

3



Islam:
Dr M Z Jasser
hits out at 'back-
ward' Muslim
leaders in
America

5



Appeal rejected:
Christian group
which favours the
Bible over science
loses landmark
court case

8



Arkeology:
An irreverent
examination
of the biblical
Great Flood
myth

12



Beer saints:
Strong links
between booze
and the godly
go back
centuries

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1977 REG2142

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Claire Rayner's death is a great loss to the humanist movement

At the heart of Claire Rayner's many admirable accomplishments – as a nurse, writer, commentator, "agony aunt", vice-President of the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society honorary associate – was her healthy skepticism and her utter rejection of religion.

But you would hardly guess this from media reports of her death at 79 from cancer last month. The BBC, for example – apart from saying that she was to have a humanist funeral – shamefully made not a single mention of the fact that she was a leading figure in the British humanist movement and an outspoken atheist until the very end.

A BHA pen picture of Claire – much loved for her warmth, frankness and vast energy – revealed that, although born into a Jewish family, she was from an early age a freethinker, unconvinced by the religious answers given by the adults around her to questions such as "Why is there so much green in grass, the plants and the trees?"

She realised that if she wanted to know the truth she would have to search it out for herself, and she became a voracious reader. Receiving little affection or intellectual stimulation from her parents, she was more fortunate in her schooling, which introduced her to writers such as Mill, Paine, and Wollstonecraft. Her philosophy was: "Always ask why – and don't be put off with half an answer."

She described the worldview she arrived at in an interview in *Humanist News* in 2000: "You think for yourself, and work out your own morality... I'm fascinated by the idea of trying to find your own way through the world with your own maps rather than someone else's... All I know is there is no God in my universe. I've looked and looked, and there ain't no God there. But I don't want to be a dogmatic atheist. I like mythology, and



Claire Rayner at 77. She is pictured holding a photograph of her NHS days. She lied about her age to begin nursing at 14

a life without stories doesn't bear thinking about, just let us not have supernatural beings. What is natural is awe-full enough. We don't need a First Cause."

Her warm and enthusiastic support for the BHA's work included writing the foreword to *Sharing the Future*, the BHA's practical guide to humanist weddings, and joining in humanist campaigns against the blasphemy law and the teaching of creationism in schools.

In July 2001 she was one of the signatories to a letter published in the *Independent* which urged the Government to

reconsider its support for the expansion of maintained religious schools; in July 2002 she was one of the distinguished humanists who put their names to the publication and distribution of James Kirkup's gay poem *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name* as a public challenge to the blasphemy law in the name of free speech; she was one of the signatories to a letter supporting a holiday on Charles' Darwin's birthday, published in *The Times* on February 12, 2003, and also sent to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary.

Her life-long rationalism remained unshaken when in 2003 she almost died as a result of complications after a routine operation. Asked on BBC Radio 4 whether the hallucinations she had experienced during her "near death experience" involved seeing God, she replied: "No. I am a humanist. An atheist humanist... And I saw no long tunnels with lights at the end – I mean, those sort of out-of-body experiences that people are supposed to have, or last-minute experiences before they are dragged back, I think they are effects of hypoxia, a lack of oxygen, I'm quite sure that's why people get those effects, and I wasn't short of oxygen. They were pumping the stuff into me

Continued on p4)

Intelligent Design: what's that all about?

BARRY DUKE FOCUSES ON TWO INDIVIDUALS WHO THINK ID IS BALONEY

Glasgow awoke one morning last month to discover it had mysteriously acquired a "Centre for Intelligent Design". It yawned, turned over and went back to sleep, convinced that its latest acquisition would have sod-all impact on the lives of its citizens, who, frankly, have more important things on their mind than whether or not they owe their existence to some supernatural draughtsperson.

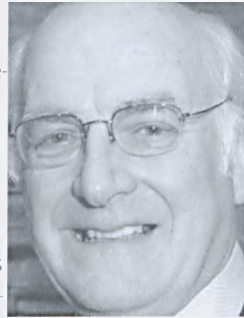
But is it wise to be sanguine, or indeed indifferent to the sudden appearance in the UK of a centre such as this? Gordon (no other name given) is from Edinburgh, and runs an online journal called Gordon's blog. He thinks not, and is troubled by the fact the centre as been set up as a charity on Guernsey.

This, he said, means that "they do not need to disclose who their funders are. Maybe their funders are religious organisations? We simply don't know and this lack of transparency is troubling. If my fears are correct this could be another example of Christians being 'economical with the truth' which does not lend credibility to their core beliefs about God (who

apparently has a strong interest in truth)."

Gordon concludes that the Centre for Intelligent Design "seems to be an attempt to sanitise the religious message of creationism and get it into mainstream education where overtly religious organisations have failed".

The Centre's website denies this. For the time being, the organisation says it isn't looking to promote ID in Britain's schools. Its Director Dr Alistair Noble declared: "I would stress that we're not targeting schools".



Dr Alistair Noble

So what does the Centre hope to achieve? First off, it wants people to stop regarding Intelligent Design as "a religious position". Noble said in an interview with the *Guardian* that what separates the Centre for Intelligent Design from other bodies engaged in the "evolution argument" is its emphasis on science.

"There are various organisations that debate the faith issue around origins, but what we will be trying to do is open a debate around the scientific issue. ID is consistently misrepresented as a religious position. The debate about ID is quite difficult to elevate to a civilised conversation. It's not about religion, it's about evidence."

Hmmm. Well, I'm afraid this just will simply not do. Back in 2006, David Smillie, writing in the *Toronto Star*, left his readers in no doubt as to what Intelligent Design was *really* all about.

"It is an underhanded move to teach a religion-based alternative to evolution in high-school biology classes. Scientifically speaking, it makes about as much sense as teaching an alternative to gravity in high-school physics classes, but that hasn't stopped its proponents from trying to force it onto curricula."

He added: "At its heart, ID is a simple idea: life is far too intricate and marvellous to have arisen by chance, so it must have been designed by an outside intelligence. ID advocates are (usually) careful not to mention God; they always refer to a "Designer". Which, to paraphrase *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, is basically someone who isn't God but who has all of God's powers. And his job description."

Smillie went on: "Far be it from me to kick an idea when it's down, but I do wonder whether proponents of ID have really thought this through. It seems to me that teaching ID in

schools could end up hurting belief far more than helping it. Because if we were designed by God, it wasn't on one of His better days."

After listing a number of basic faults in humans – eg "Why would an intelligent designer equip each of us with an appendix – an organ whose sole purpose is to become infected and periodically explode?" – Smillie suggested that ID "could stand for Incompetent Design. Like the cousin you hired to build an addition to your house, this Designer simply wasn't up to the job. Which means the Designer can't be all-knowing (we wouldn't have had any flaws) or all-powerful (the flaws would have been fixed by now).

"But what would it do to mainstream religion to teach students their creator was someone who just didn't do a very good job? A nice enough deity maybe, but not the sharpest knife in the drawer? I can't see hundreds of millions lining up to worship a second-rate creator.

"Second, ID could stand for Infernal Design. Not to get needlessly Zoroastrian, but a lot of our design flaws make more sense if we assume we were created by someone who doesn't much like us and wants us dead. Which means that by worshipping the Designer, we're actually worshipping the bad guy.

"There is a third possibility that comes to mind. ID could stand for Incomplete Design. What if the Designer is just beta-testing us to identify the bugs before rolling out homo sapiens 2.0? Sure, we have lives that are nasty, brutish and short, but the Designer doesn't really care, and we have to muddle through so He can come up with something better for the next roll-out.

"And we're powerless to complain, because the Designer has a monopoly. I call this the 'God as Microsoft' option.

"If this last option is true, I'd like to put in some suggestions for the pending upgrade. I'd like to be immortal, healthy and never have to worry about disease. I (and everyone else) should be way better-looking. My hair should stay thick and not turn grey. Men and women should have similar sex drives. I should be able to run faster, jump higher and hit a curveball. Gills would be handy. So would wings. So would retractable claws. If I had wings and retractable claws, I can pretty much guarantee I'd never question ID again."

Dr Noble is a lay preacher, and an elder at Cartsbridge Evangelical Church, Busby.

'Nuff said.



BARRY DUKE
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Stem-cell research centre bows to anti-abortionist bullying – over a poem

I think that I shall never see a poem as offensive as “Stem C.”

THAT’S what an anti-abortion organisation said last month about a poem that received an award from the San Francisco-based California Institute for Regenerative Medicine.

According to this report, the taxpayer-funded research centre held a poetry contest to commemorate Stem Cell Awareness Day in October. First prize was awarded to a poet who compared a scientific procedure that takes cells from a human embryo to the Christian ceremony of communion.

The poem “Stem C.” by Tampa-based Tyson Anderson begins, “This is my body/ which is given for you,” and ends with, “Take this/in remembrance of me.”

After the poem ran in national publications and on the research organisation’s website, the Life Legal Defense Foundation lashed out and accused the agency of “rewarding blasphemy”.

A statement issued by the group declared: “The choice of this poem for a prize represents the deliberate pilfering of the holiest of voluntary, sacrificial acts in the history of humanity.”

The stem-cell agency has since apologised and pulled all of the poems off its website, according to Communications Manager



An anti-stem cell research cartoon

Don Gibbons, who also served as one of three judges on the panel that picked the winners. He noted that one of the other judges, Margaret Hermes, is a devout Catholic and didn’t think the reference was at all belittling to her faith.

He said: “They found that use of religious language is artistically appropriate. But in the end, the poems were pulled because as a public agency we felt a responsibility to take them down if it caused offense.”

Gibbons added: “We didn’t want it to be a distraction.”

The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine has been sparring with the Life Legal Defense Fund since the publicly

funded agency was approved by voters with Proposition 71 in 2004.

The religious group challenged the constitutionality of a \$3-billion public agency funding human embryonic stem-cell research but lost in an appeal. The group’s president, Dana Cody, noted that while the group lost the lawsuit, the agency has since been held to much stricter public scrutiny.

Thanks to Life Legal Defense Foundation, Anderson’s “offensive” poem, reproduced below, is all over the internet, and being read by millions more people than would ever have seen it had the insane Christian group kept their mouths shut.

*This is my body
which is given for you.
But I am not great.
I have neither wealth,
nor fame, nor grace.
I cannot comfort with words,
nor inspire to march.
I am small and simple,
so leave me this.
Let me heal you.
This is my body
which is given for you.
Take this
in remembrance of me.*

Many US Muslim leaders are ‘wallowing in denial’

PRESIDENT and founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, based in Phoenix, Arizona, last month accused many Muslim leaders of “condemning terror out of one side of their mouth while deceptively amplifying victimology, Islamophobia, anti-Americanism and morally vacant justifications out the other.”

Writing in the *Des Moines Register*, Dr M Zuhdi Jasser, a physician and former US naval commander, said that the controversial Islamic centre near Ground Zero, while pouring salt in a yet widely open national wound, served to awaken US Muslims to the yet unfought war of ideas within the “House of Islam” itself.

He added: “Many of us reform-minded Muslims have been waging that war of ideas for most of our adult life, long before 9/11. But time has shown that we cannot wage this battle alone.

“The last 12 months have seen the most arrests and attacks of radical Islamists on Americans since 9/11. This was confirmed to Congress last month by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, who also finally acknowledged the growing homegrown threat of radical Muslims.

“Sadly, many of my co-religionists called on by media to speak

for American Muslims too often wallow in denial simply deflecting any responsibility by distancing themselves from radicals or myopically equating Muslim radicals to those of other faiths. They willfully ignore the main ideological conveyor belt towards radicalism – political Islam.

“Most Americans no longer accept these detached irresponsible dismissals from leading American Muslims.” He cited Imam Anwar Al-Awlaki as an example of a leader who condemned 9/11 in the national media and was hailed as a moderate Muslim. “But today, he is one of the greatest threats to America.”

Dr Jasser stressed that “American Muslims need to accept and spread the meme that it is time to get shariah (Islamic law) out of government and bring the ideas of modernity and Enlightenment to the Islamic faith we love.

“We need to take the offensive in ending the ideas of jihad, the ‘ummah’ as nation, and the ‘salafi’ dream of returning everything to the time of the Prophet Mohammed.”

He concluded: “Until we Muslims take on the responsibility of separating history from religion and mosque from state, the threat will not dissipate.”



Claire Rayner: a remarkable life

in vast quantities. So I had none of those hallucinations. [Mine] were – what were they? – coloured lights, lots of coloured lights. Pretty ones, like Des's pictures – my husband paints interesting abstracts, and I saw a lot of his paintings. There were no nasty hallucinations, I'm happy to say.

And she told the *Guardian*: "I was an atheist when it started and I remain one. People used to say to me 'You wait until something really bad happens, you'll start praying', but I didn't and I can't. I don't put [my recovery] down to any superior being, I put it down to the superb training and skill of the people looking after me."

Claire Rayner was recently singled out by Dr William Oddie, a leading British Catholic writer and broadcaster, as one of a number of "hysterical" atheists who dared to oppose Pope Ratzinger's state visit to the UK. Writing in the *Catholic Herald*, Oddie, said: "The atheists' utter loathing ... is at times a little frightening in its sheer vicious irrationality."

Referring to Rayner's contribution to "Pope Special edition" of the *New Humanist* magazine, Oddie wrote: "Claire Rayner's offering gives a good idea of the tone and the rational level at which these contributions are conducted."

Rayner had written: "I have no language with which to adequately describe

Continued from page 1

Joseph Alois Ratzinger, aka the Pope. In all my years as a campaigner I have never felt such animus against any individual as I do against this creature. His views are so disgusting, so repellent and so hugely damaging to the rest of us, that the only thing to do is to get rid of him."

"What that means," said Oddie, "is not explained". And he went on: "This is all horrible for anyone who regards Pope Benedict with the admiration and love most Catholics feel for him; and I find myself almost wishing that the decision had been taken to beatify Cardinal Newman in St Peter's Square and not a muddy field, and for the Pope to be spared this dreadful business of a state visit."

Asked how she would like to be remembered, she told her husband of 53 years, Des, and children Amanda, Adam and Jay, that she wanted her last words to be: "Tell David Cameron that if he screws up my beloved NHS I'll come back and bloody haunt him."

Jay, a restaurant critic, said: "She would have always wanted to be the last person to leave the party and she was furious at going. She had led an amazing life and I am very, very proud of her."

Predictably, within hours of the announcement of Rayner's death, Christian fundamentalists were using the internet

to declare that she was "now in hell". Example: a Kent-based evangelist, Bob Hutton, who has a blog called The Gospel Truth (<http://bobhutton1.blogspot.com>) wrote: "The news came through today that Claire Rayner has died. She became famous for answering questions from newspaper readers about emotional issues that were concerning them. (The term for such people is "Agony Aunt".) In itself it is not wrong to seek to help people who have problems; however, in Rayner's case the answers did not reflect the teaching of God's infallible word for one simple reason – she was a convinced atheist (and proud of it!). Consequently she was a fool (Psalm 14 v 1).

"According to an article on the "Freethinker" website she died as an atheist – if that is the case then we can say with all confidence that she is now in the torments of Hell. The clear teaching of God's infallible word gives no eternal hope to those who die as unbelievers, particularly those who – like Rayner – seem to have no willingness to even consider the possibility of the existence of a God to whom they must give account.

"Rayner joins the ranks of other prominent atheists who recently passed into eternity and are bitterly regretting their sin and rebellion against God. I have in mind such people as Michael Foot and Robin Cook.

"As Christians we face many challenges in life and much hostility. In recent years persecution against us has increased. Consequently we may be tempted to think that it would be easier to go with the tide of unbelief and simply live to please ourselves instead of standing up for Jesus and putting ourselves through distress and anxiety due to opposition. However, let us remember the words of our Saviour when He said 'What does it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul' (Mark 8 v 36).

"Let us not be intimidated – these people who think they are so clever that they can reject God will have their "payback". One second in Hell will be enough to convince them they made the wrong choice; for us Christians, one second in Heaven will convince us we have made the right choice, and all the persecution we endured for the Saviour will have been worth it."

Catholic Church halts formal defections

EARLIER this year, the Catholic Church modified its Code of Canon Law to remove all references to the act of formal defection, the process used by those who wish to formally renounce their membership of the Church.

This means that Count Me Out, an Irish organisation set up to help disaffected Catholics to formally leave the Church, has had to suspend its services.

Count Me Out said that, "despite our requests for clarification, the Church have yet to reach a firm position on how or whether they will continue to accept requests for the annotation of the baptismal register."

The Church in Ireland said in a statement to RTE News: "The Holy See confirmed at the end of August that it was introducing changes to Canon Law and as a result it will no longer be possible to formally defect from the Catholic Church.

"This will not alter the fact that many people can defect from the Church, and continue to do so, albeit not through a formal process. This is a change that will affect the Church throughout the world. The Archdiocese of Dublin plans to maintain a register to note the expressed desire of those who wish to defect. Details will be communicated to those involved in the process when they are finalised. Last year 229 people formally defected from the Church through the Archdiocese of Dublin. So far this year 312 have done so."

Christian Schools Association gets brush-off from US Supreme Court

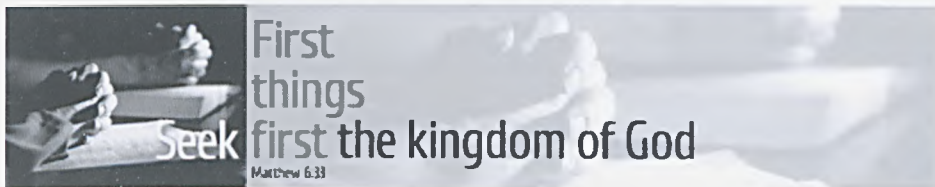
THE US Supreme Court last month rejected an appeal from Christian schools that want the University of California to grant college-prep credit for courses with religious viewpoints – using textbooks, the university said, that replace science with the Bible.

The justices, without comment, denied a hearing to the Association of Christian Schools International, which accused the university of violating freedom of speech and religion with its policy on the classes applicants take in high school.

UC requires certain high school courses for admission and says it reviews their content to make sure they cover subjects that incoming students need. University officials said some of the Christian schools' classes in biology, history, English and religion didn't pass the test – a conclusion that the schools blamed on discrimination.

The association's 800 high schools in California teach "standard course content" and "add a religious viewpoint in each subject ... as an integral part of their reason for existence," the group's lawyers said in their Supreme Court appeal.

But a federal judge said experts testifying



The official banner of the Association of Christian Schools International

for the university refuted those claims in reviewing textbooks.

Biology texts, one professor concluded, teach students to reject any scientific evidence that contradicted the Bible. A history text declared the Bible to be the "unerring source for analysis" of past events, in the view of another expert, and gave short shrift to women, non-Christians and some ethnic groups.

Another UC evaluator said an English literature course did not require students to read novels or plays, but instead presented an anthology, "Classics for Christians," that "insists on specific interpretations" of excerpted works.

Those and similar assessments showed that the university had rational grounds for denying college preparatory credit for the courses, US District Judge James Otero said

in a 2008 ruling.

The Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco upheld his decision in January. A three-judge panel said the evidence showed that UC has approved other high school courses with "religious content and viewpoints," and classes that used religious textbooks, as long as they met academic standards.

UC officials praised the court decisions and said the university has similar rates of approval for courses in religious and secular schools. But lawyers for the Christian school association denounced the ruling in their Supreme Court appeal.

"In the Ninth Circuit," they howled, "religious speech in religious schools is less protected than commercial speech, flag burning and pornography."

Modern science allows Orthodox Jews to use their 'Shabbatmobiles' on the Sabbath

TO enable less able Orthodox Jews to continue being mobile during the Sabbath and on Jewish holidays, UK based TGA Electric Leisure and its Israel supplier recently introduced the "Shabbat controller" to several of their models. According to disability magazine, *Able*, the TGA Breeze 3 and 4, and their new Midi counterparts, are now compliant with Halacha (Jewish law) which enables the owner to operate the scooter on days they are forbidden to operate machinery. The Shabbat controller has been authorised and certified by Zomet, the Israeli hi-tech, non-profit organisation specialising in IT equipment and electronic appliances designed to meet Halacha.

So how does the thing work? In



Shabbat mode it utilises a separate circuit board which produces "steady acceleration with no throttle lever activation required by the user."

This initial process is considered an "indirect action" and, because the motor relay circuit was changed whilst in Shabbat mode, varying the voltage to the motor by the throttle lever and hence

altering speed during motion, it is not considered a violation of the Shabbat principle.

The Shabbat controller is also used for turning the scooter on or off and for changing direction.

TGA Managing Director David Stone said: "TGA and our Israeli partners Afikim have invested extensive R&D in the Shabbat controller to ensure it complies with Orthodox Jewish Law. We felt the time was right to provide custom fitting of this system to a wide range of our scooters here in the UK with the aim of satisfying both Halacha and the growing need for independence. People of Jewish faith who unfortunately live with restricted mobility now have the ability to visit the synagogue on the Sabbath."

An Atheist Manifesto

A while back, **SAM HARRIS**, author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, published *An Atheist Manifesto*, reproduced here as a two-part article. The second part will appear in the December issue

Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture and kill her. If an atrocity of this kind is not occurring at precisely this moment, it will happen in a few hours, or days at most. Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of six billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl's parents believe at this very moment that an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it good that they believe this? No.

The entirety of atheism is contained in this response. Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply a refusal to deny the obvious. Unfortunately, we live in a world in which the obvious is overlooked as a matter of principle. The obvious must be observed and re-observed and argued for. This is a thankless job. It carries with it an aura of petulance and insensitivity. It is, moreover, a job that the atheist does not want.

It is worth noting that no one ever needs to identify himself as a non-astrologer or a non-alchemist. Consequently, we do not have words for people who deny the validity of these pseudo-disciplines. Likewise, atheism is a term that should not even exist. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make when in the presence of religious dogma. The atheist is merely a person who believes that the 260 million Americans (87 percent of the population) who claim to never doubt the existence of God should be obliged to present evidence for his existence and, indeed, for his benevolence, given the relentless destruction of innocent human beings we witness in the world each day. Only the atheist appreciates just how uncanny our situation is: most of us believe in a God that is every bit as specious as the gods of Mount Olympus; no person, whatever his or her qualifications, can seek public office in the United States without pretending to be certain that such a God exists; and much of what passes for public policy in our country conforms to religious

taboos and superstitions appropriate to a medieval theocracy. Our circumstance is abject, indefensible and terrifying. It would be hilarious if the stakes were not so high.

We live in a world where all things, good and bad, are finally destroyed by change. Parents lose their children and children their parents.

Only the atheist recognizes the boundless narcissism and self-deceit of the saved. Only the atheist realizes how morally objectionable it is for survivors of a catastrophe to believe themselves spared by a loving God while this same God drowned infants in their cribs

Husbands and wives are separated in an instant, never to meet again. Friends part company in haste, without knowing that it will be for the last time. This life, when surveyed with a broad glance, presents little more than a vast spectacle of loss. Most people in this world, however, imagine that there is a cure for this. If we live rightly – not necessarily ethically, but within the framework of certain ancient beliefs and stereotyped behaviors – we will get everything we want after we die. When our bodies finally fail us, we just shed our corporeal ballast and travel to a land where we are reunited with everyone we loved while alive. Of course, overly rational people and other rabble will be kept out of this happy place, and those who suspended their disbelief while alive will be free to enjoy themselves for all eternity.

We live in a world of unimaginable surprises – from the fusion energy that lights the sun to the genetic and evolutionary consequences of this light dancing for eons upon the Earth – and yet Paradise conforms to our most superficial concerns with all the fidelity of a Caribbean cruise. This is wondrously strange. If one didn't know better, one would think that man,

in his fear of losing all that he loves, had created Heaven, along with its gatekeeper God, in his own image.

Consider the destruction that Hurricane Katrina leveled on New Orleans. More than a thousand people died, tens of thousands lost all their earthly possessions, and nearly a million were displaced. It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Katrina struck believed in an omnipotent, omniscient and compassionate God. But what was God doing while a hurricane laid waste to their city? Surely he heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Only the atheist has the courage to admit the obvious: these poor people died talking to an imaginary friend.

Of course, there had been ample warning that a storm of biblical proportions would strike New Orleans, and the human response to the ensuing disaster was tragically inept. But it was inept only by the light of science. Advance warning of Katrina's path was wrested from mute Nature by meteorological calculations and satellite imagery. God told no one of his plans. Had the residents of New Orleans been content to rely on the beneficence of the Lord, they wouldn't have known that a killer hurricane was bearing down upon them until they felt the first gusts of wind on their faces. Nevertheless, a poll conducted by *The Washington Post* found that 80% of Katrina's survivors claim that the event has only strengthened their faith in God.

As Hurricane Katrina was devouring New Orleans, nearly a thousand Shi'ite pilgrims were trampled to death on a bridge in Iraq. There can be no doubt that these pilgrims believed mightily in the God of the Koran: their lives were organized around the indisputable fact of his existence; their women walked veiled before him; their men regularly murdered one another over rival interpretations of his word. It would be remarkable if a single survivor of this tragedy lost his faith. More likely,



Sam Harris

the survivors imagine that they were spared through God's grace.

Only the atheist recognizes the boundless narcissism and self-deceit of the saved. Only the atheist realizes how morally objectionable it is for survivors of a catastrophe to believe themselves spared by a loving God while this same God drowned infants in their cribs. Because he refuses to cloak the reality of the world's suffering in a cloying fantasy of eternal life, the atheist feels in his bones just how precious life is – and, indeed, how unfortunate it is that millions of human beings suffer the most harrowing abridgements of their happiness for no good reason at all.

One wonders just how vast and gratuitous a catastrophe would have to be to shake the world's faith. The Holocaust did not do it. Neither did the genocide in Rwanda, even with machete-wielding priests among the perpetrators. Five hundred million people died of smallpox in the 20th century, many of them infants. God's ways are, indeed, inscrutable. It seems that any fact, no matter how infelicitous, can be rendered compatible with religious faith. In matters of faith, we have kicked ourselves loose of the Earth.

Of course, people of faith regularly assure one another that God is not responsible for human suffering. But how else can we understand the claim that God is both omniscient and omnipotent? There is no other way, and it is time for sane human beings to own up to this. This is the age-old problem of theodicy, of course, and we should consider it solved. If God exists, either he can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities or he does not care to. God, therefore, is either impotent or evil. Pious readers will now execute the following pirouette: God cannot be judged by merely human standards of morality. But, of course, human standards of morality are precisely what the faithful use to establish God's goodness in the first place. And any God who could concern himself with something as trivial as gay marriage, or the name by which he is addressed in prayer, is not as inscrutable as all that. If he exists, the God of Abraham is not merely unworthy of

the immensity of creation; he is unworthy even of man.

There is another possibility, of course, and it is both the most reasonable and least odious: the biblical God is a fiction. As Richard Dawkins has observed, we are all atheists with respect to Zeus and Thor. Only the atheist has realized that the biblical god is no different. Consequently, only the atheist is compassionate enough to take the profundity of the world's suffering at face value. It is terrible that we all die and lose everything we love; it is doubly terrible that so many human beings suffer needlessly while alive. That so much of this suffering can be directly attributed to religion – to religious hatreds, religious wars, religious delusions and religious diversions of scarce resources – is what makes atheism a moral and intellectual necessity. It is a necessity, however, that places the atheist

One wonders just how vast and gratuitous a catastrophe would have to be to shake the world's faith. The Holocaust did not do it. Neither did the genocide in Rwanda, even with machete-wielding priests among the perpetrators

at the margins of society. The atheist, by merely being in touch with reality, appears shamefully out of touch with the fantasy life of his neighbors.

According to several recent polls, 22 percent of Americans are certain that Jesus will return to Earth sometime in the next 50 years. Another 22 percent believe that he will probably do so. This is likely the same 44 percent who go to church once a week or more, who believe that God literally promised the land of Israel to the Jews and who want to stop teaching our children about the biological fact of evolution. As President Bush was well aware, believers of this sort constitute the most cohesive and motivated segment of the American electorate. Consequently, their views and prejudices were allowed to influence almost every decision of national importance. Political liberals seem to have drawn the wrong lesson from these developments and began thumbing Scripture, wondering how best to ingratiate themselves to the legions of men and women in our country who vote largely on the basis of religious dogma. More than 50 percent of Americans have a "negative" or "highly negative" view of people who do not believe in God; 70 percent think it important for presidential candidates to be "strongly religious". Unrea-

son is now ascendant in the United States – in our schools, in our courts and in each branch of the federal government. Only 28 percent of Americans believe in evolution; 68 percent believe in Satan. Ignorance in this degree, concentrated in both the head and belly of a lumbering superpower, is now a problem for the entire world.

Although it is easy enough for smart people to criticize religious fundamentalism, something called "religious moderation" still enjoys immense prestige in our society, even in the ivory tower. This is ironic, as fundamentalists tend to make a more principled use of their brains than "moderates" do. While fundamentalists justify their religious beliefs with extraordinarily poor evidence and arguments, at least they make an attempt at rational justification. Moderates, on the other hand, generally do nothing more than cite the good consequences of religious belief. Rather than say that they believe in God because certain biblical prophecies have come true, moderates will say that they believe in God because this belief "gives their lives meaning". When a tsunami killed a few hundred thousand people, fundamentalists readily interpreted this cataclysm as evidence of God's wrath. As it turns out, God was sending humanity another oblique message about the evils of abortion, idolatry and homosexuality. While morally obscene, this interpretation of events is actually reasonable, given certain (ludicrous) assumptions.

Moderates, on the other hand, refuse to draw any conclusions whatsoever about God from his works. God remains a perfect mystery, a mere source of consolation that is compatible with the most desolating evil. In the face of disasters like the Asian tsunami, liberal piety is apt to produce the most unctuous and stupefying nonsense imaginable.

And yet, men and women of goodwill naturally prefer such vacuities to the odious moralizing and prophesizing of true believers. Between catastrophes, it is surely a virtue of liberal theology that it emphasizes mercy over wrath. It is worth noting, however, that it is human mercy on display – not God's – when the bloated bodies of the dead are pulled from the sea. On days when thousands of children are simultaneously torn from their mothers' arms and casually drowned, liberal theology must stand revealed for what it is – the sheerest of mortal pretenses.

Even the theology of wrath has more intellectual merit. If God exists, his will is not inscrutable. The only thing inscrutable in these terrible events is that so many neurologically healthy men and women can believe the unbelievable and think this the height of moral wisdom.

THE ABSURDITIES OF NOAH'S ARK

The Elephant and the Kangaroo

JOHN RADFORD revisits Genesis – and comes away with far more questions than answers

THE animals went in two by two ...

Into Noah's Ark, of course, in the Book of Genesis, chapters 6, 7 and 8. I had the idea of pointing out some of the puzzles of this account – even though many others have done so before me. How did the kangaroos get there, for example, as they live on an island? Would there be room for elephants, let alone two of every other animal? Where did enough water to cover all the earth come from, and where did it go afterwards? And so on.

I looked up the size of the Ark on the web. Genesis is quite clear, it was 300 cubits long by 50 wide by 30 in height. It is generally accepted that a cubit was about 18 inches, so that is about 450 x 75 x 45 feet. About the same as a medium-sized merchant vessel today. The websites I happened upon also gave complete answers to queries, on the basis that the Bible provides a totally accurate account of world history. Some of them are www.answersingenesis.org, www.christiananswers.net, www.christiancourier.com, and www.biblestudy.org. Each looks like a spoof, but surely they can't all be. I recommend them if you are puzzled, or just want to gasp, yet again, at human credulity. They often draw on two books, *The Genesis Flood: the Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications* by J C Whitcomb and H M Morris (1961) and *Noah's Ark: a Feasibility Study* by J Woodmorappe (1997).

Henry Morris (1918–2006) was a distinguished professor of civil engineering, author of authoritative textbooks in that field. It was this, combined with his religion, that led him to investigate the logistics of the Ark and the Flood.

John Whitcomb was a professor of theology. At Morris's death their book had sold more than 250,000 copies. The late Stephen Jay Gould called it "the founding document of the creationist movement".

John Woodmorappe, born 1954, has degrees in biology and geology. His

name in a search engine yields a morass of claims and counter-claims of baffling complexity about the Flood and the Ark, getting wilder and wilder as one goes on. Among them, the Ark itself is claimed to have been found, and people have walked on its roof, a fact which seems to have escaped the notice of the archaeological journals.

How did the kangaroos reach the safety of the Ark? Well, geologists tell us that the earth's land masses are moving at about an inch a year, and were once joined in one vast continent, Pangaea. Obviously that is when the Flood occurred; indeed it may well have caused the break-up. There is the slight difficulty that the biblical age of the earth is about 6–10,000 years, but that simply means that the continents once moved much faster than now, about 25 thousand times in fact. Geologists also tell us that continents have joined and split several times, but never mind.

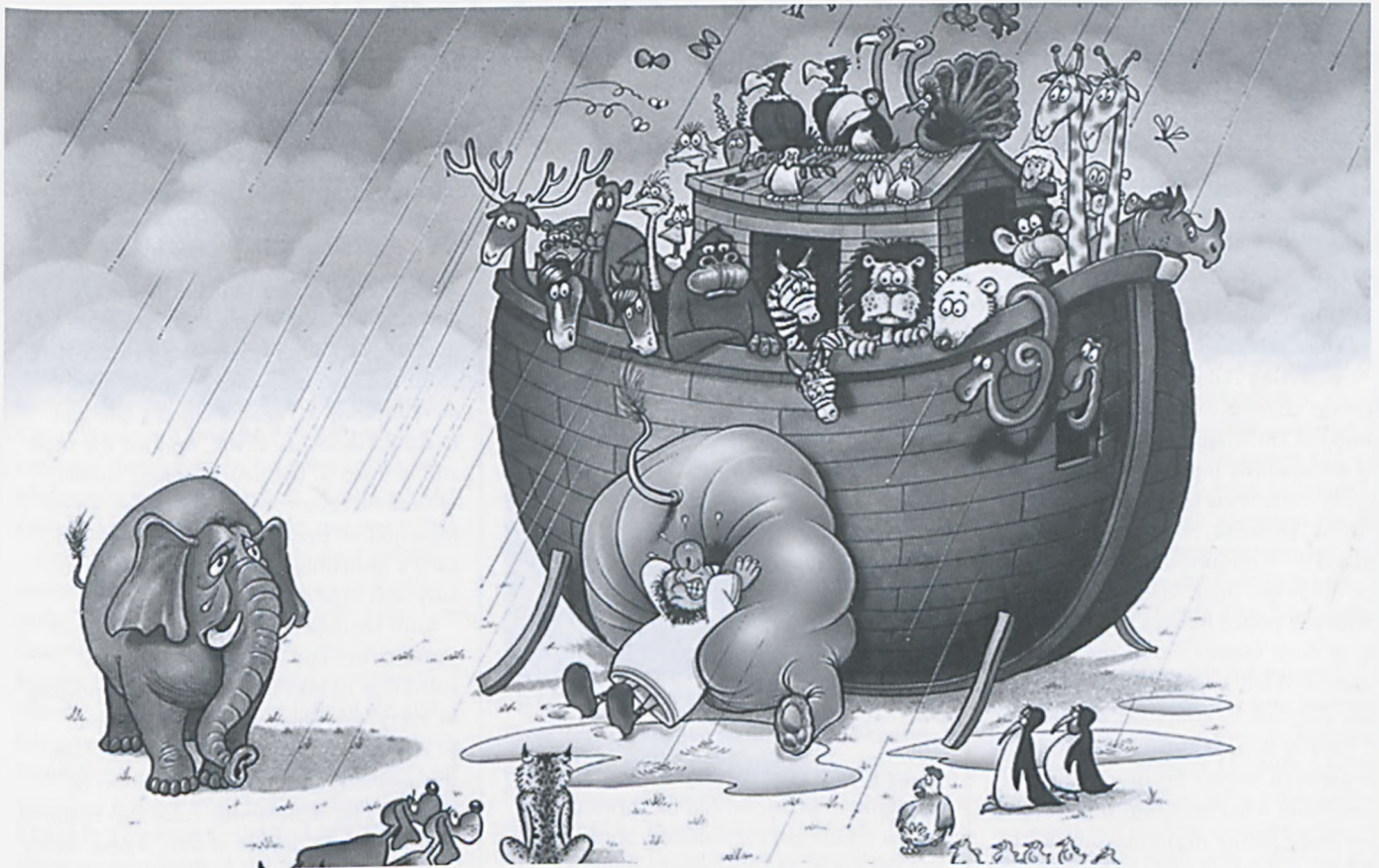
How did the Ark accommodate all the animals? Actually, this had been worked out in the 17th century by John Wilkins, a founder of the Royal Society. But here we are on firmer ground (so to say). Given three decks as directed by God, the Ark's floor space would be equivalent to about 100,000 square feet, or 20 basketball courts, or about 500 railroad stock cars. Whether this would suffice obviously depends on how many animals there were. Noah presumably did not include any salt water dwelling creatures (since the sea covers much of the globe, the Flood must have been largely salt). Fresh water creatures are not mentioned. Genesis specifies two of each kind, but it is uncertain what a "kind" is. The accepted zoological grades of living things are, domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species, variety, individual. The total number of species today is still unknown, but it was presumably more then, since all the creatures were made on Day Five and some have died out since the Flood. Such as the dinosaurs, who perished a few centuries afterwards, probably due to the post-Flood conditions. The largest species of

dinosaur so far discovered is apparently *Argentinosaurus huinculensis*, up to 130 feet long and up to 100 tons in weight. A pair of these would have taken up a good part of one deck. The tallest was *Sauroposeidon* at 60 feet, which would stick some 15 feet above the roof, unless it lay down. One might also feel it unwise to keep even two of *Tyrannosaurus rex* in a stock car, or even a basketball court. Then again, there are, I believe, some 12,000 species of ants. Even a few square centimeters each would seem to mean some hundreds of square metres. And ants are communal and cannot exist in isolation. But wait. What God was after was sufficient representatives to re-stock the earth. His created species can subdivide into varieties, but do not evolve into other "kinds". A "kind" is to be taken as akin to a genus or even a family, rather than a species.

Thus dogs, wolves, coyotes and jackals are one kind, which would only need two specimens. A few "basic" dinosaurs would do, presumably small ones, and two ants. (The pairs would need to be of the same species though, as otherwise they would have been unlikely to reproduce. Even if they did, DNA sequencing shows that today's animals could not derive from one pair of each in the biblical time span.)

Woodmorappe calculates that 7,877 genera would have been needed, that is 15,754 animals. Other estimates range from 2,000 to 50,000 (Morris and Whitcomb said 35,000). And while some animals would be very large, the average size would be about that of a rat. Another calculation says a sheep. And they need not have been adults.

Taking the average estimates, and allowing 11 cubic feet for each, they would take up only about 35 percent of the Ark, leaving plenty of room for Noah and his family, food and fresh water, and any equipment needed for feeding, watering, cleaning, etc. Of course there were no engines or sails. The animals may have been largely dormant, which would save on food, and lessen the risk of them killing each other (or Noah). Noah and his crew



of seven would still have their work cut out to feed, water and clean between four and a hundred thousand animals, though Woodmorappe thinks Noah would have trained many of them, before embarking, to do these things for themselves.

As to where all the water came from, and went to afterwards: we know that it rained, and that water also came from somewhere beneath the earth. Presumably it returned there, though it is not clear why it should not do so immediately, as water always seeks its own level. And it was probably much hotter after the Flood, so that the water dried up.

Well, so it goes on. There's more where that came from, as the Goon Show had it. I still have questions. What did the carnivorous animals live on? Even if there were only one continent, some must have found getting there hard going, for example penguins and polar bears. Giant sloths would have taken many years. But apart from all that, why did God go to all that trouble? He could have destroyed all he wanted to by a mere thought. But I suppose, since God is omnipotent, nothing is any trouble at all. Perhaps he thought it would make a good story.

Why did Noah have to save the animals? God created them in the first place, and could just as easily have re-created them. Why did he destroy the land-based

but not the (salt) water-living creatures? Did the former share in the human wickedness that aroused God's wrath? Hardly, since they did not have free will, which God gave to humans only.

Genesis tells us that God said "It repenteth me that I made them", but not why. No doubt there are perfectly rational explanations, or what counts as rational in this context. But that itself raises a question: why people go to such bizarre lengths to show that an obvious folk-tale is literally true (scholars point out that the biblical Flood story amalgamates at least two such tales).

One answer is suggested in <http://creation.com>. "Seeing that the Bible can be trusted on testable matters, nonbelievers disregard its warnings concerning future judgment at their own peril." Not many nonbelievers would accept these absurd "tests". Even if one did believe all this nonsense, it would only show that the Flood story was just barely possible. In no way could it prove the story is true. What is likely is that believers cannot tolerate any crack in the system. If any verse of God's book is not perfectly true, where do you stop? It calls to mind the fictionalised film versions (1960, 1988) of the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial", *Inherit the Wind*. The fundamentalist lawyer, Matthew Harrison Brady, forced to admit

that "a day" in Genesis might not be 24 hours, and so on, eventually breaks down completely.

A recent meta-analysis of 91 studies suggested, perhaps not surprisingly, that those who are not confident in their own views are less likely to expose themselves to contrary views. We all have a need for certainty, some more than others. Since Luther, Protestants have not had the infallibility of the Pope and his Church, and have had to fall back on "the absolute truth and authority of the Bible" (www.answersingenesis.com). The extreme creationists come in general from the fringes of Protestantism. We also have a strong urge to make sense of things. Most religions offer stories which seem to do this. Both needs are valuable, so long as they are constantly checked against reality. For those unable or unwilling to do that, there are at least three ways to deal with unpalatable facts: ignore them, deny them or distort them. The Flood apologists ignore genetics, deny evolution, and distort geology.

Similarly, we have a tendency to seek and notice what agrees with our opinions, and ignore counter-evidence. Bits of science (like continental drift) are pressed into service willy-nilly to support the biblical account. The obvious impossibilities are ignored. The Genesis Flood is myth, or

Booze and the Godly

After watching a TV programme about a drink called Buckfast, made by Benedictine monks in Devon, *Freethinker* editor **BARRY DUKE** recalled once reading a fascinating account of the links between alcohol and Christianity, written in the 1990s by **THERESA O'SHEA**

In the course of a BBC3 TV programme called *Britain's Disgusting Drinks*, screened in September, presenter Alex Riley attempted to get some answers out of the Benedictine monks at Buckfast Abbey in Devon regarding the absurdly high caffeine content of a potent tonic wine they produce.

The drink, Buckfast, commonly known in Scotland as "Commotion lotion" and "Wreck the hoose juice" had been linked by Strathclyde police to over 5,000 crimes – many of them violent – over the past three years, and led Andrew M Brown, of the *Daily Telegraph*, to comment in January, 2010: "They're Benedictines and they claim to have a special respect for moral values; they determine what goes into Buckfast; and they make plenty of money out of its sale." Riley made much the same point in his investigation of super-strength "Buckie", each 75ml bottle of which contains 281.25mg of caffeine – equivalent to eight cans of Coke or six cups of coffee – and leads to a heightened state of anxiety and irritability among those who drink it.

His attempts to speak to the abbots at Buckfast Abbey, which is in the process of building a new plant to increase their output of this drink, were completely stonewalled, and no monk would grant an interview. Basically, he wanted to know why they felt it necessary to add such levels of caffeine to their product, when this had been clearly shown to have adverse effects on those who neck this disgusting stuff.

He did, however, manage to interview Jim Wilson, the spokesman for J Chandler & Co which distributes the drink. Wilson was utterly unrepentant, and could see no reason to change a "successful" formula that the monks had been using for decades.

Back in January, Wilson told the BBC that the monks were also resistant to the idea of bottling "Buckie" in plastic to prevent drinkers from using the bottles as weapons. A number of people have been injured by Buckfast bottles, including Chris Henery, who was struck by one on a bus. He said "If it was in a plastic bottle at the time then the guys wouldn't have a weapon on them and I probably wouldn't have 34 stitches in my head."

But Wilson said the company will be



A young Scottish binge-drinker necks a bottle of 'Buckie'

sticking with glass because the cost of changing to plastic would be "horrendous".

This report got me thinking about booze and the godly, and I recalled reading a fascinating article some years back written by Theresa O'Shea, a freelance writer living in the south of Spain. In it she pointed out that all trades, causes and passions have their patron saints – but few have gathered up as many as brewers and beer lovers.

"No disrespect to Jesus", she wrote, "water into wine was a pretty mean feat. But the 20 or so patron saints of all things beer related were to go much further – converting bath water into beer, conjuring mugs full of the stuff out of thin air, multiplying infinitesimal amounts into gallons, and even using the magic brew to end plagues, put out fires and convert the heathen masses."

The "beer saints," who were mostly monks and nuns, pioneered brewing techniques and promoted beer consumption among the malnourished.

Official saint-making, or canonisation by the Vatican, did not start until the 11th century, but as early as the 2nd century the veneration of virgins, confessors, martyrs, monks and miracle makers by the pagan populace was in full swing. Cults grew up and spread, embroidered truths and ancient legends wove together, and groups of people claimed particular saints as their own.

But why so many patrons of beer and related professions like hop-pickers, brewers, bartenders and innkeepers?

"The New Religion", O'Shea, pointed out, "was important. Beer was important.

Together the patron saints made a holy alliance, reaching where other religions and beverages couldn't reach. In a world where clean water supplies and balanced diets were unknown, beer provided a safe and healthful food-like drink. And for the men and women in the new monastic orders, with their austere, one-meal-a-day, stone-for-a-pillow, pray-till-you-drop regimens, such a nourishing substance was particularly welcome and necessary."

Saint Benedict (480-547), the father of monasticism and unofficial "beer saint", ruled that monks had to be self-supporting in every way. Since they were allowed to imbibe up to a generous 5 litres a day, this naturally included the provision of alcohol. The Benedictine rules also required monasteries to double as inns, where weary travellers could rest and partake of whatever the monks could provide. As the monasteries grew, their brews became more well known and in demand. That, and the drive

The Elephant and the Kangaroo

legend, or fantasy, probably a mixture. Legends do however often turn out to have an original grain of fact. Floods are frequent, and a simple guess is that the world-wide myths may well have originated, at least sometimes, in actual disasters which overwhelmed some small community. "The world" would be the few square miles they knew.

A survivor's story would be told and retold, and gods would be brought in to explain both the disaster and the escape. There have been attempts to show that the Flood might have been the inundation of the Black Sea area, or even that of the Mediterranean, but that seems to me quite unnecessary, and would not account for non-European legends. But there is now actually a real danger of floods, and other disasters, and we need all the realistic thinking we can muster. No god will land us safely on Mount Ararat.

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

for self-sufficiency, pushed the monks into the small businessman mode. They started selling their high-quality brews to the public and, suddenly, there were “beer saints” everywhere.

Some, like Augustine of Hippo (353-430), became patrons of beer simply because of the vast quantities they knocked back. In his youth, Augustine explored all avenues of the “wine, women and song” variety and flirted with the many philosophical and theological “isms” of his day. Catholicism got him in the end. He gave us his sin-filled Confessions and about-faced into an ascetic hardliner, a reformed unbeliever, womaniser and drinker. Sounding not unlike an early Oscar Wilde or Groucho Marx, Augustine captured the essence of his pre-conversion philosophy with these words, “God, give me chastity and continence – but not just now.”

Other beer-loving saints showed greater moderation but no less enthusiasm for the grain. The Irish saint, Brigid (457-525), founded an abbey at Kildare and was well known for her generosity and compassion. She was also famed for her love of ale and her powers of spontaneous beer production. From her monastery, it was said, she kept 18 churches in beer from just one barrel, from Maundy Thursday to the end of Easter. But transformation of matter was her real specialty. One day, she was working in a

leper colony that found itself without beer. Taking pity on the thirsty lepers, she prayed hard and succeeded in changing their grub-by bath water into cool, refreshing ale.

A poem attributed to her, in praise of beer and God, begins: “I should like a great lake of ale, for the King of Kings. I should like the family of Heaven to be drinking it through time eternal.” Amen.

Water-into-ale miracles and bottomless barrels of beer were par for the course for Brigid, whose legend merged with that of an earlier pagan goddess of plenty. Her cows reputedly gave milk three times a day, she caused wells to spring forth, and once, during a famine, she threw into the river an armful of rushes that abra-cadabraed into fish a few days later.

But female saints did not have a monopoly on multiplication miracles. The three Arnolds – Arnold of Metz (580-640), Arnold of Soissons (1040-1087) and Arnold of Oudenaarde (died c 1100) – all came up with their own variations on the old loaves-and-fishes, wine-into-water routine.

Throughout his life, Arnold, Bishop of Metz, lectured the peasants on the benefits of drinking beer, which was made safe by boiling and processing. “Don’t drink the water,” he urged, “drink the beer.” So strong was his faith in beer power that, in the midst of a plague, he plunged his crucifix into a brew kettle (what a great symbol for the beer-religion connection!) and persuaded the locals to drink only from

that “holy” vessel. His action stopped the spread of illness.

For the Bishop’s crowning beer miracle, though, the citizens of Metz had to wait until after his death. It was well worth the wait – at least for those who bore his bones from the monastery where he died back (by popular demand) to the town of Metz. According to one version, the worn-out porters stopped off at an inn for a pint. With ale enough for only one glass, Arnold kindly interceded from his casket. As the men passed the mug around, it miraculously refilled until the thirsts of all had been quenched.

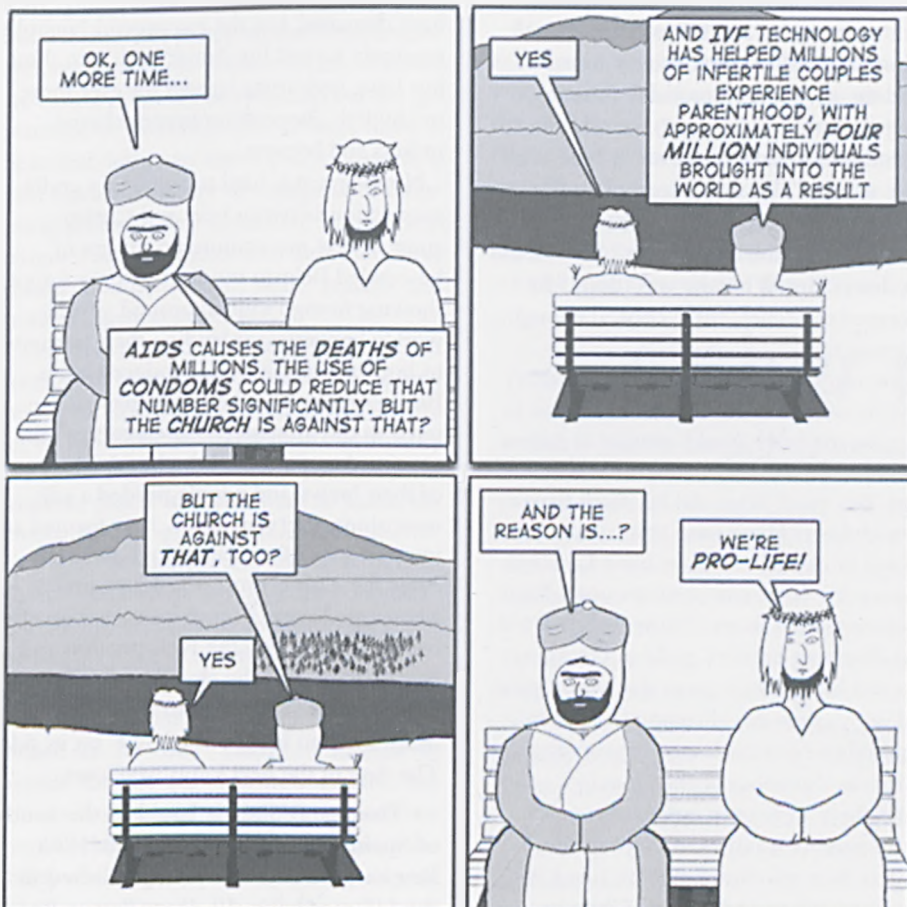
In the second version, the thirsty porters appealed to God for refreshment en route. Via Arnold, God complied, shooting lashings of icy ale out of the casket and soaking all present. It’s raining beer, hallelujah! As if that were not enough to endear the Bishop of Metz to beer lovers everywhere, he is also credited with the famous words, “From man’s sweat and God’s love, beer came into the world.”

Arnold of Soissons is the patron saint of hop-pickers, probably because he preached in the hop-growing region of Brabant, in what is now Belgium. He pulled his beer proliferation number after a monastery roof collapsed in Flanders, destroying the monks’ supply of beer. With only a few sad barrels remaining, Arnold asked God to lend a hand. The barrels multiplied, the monks and townsfolk rejoiced, and Arnold was popularly canonised on the spot. Ingenious as well as miraculous, he also came up with the idea of using straw cones (the kind used in bee keeping) as a filter to clarify beer.

Arnold number three worked his magic on the battlefield. Before becoming a Benedictine monk, he belonged to a military order, making a name for himself as “Arnulph the Strong of Oudenaarde.” He fought with God, and beer, on his side. Once during a battle in Flanders, he magicked mugfuls of cold ale out of heavenly thin air to revive his flagging soldiers—who, of course, went on to win. Later, he founded the Abbey of St Peter in Oudenburg, where he learned the art of earthly brewing. Both Arnold number two (Soissons) and Arnold number three (Oudenaarde) lived in the 11th century, preached in Flanders, wrought numerous miracles, promoted beer and became patron saints of Belgian brewers. These similarities perhaps explain why their stories and legends are sometimes attributed to one and sometimes to the other, depending upon the source.

Performing beer-based miracles was not the only way to end up a beer saint. Other holy men and women made the beer canon due to their contribution to the brewing process. One such woman was Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), a Benedictine

Jesus & Mo



nun, and one of the wisest and most exceptional human beings to have ever lived. In between composing music, writing poetry, advising the Pope, and analysing the scriptures, she found time to write two scientific studies on medicine and nature. In one of these, *Physica Sacra*, she describes the use and value of using hops in beer making, writing, “[Hops], when put in beer, stops putrefaction and lends longer durability.”

Although Hildegard was the first to write about the use of hops in brewing, other sources suggest that the Brabant monasteries were flavoring their beer with hops in the 9th century. Perhaps you’ve passed bars or pubs named “King Gambrius,” still today one of the most popular patron saints of beer? Gambrius, the King of Brabant, set himself up – falsely – as the inventor and “king of beer,” declaring: “Be I called Gambrius, King of Flanders and Brabant. I have made malt from barley and first conceived of the brewing of beer. Hence, the brewers can say they have a king as master brewer.”



*A statue of King Gambrius
in Wisconsin, USA*

Another hop connection comes from 10th-century Bohemia, where Wenceslas (yes, that Wenceslas from the Christmas carol) worked to spread Christianity. Less well known is his contribution to the hop-growing business. When “a poor man came in sight, gathering winter f-u-u-e-!,” the Good King may have showed Christian charity, but when he caught his countrymen trying to smuggle highly valued hops out of the country, he sent them straight to the gallows. Wenceslas’s hard-line stance made him a hit with local growers and brewers. His crown became a symbol of Czech nationalism, and he earned the title of patron saint of Bohemia and Czechoslovakia – and, of course, Czech brewers.

Some saints used beer to win over converts. With beer on God’s side, anything was possible. Saint Columbanus (c 543–615), an Irish missionary on assignment to Germany, was walking through the woods one day, when he came upon a group of misguided

Booze and the Godly

Wodan worshippers. Just as they were about to commit the sacrilege of sacrificing a cask of ale to their god. Columbanus stepped in, rather, blew in, shattering the cask with a mighty crack using only his breath. He explained to the Wodanites the error of their ale-wasting ways. He told them that the Christian God loved beer, but only when drunk in His Name. Suitably impressed, many converted on the spot to the new, beer-friendly religion.

Saint Columbanus also gave us this gem of a beer lover’s blessing: “It is my design to die in the brew house; let ale be placed to my mouth when I am expiring, so that when the choir of angels come, they may say: ‘Be God propitious to this drinker.’”

Most of the beer saints “make sense”: they either promoted the healthful and spiritual benefits of beer, were experts and innovators in the brewing process, or went in for beer-multiplication miracles. Some, however, earned their beer patronage for reasons more obscure. Saint Laurence (died 258), archdeacon of Rome, was tied to a huge gridiron and roasted alive during the Valerian persecutions. It should have been an agonizing way to go. According to eyewitnesses, however, Laurence radiated calm and serenity, and instead of the smell of burning flesh, a sweet, saintly aroma filled the air. More improbably (but don’t you just want it to be true?), he told his executioner to turn him over to broil with these words: “This side is toasted, so turn me over tyrant, eat, And see whether raw or roasted I make the better meat.” His wit did not desert him. When he was “done,” he informed the “chef,” “It is cooked enough; you may eat.”

One can only applaud the early church’s mixture of reverence and black humour in revering the barbecued Laurence as patron of cooks, bakers, comedians and restaurateurs. But beer? What did his death have to do with beer? Hang onto your sense of irony and think malt. Brewers liked Laurence because his slow-roast-over-an-open-flame death reminded them of how malt is dried. The Bamberg brewers’ guild in Germany adopted him as their particular patron saint, and on his feast day, all apprentices were required to carry his image in processions and make donations to the church.

But there were even uglier ways to die than Laurence’s, and even more spurious ways to beer sainthood. Florian (died 304), a Roman officer and a secret Christian,

came out of the closet during the Diocletian prosecutions. His executioners flogged him, flayed him, tied a stone around his neck and threw him in the river. This time there are no eyewitness accounts of serenity and wit. And there is no clue to Florian’s credentials as a beer saint in his death. Instead, Florian is most remembered for “saving” the city of Nuremberg during a great fire. The quick-witted saint headed straight for the local brewery, where he knew water would be stored. With just the one bucket, he put out the raging fire, winning applause from firefighters, barrel (and bucket?) makers and brewers everywhere.

Coopers and brewers find common ground, too, in adopting 4th-century Nicholas of Myra (aka Santa Claus) as one of their patrons. We are, however, starting to reach the bottom of the barrel with Saint Nick, who was all things to all men and women, chalking up some 60 patronages, including everyone from pawnbrokers and prostitutes to shoe shiners, judges and newly-weds. Still, the story that gives us the barrel-beer connection is one of the myth makers’ best.

One evening after a hard day’s do-gooding in his capacity as Bishop of Myra, Nicholas stopped off at an inn. There was famine throughout the land, so when the innkeeper offered him meat and drink, he was suspicious. He snuck into the kitchen, and there, floating around in a tub of brine, he found his “meat” – the chopped up bodies of three young boys. A lesser saint might have despaired, but the resourceful Nicholas promptly turned his dinner back into three live boys, endearing himself for ever more to children, (honest) innkeepers, barrel makers and brewers.

Nowadays, it is hard to think of a godly connection between beer and Christianity. At best, we conjure up images of be-cowled Belgian monks that time forgot, showing foreign tourists around ye-olde-worlde breweries, or lending their portraits to bottles of industrially produced beers. But in times past, when brewing was centered in the monasteries, members of religious orders promoted the healthful nature of their brews, and people needed a safe, nourishing, everyday drink, beer formed an intrinsic part of secular and religious life. After the 12th century, the courts gradually granted more licenses to non-monastic brewers. Then with the Reformation and the weakening of the church, the beer industry moved firmly into the public domain. Beer no longer had “God” on its side. The days of the beer saints were over.

• Theresa O’Shea is based in the south of Spain. Her article *Beer Saints: With Beer on Their Side* was first published in the US magazine *All About Beer*.

Keeping abreast of new atheist writing



IN response to a number of readers' requests, from this month we will be periodically running a guide to the best new atheist books, films, videos, websites and other media.

We kick off with a review by PETER BRIETBART of *God Bothering: Our Journey Away From God* by Stuart Abercrombie and Malcolm Hobbs. He writes:

This book is a devastating dissection of the Alpha Course, a recruiting tool of evangelical Christianity. It poses as a philosophical course pondering the Big Questions, but all of Alpha's answers point to Jesus.

In it, Abercrombie and Hobbs take us through the Alpha Course week-by-week, and shine a critical light on the superficial and comically shallow theology espoused within. For example, the Alpha Course starts with the historicity of Jesus, and attempts to establish his existence as a historical certainty.

However, this is by no means convincing, and the authors significantly undermine the existence of Jesus.

During their Alpha sessions, the questions they raise go unanswered, or are countered with contradictory and nonsensical replies. But this does not matter to the Alpha organisers, because, as the authors clearly discover, the course is not about evidence, but the appearance of evidence. The authors make it clear that whatever the Alpha Course is, it is far from an attempt to engage with interesting philosophical questions. Instead, it is designed to take those who already believe toward a more certain, more zealous and more evangelical position.

This is a witty and smart book, and one that manages to take on much more than merely the Alpha Course. Abercrombie and Hobbs get to the heart of evangelical Christianity and show it for the vacuous and irrational nonsense that it is. If you want to know the science behind speaking in tongues, the reality behind miracles and the facts behind Alpha – especially the ones they wouldn't want you to bring up in discussion sessions – then *God Bothering* is definitely for you.

Choice quote: "God created sin, judged the sin that he'd created to be bad, sacrificed himself to himself for the sin that he'd created but nonetheless judged to be bad – and we were to be grateful because the responsibility for the sin that God had created rested on us because we'd done the sin-

ning (except that humans are by their God-given nature incapable of not sinning). Now we had to try, and inevitably fail, to adhere to his rules in order to show our gratitude for this, but it didn't matter how badly we failed provided we repented because Jesus had taken away our sins."

God Bothering, published in paperback, is available from Amazon from around £9.00.

Brietbart then turns his attention to Jon Gower Davies, author of a Civitas report entitled *A New Inquisition: Religious Persecution in Britain Today*. He writes: Davies – formerly the Head of Religious Studies at Newcastle University – is a man who is right for all the wrong reasons. He is the kind of Christian – I assume he is a Christian – that uses "atheist" as an insult. His central premise is that religious and anti-religious debate should be regulated within the public, not judicial, square – and he's right. Laws against "religious hatred" are vague, bizarre and dangerous. The idea that one might be arrested for hating religion is a curious one, considering many consider such hatred entirely justified.

The report was inspired by the case of Ben and Sharon Vogelenzang, a Christian couple who criticised Islam to a Muslim guest at their hotel, and were prosecuted under the Public Order Act for "religiously aggravated hatred".

Davies is right – this case should not have come to court. People should be free to criticise whatever religion they like, without

fear of punishment by the state. The abolition of the blasphemy law, and the introduction of the crime of "Religious Hatred" has, in essence he argues, created a new, stronger blasphemy law, and one which is extremely advantageous for Islam. Davies perceives this as an attack on Christianity. I laughed aloud at one point at the author's perception of an alliance between secularism, atheism, and Islam. How paranoid one can become?

His case is further marred by the sideswipes he takes at certain individuals, such as calling Blair and Brown "professional politicians almost completely disconnected from the traditional hierarchical bases of political life".

Ultimately, he considers multiculturalism the enemy, since it does so much to strengthen Islam and not Christianity. His thinking is plagued by conservatism, with much muttering and stomping of feet over the fact that, well, we didn't use to do things like this, so it's not good.

On the topic of homosexuality, the author writes that we should support "the age-old rights of Christians to make their long-held views known on this (and any other?) subject." Of course we should. Freedom of speech is damaged by the concept of "hatred" as a criminal offense: Davies is right about that (even if he gets almost everything else wrong).

Other new titles

- *God & Human Beings*, Voltaire, translated by Michael Shreve. Prometheus Books: 978-1-61614-178-3. Voltaire wrote extensively on gods and religions, especially on Christianity, and this book is a real treasure, having only very recently been translated into English. Full of the insights for which Voltaire was so renowned, this book is a magnificent addition to any freethinker's arsenal. £13.59 from Amazon UK + free delivery; £11.20 from Prometheus directly, but there may be transatlantic shipping costs.
- *The Truth About the Gita: A Closer Look at Hindu Scripture*, V R Narla. Prometheus Books: 978-1-61614-183-7. In the West, the Abrahamic religions have been criticised extensively, but there's been far less discourse regarding Hinduism. In this tidy volume, Narla casts a critical eye over the Gita, and explains how it leads to violence, superstition and the brutal caste system. £14.44 from Amazon UK + free delivery. Also £11.20 from Prometheus directly.

If you would like to have readers' attention drawn to any new publication of interest to freethinkers please email Peter Brietbart at peter@freethinker.co.uk or peterbrietbart@gmail.com.

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,
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SCOTTISH 'WEE FREES'

IN his reflection "Islam and Treason" (*Freethinker*, October), Jack Hastie blithely underestimates the "Scottish 'Wee Free' Presbyterians" as merely "clinging to wind-swept islands in the furthest west".

The "Wee Frees" are indeed few, compared with other Christians and the British population, but their range and influence are greater than he thinks. Large infestations can be found all over mainland Scotland and there are pretty large colonies of them, belonging to at least three denominations (they thrive on schism) in the cities, not only Inverness where you might expect to find them, but also in Glasgow and Edinburgh ... and Arbroath.

Professor Donald Macleod, head of the Free Church of Scotland's seminary in Glasgow, has a sometimes extremely 16th-century Calvinist (witch burner) weekly column in the *West Highland Free Press* and Rev Maurice Roberts – Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) – is an influential voice in the creationist outfit that pretends to be a modern educational resource, Truth In Science, one of the greatest misnomers of our time.

The Sabbath is imposed on the faithful and the rest of us well beyond the Hebrides, where there are frequent split-community rows about Sunday ferries and sports on Sunday. A friend who lives not far from me has been forced by her landlord to choose between not laundering her smalls on a Sunday or being kicked out of her accommodation. That sort of thing is not so common, but I find myself shocked to hear that it happens at all.

I have myself been bad-mouthed by a gossiping Skye crofter lady who had somehow got it into her head that I am a wicked atheist. When I once travelled in the same car as her, I thought it wise to

keep my lip buttoned, but arrived at my destination fuming with the frustration of being polite in the company of this malicious old bat. The things she said!

If we did not have civilised laws in this country, I don't doubt that the "Wee Frees" would still be – not merrily; these ol' miseries don't do merry, but they certainly do dour – carrying out the atrocities featured in the cartoon accompanying Jack's article. They are still a force, if not to be reckoned with any more, then not to be underestimated.

Dr James Merryweather
Scotland

ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIANS

I AM glad that Derek Wilkes rested his case because he doesn't have one. To say something against Israel doesn't make you an anti-Semite.

The bogus state of Israel was formed for no other reason than the Bible saying that a barbarous tribe used to roam the area killing, raping and plundering. At times, even their own people.

If you compare the original map of Israel with the current one, you will see how much land Israel has taken from the Palestinians, all in "self-defence".

David Anderson
Spain

DEREK Wilkes is naïve, to say the least, in asserting that Israel "seeks only to be left in peace" (letter October). If I wanted peaceful relations with my next-door neighbours, would I occupy their back garden? Israel, moreover, is continually expanding its occupation of Palestinian territory.

Mr Wilkes is also wrong to say that "Israel has never instigated violence save in self-defence". In his report on the Gaza conflict in 2008/9, Judge Goldstone, a South African Jew and a Zionist, stated that the evidence of Israel targeting civilians was

overwhelming. (The ratio of Palestinian to Jewish deaths in this invasion was 100:1.)

David Simmonds
Essex

HISTORICITY OF JESUS

STEUART Campbell (*Points of View*, October) referred me to *Wikipedia's* article on "The Burden of Proof", which notes that the burden "typically falls more heavily on the party that makes either an ontologically positive claim, or makes a claim more 'extraordinary', that is farther removed from conventionally accepted facts".

Campbell makes an ontologically positive claim [a historical Jesus existed], and I don't. My claim can hardly be more extraordinary than his – he's making a claim to knowledge, and I'm not!

Even supposing that I were in this instance to claim that the historical Jesus never existed, the unorthodox nature of the claim would mean that I'd need to work hard to advance it. The burden of proof would be with me, but for practical reasons rather than philosophical ones.

A statement does not become truer simply because more people believe it; a statement's truthfulness should therefore be established by appealing to evidence and argument, not orthodoxy. In my booklet *Did Christians Steal Christmas?* I dispense with the lenses of orthodoxy, analyse the Nativity accounts afresh and make the case that they owe far more to Old Testament verses and pagan motifs than they do to actual historical events.

Mr Campbell and I evidently have our differences, but neither one of us plumbed the depths reached by Diesel Balaam in last month's *Freethinker*. His letter contained eight insults ("crabby old men", "ill-tempered", "self-aggrandising", "rambling", "tub-thumping lefties", "lost-the-plot pensioners", "snide", "irascibility") but no



evidence. He complained that others want the last word – and of course wrote in himself hoping to have it, demanding that everybody else stop arguing! He labelled his critics “self-aggrandising” then blew his own trumpet by describing his own views as “a positive counterpoint” to those of his critics. When Graeme Moore wrote to the *Freethinker* condemning “mudslinging” (*Points of View*, September) he presumably had letters like those of Mr Balaam in mind.

Robert Stovold
Brighton

I AM somewhat bemused by Stuart Campbell's letter (*Points of View*, October).

To me his logic goes thus: I and many others, having perused two or three ancient texts of completely unverified accounts, aver that the moon is made of cheese.

It is not up to us to prove it, the proof that it is not made of cheese is the one to be established, because there is an unfair “asymmetry” in the burden of proof. Well, if the assertion were not made, then there would be no proof required. You make the assertion – prove it to me!

Have I understood it correctly (without resort to *Wikipedia*)?

Lawrie North
London

IF STEUART Campbell (*Points of View*, October), prefers to prostrate himself before “learned authorities”, that is his affair. Unlike him, I prefer to examine the material upon which these “learned authorities” base their claims and on the basis of this form my own assessment as to whether their claims are valid or not.

Hence my rejection of the claim advanced by the “learned authorities” who so impress Mr Campbell, who equate Chrestus with Christ, the reference being in Suetonius's *Life of Claudius* not, as Campbell first states, in Tacitus's *Annals*, then in his second paragraph changes his mind and refers to it being in the *Annals*. Both these Roman statesmen were contemptuous of Christian claims and probably saw no good reason to investigate in depth their fantasies.

Mr Campbell then asks why I challenge the historicity of Jesus? However, what I do challenge is the historicity of the Jesus of what became the Christian cult. As far as I am concerned there may well have been a Jesus, a common enough name amongst the Jews, who imagined he was the messiah who would lead the people of Israel to victory over the Romans, who ruled Judea directly and who exercised their power in other areas of the country through client tetrarchs such as Herod Antipas. Josephus held such would-be messiahs in contempt, and only discusses a few of them, although

it is clear there were quite a few around at various times. I am quite happy to accept that amongst these was a Galilean revolutionary. The problem here is that there are no contemporary accounts of, for that matter, the Christian Jesus. All we have in respect of the latter are fantastic claims concocted by anonymous Christian writers years after the time they date their god to have lived on earth. No doubt they believed in what they wrote. I do not.

Anyone who has read historical fiction set in the first century, such as the Eagle series of Simon Scarrow or the Roma Sub Rosa series of Steven Saylor, will not require telling how the authors weave purely fictional characters seamlessly into a historical background. Why, then, assume the writers of the gospels were incapable of doing likewise?

Robert Morrell
Nottingham

MUDSLINGING

I ENTIRELY agree with the last one-third of Diesel Balaam's letter (*Points of View*, October 2010).

However, he has entirely and comprehensively undermined his own credibility with the two-thirds of the letter preceding it, and exposed himself as a liability to the secular humanist movement.

Colin Mills
Amersham

POPE'S UK VISIT

DURING the Pope's visit, three items made a haunting impression on me.

The size of this man's girth, the fact that he feasted on haggis and roast beef in Edinburgh (although God stated in the book of Isaiah that killing an ox is the same as killing a man) and Peter Tatchell's Channel 4 documentary depicting a Philippine woman expecting her eleventh child although she was clearly extremely poor. Her Catholic priest insisted that she produce lots of children.

I have seen better materials thrown into skips in the UK than the poor Philippine people use to build their shacks.

A comparison of the two lifestyles left me wondering how anyone can ever refer to Joseph Ratzinger as “His Holiness”, especially as he is quite prepared to put impoverished women through the agony of several births without the benefit of western gynecological knowledge.

John Paul II carried on the tradition of forbidding harm to the foetus and, as a result, pregnant women in Northern Ireland, suffering from treatable cancer, were not allowed to have treatment or even painkillers. They died an agonising death.

If the Catholic Church persecutes homosexuals because the Bible says so, why do the obese men in the Vatican eat meat? The Catholic Church is responsible for much of the starvation and ignorance among the poor of this world and no amount of collecting-boxes will fix the problems.

B Barratt
Berkshire

AS I watched the Philippino woman, in Peter Tatchell's brilliant and restrained programme, scratching in a rubbish pile to support eight children, three dead and again pregnant, I was looking on the Pope's preaching in practice.

The woman had “thought about family planning” but her priest said that it was a sin. As the Pope and his 30 acolytes enjoyed luxurious hotel accommodation, courtesy of the UK taxpayers, his victims struggle to survive on the margin of starvation.

Amid the fawning politicians, the acclaim of the surrounding hordes and the sycophancy of most of the media, there is no space for this woman or others like her. The poor are not so blessed.

But what was also absent during his tax-funded carnival was any questioning, never mind challenge, to the truth of his superstitious rants. These passed largely as if they were based on fact instead of prejudice and bigotry. That this man should receive such a welcome stains our country and removes any possible confidence we might have in the judgment of our politicians.

Denis Watkins
Wales

ISLAMIC TIME

NO, the international community has not accepted “that the start of each day should be measured from the prime meridian” (Meccas's Islamic clock aims to trump Greenwich, *Freethinker*, September). Each day starts at the International Date Line, which is opposite the prime meridian around 180 degrees (E or W of Greenwich).

Although the date and day of the week change at that Line, the actual start of each day depends on longitude and in the UK starts at midnight GMT or BST. In Saudi Arabia each day starts at midnight AST, the same time zone as Moscow, St Petersburg, Georgia, Samara, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Madagascar.

Incidentally, because Saudi Arabia does not observe any daylight saving time, for about half the year AST is only two hours ahead of UK time. So British Muslims should take this into account.

Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information **w** website **e** email

Birmingham Humanists:

w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. 0845 2015135.
Friends Meeting House, St James's Road, Edgbaston. Various events.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: **i** 01273 227549/461404. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Nov 3, 8pm. Valerie Mainstone: *50 Years of the "Ungodly" Pill*. Wed, Dec 1, 8pm. Ken Humphreys: *The Jesus Hoax*.
w <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.

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 Pinel 01298 815575.

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available **i** 01268 785295.

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

w www.farnham-humanists.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):

1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067.

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

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: **i** John Coss: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday, 7.30pm) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Nov 10, Roger Martin: *World Population Issues*.

Hampstead Humanist Society: **i** NI 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 August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Nov 10: Nitin Mehta, Member of the Vegetarian Society: *Be Healthy, Be Compassionate, Save the Planet, Go Vegetarian*.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagema@hotmail.com

Humanists of Havering: **i** Natalie Kehr 01708 442161

e humanist@kehr.co.uk

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

Ireland: **i** Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 **e** brianmcclinton@btinternet.com.

w www.nirelandhumanists.net

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

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

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

Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Dundee:** 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Edinburgh:** 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Glasgow:** 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Highland:** 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jersey Humanists: Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des 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, 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, Rushy Green, Cufford SE6. Meetings on third Thurs, 7.30pm. Nov 18, John Severs: *A History of Humanism*.

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 **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.

Oxford Humanists: Chair: John White, 77 High St, Chalgrove OX44 7SS, 01865 891876.

e jdwhite@talk21.com

Peterborough Humanists: **i** Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Sheffield Humanist Society: **i** 0114 2309754. University Arms, 197 Brook Hill, Sheffield. Wed, Nov 3, 8pm: Mosheir al Fara: *Palestine*.

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

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 at Conway Hall Roockway Room, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8031/4

e programme@ethicalsc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.

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

Secretary: Denis Johnston.

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

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

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

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

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: **i** 01568 770282

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

Meetings on the 2nd Tues of the month at Ludlow, Oct to June.

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

Listing & Event Deadlines

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