. Wed Mar 10, 7.45pm
Speaker from the National Assembly of Women.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: i 01273 227549/
461404. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed,
Mar 3, 8pm. Robert Stovold: *Defending Darwin, Defeating
Design*. w [http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/
humanist.html](http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html).

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

w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com

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

Chiltern Humanists: Enquiries: 01296 623730. The Court
House, High St, Berkhamsted, Tues Mar 16, 7.45pm. Speaker:
Richard Rawlins, Secular Medical Association.

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

Cotswold Humanists: i Phil Cork Tel. 01242 233746.
e phil.cork@blueyonder.co.uk. w [web www.phil-cork.pwp.
blueyonder.co.uk/humleft.htm](http://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](mailto:info@cumbria-humanists.org.uk).

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

Devon Humanists:
e info@devonhumanists.org.uk
w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities.
Enquiries 01202-428506.
w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available i 01268 785295.

Farnham Humanists: 10 New House, Farm Lane, 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.

Hampstead Humanist Society: i NI Barnes,
10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 OHP. Tel:
0207 328 4431 w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

Harrow Humanist Society: meets the second Wednesday
of the month at 8pm (except Jan, July and Aug) at the HAVS
centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. March 10. The Parliamentary
Humanist Group. Speaker, Naomi Philips, Head of Public Affairs,
BHA i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagema@hotmail.com

Humanists of Havering: i Jean Condon 01708 473597.
Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Cres, Gidea Park. Meetings
on first Thursday of the month, 8pm. Mar 4. Blaise Egan, *The
Evidence for Evolution*.

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

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and 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](mailto:secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Information and events: [info@humanism-
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Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
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gow@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk). **Highland:** 07017 404779,
highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

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

w <http://humanists4science.blogspot.com/>
Discussion group: [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/
humanists4science/](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/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/)

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

w www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk i Ian Abbott,
Wavecrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde,
Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 e ian@lanzere.demon.co.uk
Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone
Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 07598 971420.

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk
Lewisham Humanist Group: i Denis Cobell: 020 8690
4645. The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Meetings on
third Thurs. 7.30pm. Mar 18 Norman Bacrac: *A Humanist Unit
for Schools*.

w www.lewisham.humanist.org.uk

Liverpool Humanist Group: i 07814 910 286.

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e lhghumanist@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](mailto: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 Mar 3, 8pm. Terery Fox &
Jenny Patient: *Is clean Coal an Act of Faith?*

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

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

e library@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.
Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in
Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or
e edward.gwinnell@talktalk.net

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

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

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

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

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

Watford Area Humanists: Meet on the third Tuesday of
each month (except August and December) at 7.30 pm at
Watford Town and Country Club, Watford. i 01923-252013
e john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk w www.watford.humanists.org.uk

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: i 01568 770282
w www.wmhumanists.co.uk e rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk.
Meetings on the 2nd Tues of the month at Ludlow, Oct to June.

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

Please send your listings and events notices to:
Listings, the *Freethinker*,
PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.
Notices must be received by the 15th of the
month preceding publication.