

NSS Newsline - 4th February 2005

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RUTH KELLY OFFERS ASSURANCE ON STEM-CELL POLICY

Education secretary Ruth Kelly put collective Cabinet responsibility ahead of the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church this week, by making plain on the Today programme that she will support the Government's policy on stem-cell research.

Ms Kelly, who has admitted being a member of Opus Dei, has come under growing pressure to reveal her views on a range of issues, from stem-cell research to sex education and abortion.

In the Today programme interview on Tuesday, she tried to put an end to the controversy. Ms Kelly, who has responsibility for millions of pounds of government funding for stem cell research, which the Catholic Church opposes, said she would not unilaterally break from the decision made collectively by the Cabinet. "We have a ten-year science strategy, we have a policy towards stem-cell research. I completely accept that this is Government policy and I stand by it," she said. "I am a member of this Government and I will not only stand by the policies of this Government, but also, where I am responsible for the implementing them, I will."

She declined to give any further information about her involvement with Opus Dei, repeating the routine that she has offered in other interviews. "I, as a politician, have a right to a private life, just

as any other politician has," she said, "but I want to make it absolutely clear that, while I bring my own views to the table, I am also completely committed to the doctrine of collective responsibility which applies around the Cabinet table."

Commenting on Ms Kelly in the Daily Express, Peter Stanford, a former editor of the Catholic Herald said: "Catholics who have met Kelly privately confirm that she has offered to refer them to Opus Dei. It is part of a member's duties to try to recruit others in their workplace. Kelly is also said to be utterly humourless about the strange practices, such as wearing a spiky metal bracelet around your thigh to mortify your flesh."

On Ms Kelly's demand for privacy on her religious beliefs, Stanford says: "The distinction between public and private, while important, cannot be made quite so definitively. For example, elsewhere, Catholics such as John Kerry have had to explain their personal position on issues such as abortion, on which Catholic teaching clashes with secular law. Given her role as headmistress to a multicultural nation, Ruth Kelly owes us a fuller explanation of where she is coming from. It is absurd for her to suggest her links with Opus Dei are irrelevant to her role as a minister, especially as Opus Dei makes clear and unambiguous link between work and faith."

Stanford concludes: "Her secrecy - like Opus Dei's - only serves to arouse suspicion."

In a letter to The Times, Aidan Reynolds of Abergavenny made this point: "Take the issue of faith schools, an area in which an education minister might have considerable influence. Suppose she were in favour, would that be so alarming? Very many people in our democratic society would agree with her. On this and several other issues where religion and secularism conflict there are substantial numbers on each side of the argument. It is suggested that Kelly should have understood that her faith would have ruled her out of particular ministerial jobs. If this practice were to be followed, a secularist opposed to faith schools should not accept a post as education minister. We could end up in the ridiculous position of debarring from office anyone who held strong views on issues that particularly interested them. Those who disagree with a ministerial appointment may indeed be concerned, but they should not seek to deny the right of the individual to accept it."

QUOTES/ESSAYS OF THE WEEK

Quotes of the week:

"Pretending that Muslims have never had it so bad might bolster community leaders and gain votes for politicians, but it does the rest of us, Muslim or non-Muslim, no favours at all. The more that ordinary Muslims come to believe that they are under constant attack, the more resentful, inward-looking and open to extremism they are likely to become."

(Kenan Malik, Prospect)

"Given her role as headmistress to a multicultural nation, Ruth Kelly owes us a fuller explanation of where she is coming from. It is absurd for her to suggest that her links with Opus Dei are irrelevant to her role as a minister, especially as Opus Dei makes a clear and unambiguous link between work and faith."

(Peter Stanford, Daily Express)

"Culture has become so revered that we are encouraged to regard people of different cultures as belonging to a different species. The result is a new sectarianism, with previously mixed communities - Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus - moving house so they can divide along religious lines. That's what happened in Belfast in the early 1970s".

(Patrick West. Spectator)

Essays of the week:

If only we were more like the French
Their secularism is better than our separatism
(Stuart Jeffries, Guardian [here](#))

(and the responses [here](#))

Canada must say no to Islamic law
Women must not be made to pay the price of liberal guilt
(Mona Eltahawy, Christian Science Monitor [here](#))

You can keep identity politics
Multiculturalism has not only failed, it is destroying our society.
(Damien Thompson, Spectator [here](#))

SAVE US FROM INCITEMENT LAW, SAYS TOP THEATRE DIRECTOR

The Director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, has spoken out against the proposed new incitement to religious hatred legislation. In a speech at the Critic's Circle theatre awards, he said the new law would "strike fear" into arts institutions. Mr Hytner doubted that the law would be used to prosecute artists, but it would cause them to self-censor and stop them "saying things that are worth saying".

"I claim the right to be as offensive as I choose about what other people think, and to tell any story that I choose," he said. "No one has the right not to be offended." Politicians of all parties were cowardly about defending the theatre against attacks from minorities because they put votes before free speech, he said.

His comments received a warm response from the critics, actors and directors gathered for the ceremony at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in London.

Later, Mr Hytner said that the National Theatre would be presenting plays in the coming season that would challenge religious and racial censors. One by Howard Brenton will look at the life of St Paul - and although no details are available, it is thought that it will not be pleasing to orthodox Christians. One of Mr Brenton's other plays, Romans in Britain was prosecuted by Mary Whitehouse in the eighties.

David Edgar's *Playing with Fire*, opening in September, is both an examination of the Brown-Blair feud and the racial and religious tensions that caused riots in northern towns three years ago. Set in a fictional northern town, New Labour sends in a heavy from London to threaten to remove the powers of the Old Labour council. In the background, racial tension in the town flares.

Edgar said "One of the points I raise is whether we are as comfortable with multi-racialism as we thought we were? It also looks at the conflict within the Muslim community about whether to continue to be part of the mainstream of British life or whether to pull up the drawbridge."

Meanwhile, if you want to see the stage version of Jerry Springer The Opera hurry along to the Cambridge Theatre, London - the show is to close on February 19th. It will then go on tour around the country, so be prepared for localised weeping and wailing and the mass taking of offence by terribly sensitive Christian groups in all corners of the land.

See also: Evangelicals (and NSS) oppose incitement law [here](#)

BNP leader to speak at University [here](#)

"SECULAR FUNDAMENTALISTS" ARE THE PROBLEMS SAYS BISHOP

The Bishop of Exeter, Michael Langrish, says that "secular fundamentalists" are driving religion from the public square. Speaking at a Roman Catholic Cathedral in Plymouth last week, he said that 'pluriformity' was under attack by a "particularly pernicious form of fundamentalism". Not all fundamentalists are religious he said, arguing that one of the most persistent and dominant forms in society was "extreme secularism".

"Secularism really ought to stand for, and indeed did once stand for, the creation and preservation of an open, public space in our society where none are privileged and all may be heard. Yet under the banner of political correctness and a spurious multi-faith, multicultural agenda, there is a danger that only one voice is allowed to be heard." He gave the example of Christmas where increasingly nativity scenes and Christmas trees are banned from charity shops and official Christmas cards have 'seasons greetings'.

"Instead of depictions of the Holy Family we have glossy photos of the leader at home, and there have even been attempts to devise new events to celebrate which none but those who created them can recognise - Chrimbo, Winterval and the like."

He argued that such a 'raucous' voice was equally offensive to those of other faiths as it was to Christians. "The real reason why we need to resist the modern secularising agenda is not because there is anything fundamentally wrong with the secular in itself. We need to challenge it because we believe that God, in the secular, the normal everyday birth of a human being has made the secular a wonderful thing, full of life, full of grace and truth - and then calls us to live it out like this every day."

Langrish's utterances in a Roman Catholic cathedral chime with similar statements by Roman Catholic leaders about the refusal of the EU to mention Europe's Christian heritage in its constitution and the barring of the Italian Commission from the EU Commission in the autumn. The outcry over Government Minister Ruth Kelly's membership of Opus Dei has also raised concerns.

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said: "Mr Langrish seems to be lamenting the fact that other people besides the religious now have a voice in society. What he appears to be saying is that religion must dominate the public square and all other opinions must be subservient to it. If people want to send out non-religious greetings cards and find more interesting things to do than go to church, then they shouldn't be castigated for it. Mr Langrish is going to have to take his place amid the rough and tumble of life instead of imagining that the Church can still lord it over everybody."

"Americans and the secular fundamentalists" [here](#)

CHRISTIANS BAN ANOTHER BOOK

An Athens court banned a comic book portraying Jesus as a pot-smoking hippy who surfs naked across the Sea of Galilee and sentenced its author to six months in jail for insulting religion.

The book's Austrian author Gerhard Haderer did not attend the trial and the court suspended the sentence, which he would have been able to pay off with a fine had he been in court. He described the decision as "absolutely scandalous".

The book's Greek publishers and four local booksellers were acquitted but the court upheld a ban on "The Life of Jesus," which was removed by police from bookshops in February 2003 on the orders of the prosecution. A separate case on the book's seizure is pending in Greece's Supreme Court. "If the ban is not lifted, we'll consider appealing to the European Court of Human Rights," Haderer's lawyer Minas Mihailovic said.

The book depicts the Last Supper as a drinking binge and the late Jimi Hendrix as a heavenly friend of Jesus. Publisher Fritz Panzer said: "Greece is a member of the European Union and, so you would think, not a religious state, in which an artist's freedom of expression is kicked to the ground."

Haderer's lawyers have appealed against the sentence which can only be imposed if Haderer travels to Greece. The book cannot be sold in Greek shops until legal proceedings have been completed. The case against Haderer was started after the Greek Orthodox Church submitted a complaint when the volume first appeared in Greece in February 2003.

Milan bans da Vinci parody [here](#)

Sweden bans art after Muslim protests [here](#)

DING DONG IN DURHAM & CONFRONTATION IN CAMBRIDGE

Honorary Associate Jonathan Meades, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood and New Humanist editor Frank Jordans took up the cudgels to make the case that Religion is the problem, not the answer in a debate at Durham University on 21 January. Their opponents included Canon John Hall, the Church of England's Chief Education Officer, and the former Lord Bishop of Ely, Professor Stephen Sykes. It was an impassioned debate and standing room only.

Jonathan's erudite account of the historical and philosophical objections to religion was followed by Keith's relentless catalogue of human rights abuses carried out in the name of religion and its unjustified privileges. Frank told the students that, when he was a student, he had thought that all the world's problems stemmed from greedy corporations, arrogant American foreign policy, and economic injustices that were driving the world's poor to extreme measures. But since 9/11 he became increasingly aware of the rise of religion throughout the world and that has always been part of the problem and is becoming increasingly so.

Keith and Frank were on the debate trail again yesterday, this time arguing at the prestigious Cambridge Union that This House believes that Religion is no longer needed. They were up against stiff opposition: Rev Dr David Hilborn of the Evangelical Alliance, Professor Tim Winter of the University's Faculty of Divinity (and a Muslim) and Peter Hitchens Columnist Mail on Sunday. It certainly brought out the crowds: standing room only and a balcony groaning under its own weight, and it seems that the various Christian societies had come out in force, and a clue to the all-pervading religiosity in the University was given in the Union's programme of debates, headed "Lent 2005".

Our very own Dr Evan Harris bravely travelled from the rival Oxford to wind up for the secular side. It turned into a titanic battle, and Evan was in top form. His foil was the incorrigible Peter Hitchens, who must have been rather desperate as despite his never missing an opportunity to speak about good manners, repeatedly referred to Dr Evan Harris as "Mr Harris". Because the room was packed with Christians, the motion, inevitably, was lost. The argument, though, was certainly won.

LEICESTER COMMUNITY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

A new campaign started by Allan Hayes called Leicester Action for Community Schools is detailed on a new BBC website. You can support it by going [here](#).

MORE PRESSURE ON VATICAN TO EASE CONDOM BAN IN AIDS FIGHT

The Vatican is coming under increasing pressure to relax the ban on the use of condoms to fight AIDS.

Last week, Cardinal Georges Cottier - one of the pope's favourite theologians - caused ripples when he was quoted as saying the use of condoms may be legitimate to stop the spread of Aids in poor countries. Cottier said there was moral justification for condom use under certain circumstances to counter the virus.

He joins a growing chorus of Catholic officials and priests that are arguing that the strictly enforced ban is no longer acceptable.

Cottier said it was no longer a question only of allowing the transmission of life, but of actively preventing the transmission of death to a sexual partner. This argument - of adopting the lesser of two evils - has also been proposed by bishops in France and Spain. Spanish bishops however were forced by the Vatican to retract a statement similar to that now made by Cardinal Cottier that they issued in Madrid last month.

A less dogmatic Vatican pronouncement, to be put out later this month on the World Day of the Sick, suggests that the pope has not ruled out the adoption of "less desirable strategies" in fighting Aids than those that the Church traditionally teaches.

UN 'HIERARCHY OF RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION' CRITICISED

The United Nations has been warned that making lists of religions that must be protected from discrimination is creating a hierarchy of religious victims, leaving those religions not included open to unfettered prejudice.

Christian and human rights NGOs have urged the UN Human Rights Commission to reverse recent steps to highlight anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia because they implied a hierarchy favouring the "religions of the book".

A statement on this has been submitted by Christian groups representing Quakers, Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Franciscan order, the International Association for Religious Freedom and the International Service for Human Rights for the Geneva-based Commission's annual conference scheduled from March 14 to April 22. "No form of intolerance or discrimination based on actual or supposed religion or belief, or non-belief, is acceptable," it said.

Prompted by the Vatican and several traditionally Catholic countries, the Commission agreed at its 2004 conference to add the term 'Christianophobia' to a "special problems" list requiring

monitoring of discrimination against Jews and Muslims. The new term got a mixed reception. Some rights activists supported it while others expressed concern that listing specific religions diluted the overall commitment to defend freedom of religion for everyone everywhere.

"It's not that we're not concerned about religious discrimination against certain groups - on the contrary, we are very concerned," said Rachel Brett of the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva. "But we're equally concerned about everyone."

Human rights diplomats at the United Nations and the Vienna-based Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe said Buddhist and Sikh groups might start pressing for special consideration now that Christians had been singled out.

There was also a risk that people would imagine that religious intolerance and discrimination were always practised by "outsiders" when in fact much of it comes from different strains of the same religion.

Peter Prove of the Lutheran World Federation, one of the groups involved, added this would also overlook issues of conscience that might not be based on a religious belief system, such as a commitment to pacifism. "Once you start listing, then where do you stop?" he asked.

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said: "Protection for non-believers seems to have been totally overlooked in this debate, even though there is a growing aggression towards those who will not adhere to religion from powerful religious interests. The time has come when atheists and agnostics need special protection from the hostility of resurgent religionists."

TERRORISED INTO SILENCE AND CENSORSHIP

Blaming security concerns, organisers of the Rotterdam Film Festival have cancelled Sunday's planned showing of murdered Dutch moviemaker Theo van Gogh's "Submission".

The decision drew criticism from some directors and artists at the Rotterdam festival, who argued that limiting free expression was giving in to terrorists. The film's producer said he pulled the film on the advice of the police after receiving threats. But the producer, Gijs van de Westelaken of Column Films, said in an interview that he had withdrawn the film because he did not want "to take the slightest risk for anyone of our team."

"Does this mean I'm yielding to terror?" he said. "Yes. But I'm not a politician or an anti-terrorist police officer, I'm a film producer." The people behind the killing of van Gogh, he said, had already achieved what they wanted, "to frighten the country".

The withdrawal of the film has set off many reactions, among them a letter from several members of Parliament to the mayor of Rotterdam asking him to intervene. The producer said that the mayor had called him, but that he was sticking by his decision.

At about the same time, a Moroccan-Dutch painter went into hiding after a show of his work opened on 15 January at a modern art museum in Amsterdam. The museum director said the painter, Rachid Ben Ali, had received death threats linked to his satirical work critical of violence by Islamic militants.

The two incidents have reinforced fears among many Dutch that fast-growing non-Western immigration is having a negative impact on social attitudes in the Netherlands. Newspaper columnists and members of Parliament have warned in recent days that if people capitulated to intimidation, they would only encourage Islamic militants. Some have pointed to the recent events

as signs that militants are trying to impose their agenda and are undermining free speech in the Netherlands. A few people have quietly asked if self-censorship might be acceptable to keep the social peace.

"It would be very regrettable if we had to start accepting self-censorship, if we could not show this kind of protest art," John Frieze, the curator of Ben Ali's show at the Cobra Museum, said. "We've been pleased with the show, not only because the work is good, but also because it generated much debate with young Muslims attacking and defending it."

The exhibition, part of a series of cultural events called "Morocco-Netherlands 2005" was opened by a prominent Moroccan-born politician in Amsterdam, the alderman Ahmed Aboutaleb, who delivered a strong plea for freedom of expression. But in a sign of the times, Aboutaleb was accompanied by bodyguards and has had police protection since he received death threats from Islamic militants. In Amsterdam, a city known for its ebullient cultural life, local people say that threats to painters have not been heard since the occupation by the Nazis during World War II.

The Cobra Museum said it had no intention of removing any of Ben Ali's work, about 40 recent paintings and drawings. The artist, who had been criticized earlier by some Dutch-Moroccans for homosexual themes in his work, has now apparently infuriated his critics with angry sketches that include suicide bombers and what he calls "hate-imams," evil-looking preachers, vomiting excrement and another spitting bombs.

Since the opening of the show, the artist has stayed away from his home and his workshop. "He has been very overwhelmed by the threats and the controversy," Frieze, the museum curator, said. "His work is very topical and controversial, but that is part of the nature of modern art and we mustn't shy away from it."

RELIGIOUS THINK BUSES WON'T RUN OVER THEM

Trusting in God may make people with strong religious beliefs take more risks when crossing the road, according to a team of scientists in Israel. They found that devout Orthodox Jews were three times more likely to put themselves in danger from traffic than their secular neighbours. They suspect that having faith in a higher law may make believers think they can disregard man-made laws. Alternatively, those of a religious persuasion might take more risks because they have less fear of death.

Tova Rosenbloom, of Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan, decided to investigate after hearing complaints about pedestrian behaviour in the ultra-Orthodox community of Bnei-Brak. "Drivers who get to Bnei-Brak complain that they need seven eyes," she told New Scientist magazine. "People walk on the roads as if they were footpaths."

Rosenbloom and a team of researchers watched more than 1,000 pedestrians at two busy junctions, one in Bnei-Brak and the other in Ramat-Gan -- a largely secular city. They totalled up the number of times a pedestrian jaywalked, walked on the road rather than the footpath, crossed without looking out for traffic, or led a child across a road without holding its hand. The residents of Bnei-Brak were three times more likely to break these rules as those of Ramat-Gan, the team reported in the journal *Transportation Research*.

Terry Sanderson comments: "I lived for a while in a flat overlooking the vehicular exit to a Catholic Church, and I couldn't help noticing that on Sunday after mass there was a definite recklessness from worshippers who would drive out into a busy main road with hardly a glance at the oncoming traffic."

COMING OUT AS ATHEIST: IAN McEWAN & KEANU REEVES

Booker and Whitbread prize-winning novelist Ian McEwan told the Sydney Morning Herald: "I am very short-tempered about religion generally - that kind of respect we have to afford it. I think it has to cut in every direction. If I heard a mullah, or for that matter, a Christian, express his deep respect for the traditions of the secular, humanitarian atheist point of view, I'd feel good. I don't see that a Christian deserves more respect than an atheist. Why should they?" Read the whole interview [here](#).

Film star Keanu Reeves, promoting his new supernatural thriller Constantine, told a South African newspaper that making the film - about demonic possession - had not caused him to embrace religion, and he still thought of himself as an atheist.

JESUS HAS HAD HIS CHIPS

Jesus sure gets around. His image has now turned up in a frying pan. Mr Juan Pastrano, 49, was hanging up the pan after washing it when he spotted the image etched in the Teflon. Juan, of Prairie Lea, Texas, said: "I'm a religious man and it looks like the image of Christ to me." He has sealed the pan in a plastic bag while deciding whether to sell it.

Whether to sell it? What's the dilemma? Miraculous images of the holy family are creating a lucrative market. Jesus' mother, Mary, had her face discovered recently in a ten-year old grilled cheese sandwich which sold for £14,000 on eBay. The purchasers were an on-line casino. In November, Canadian Fred Whan from Ontario told how Jesus' face appeared on a fish finger which he had burned by accident while cooking his children's (hopefully not last) supper. This came after Mother Teresa put in an appearance in a cinnamon bun in Nashville.

Writing in the Daily Mirror, under the heading Little Lard Jesus (send for Stephen Green!) the incredibly rude Brian Reade said: "Unsurprisingly these sightings have led American bible beltters to debate what God is trying to tell their blessed people. Well folks, lemme help. He is trying to tell you that while the number of the world's starving people grows, obesity among Americans spirals out of control. And that a camel has more chance of passing through the eye of a needle than a lard-arsed Yank, dripping with saturated fat, has of getting through heaven's gate. Have a nice apparition now, ya hear?"

We, of course, could not be so nasty, but given the potential cash value of these kitchenware and fast food icons, heaven knows what Juan will get for his Jesus-in-a-chip-pan.

Now, a member of the NSS Council (who will remain nameless) has admitted to rifling through his kitchen utensils and bread bin in search of, perhaps, a John the Baptist etched on a crumpet or Moses on a scouring pad. The best he could come up with was a cocktail sausage that vaguely resembled Cliff Richard. But the search goes on. "Just think," the acquisitive councillor told Newsline, "If I could only find the Ten Commandments writ large in alphabet spaghetti, I could pay off my mortgage".

RIGHT TO DIE ADVOCATE COMMITS SUICIDE

From Ellen Ramsay in Canada

On January 28, 2005 Marcel Tremblay, held a live wake for himself with 55 of his friends and family and then went home and killed himself with a helium filled bag which he put over his head. Tremblay, a 78 year old man from Ottawa was suffering from terminal pulmonary fibrosis and is one of a number of persons in Canada to die in well-publicised battles to legalize assisted suicide.

Assisted suicide is still illegal in Canada. However in the United States, the state of Oregon legalized assisted suicide in 1997 and it has been legal in the Netherlands since 2002, Belgium since 2002, and Switzerland since 1941.

In North America, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a pathologist affectionately known as "Dr. Death", was sentenced to jail in 1999 at the age of 70 after 3 acquittals and 1 mistrial. He is said to have assisted in 130 deaths over a nine year battle and remains resolute to his cause. He is due for a parole hearing in 2007 at the age of 79. Kevorkian designed a machine that allowed patients to inject themselves with potassium chloride.

It is somewhat concerning that a brief survey of the media here in Canada this past week indicates that the authors and papers' editors don't seem to know the difference between euthanasia and voluntary euthanasia. As I've pointed out in this column in the past, the distinction is most important (e.g. Dr. Shipman) in the face of a society in which there are organisations and advocates of manslaughter calling themselves "euthanasia societies".

See also: see also www.kevork.org [here](#)

Dutch doctors refusing to carry out requested euthanasia [here](#)

Euthanasia film scoops Spain's Oscars [here](#)

NSS SPEAKS OUT

The NSS was quoted in a story in the Observer about the Muslim protest about '24'. Much of what was said was left out, giving a rather unbalanced idea of our opinion. See last week's Newsline for a more accurate reflection [here](#).

Keith Porteous Wood gave an extended interview to a Channel 4 production company making a programme about the growing assertiveness of religion, to be broadcast on 21 February.

Terry Sanderson took part in the Radio 4 programme Beyond Belief about the place of religion in public life. It is also expected to be broadcast on 21 February.

The NSS was extensively quoted in a feature article in the Herald (Scotland) about whether religion is the best way to instil morality into children (not available online).

TIME IS RUNNING OUT FOR MUG HUNTERS

We've had a stock check and the awful truth is that the number of Heroes of Atheism set-of-six mugs is now down to single figures. It follows from this that if you want a complete set at its discounted price, but have been putting off purchasing it, then you'd better get your skates on. Please go along at once to our merchant page [here](#) and order today to avoid bitter and life-shattering disappointment when we have to tell you: "Sorry, sold out". These mugs are about to enter the "unique collectable" phase, and as clumsy clots around the country break them, the full

set will become rarer and rarer. Make sure you are the proud possessor of one of these sets, firmly locked up in a secure room at your local bank. Your grandchildren will thank you for the inheritance. (We do have extra copies of certain mugs, so if you have broken one, please check to see if we have a replacement available).

THIS WEEK'S BARGAIN. We have a few copies of the stunning and moving film *The Magdalene Sisters* on VHS video that we want to get rid ... er, that is, make available for a bargain price. Each video will cost £4.95 plus £1 p&p. Stocks are limited so if you haven't seen this wonderful film yet, and still have a video player, this is your chance. Send your cheque or postal order to NSS Film Offer, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ.

LETTERS TO NEWSLINE

Write to tas@secularism.org.uk [here](#).

From Professor Edgar Rose:

Did Anthony Flew over the cuckoo's nest? Which nest is he really in? My atheism is emphatic and transparent. Some clarification from the man himself would be helpful!

From John Edwards:

I was interested in Alan Rogers' "outrageous suggestion" that people may be represented by a point in this space on a graph of religiosity versus goodness (Newsline 14th Jan which I've only just managed to read). While agreeing with his basic point of the idiocy of attempting to associate various tyrannical regimes with a lack of religious faith in their leader, I think he has his horizontal axis all wrong! If this is supposed to represent religiosity, surely it should have "Agnostics" in the centre, the extreme left would be 'Fundamentalist Atheist' and the extreme right 'Fundamentalist Religion'? With a vertical axis of "Degree of Morality" most Humanists and NSS members would probably find themselves somewhere in the top left quarter.

It's when I feel the urge to become a proselytizing atheist (a state that reading Newsline often stirs in me!) that I fear I may be dragged down towards the origin. Have I missed my vocation as a commandant of a GULAG camp I wonder?

From Roger Sutcliffe:

Might I recommend the following article as essential reading for all secularists [here](#).

From Peter Hearty (office volunteer):

I don't often comment on letters that we receive in the NSS office, suffice to say we get more than our fair share of cranks, but I thought I'd share one recent offering that we received. The sender wished to complain about part of our website which described Christianity as a "superstition". The writer took some umbrage at this and wished to point out that Christians were not superstitious, except CATHOLICS, who were extremely superstitious and should not be confused with real Christians. You could almost feel the author's Lutheran outrage seething through the page. It certainly lightened my day.

From Ellen Ramsay:

I'd like to complain about the last issue of the Newsline. It seems to me that it had an anti-Catholic and anti-Muslim bias. I thought the National Secular Society would have a campaign to

disestablish the Church of England. Surely it is because the Church of England has inordinate state powers that the other religions can request to increase their powers as well. If we disestablish the C of E then the others can't claim special place and the religions would have less claim to these faith committees and representations in the state. I've nothing against criticism of the Catholic or Islamic faiths, it is just that I found the last issue heavily biased in this way.

From Mark Pryde:

I was hoping you could help me, I'm 16 and have just embarked on making a new secular website. I was hoping you could take a look and give me some tips? It's at www.NAC.piczo.com [here](#).

Ed writes: This is not what it purports to be, and Mark thinks he's very clever tricking people into visiting his illiterate website, but it's interesting in a sad kind of way.

TELEVISION / RADIO / THEATRE / DEMO

Heavens Above (Channel 4, 02.30, Sunday 6 February 2005) One of those gentle Boulting Brothers satires from the sixties, this time sending up the Church of England's tradition of hypocrisy. It stars Peter Sellers as a left-wing vicar who is mistakenly seconded to a very posh Home Counties village called Orbiston Parva and tries to put his egalitarian principles into practice. The result is religious warfare. Stars a veritable galaxy of British character actors - Irene Handl, Miriam Karlin and Eric Sykes among them. Look out, too, for Malcolm Muggeridge and our own honorary associate Ludovic Kennedy. By the way, Miles Malleon, who plays the psychiatrist badly in need of his own treatment, was another honorary associate of the NSS at one time. (Videoplus code: 52861525).

Blood on Our Hands: the English Civil War (Channel 4, 9pm, Thursday 10 February) One of the bloodiest periods of English history was provoked, naturally, by religion. This two hour documentary looks at the period, the politics and the Puritans but is hampered by a lack of budget and has a bit of a didactic feel.

Radio Rage (Radio 4, 3.54 pm Tuesday 8 February). Few institutions in Poland arouse such passions as Radio Maryja. To its supporters the station uphold patriotic values and Catholic virtue. To its critics, it's an unholy mix of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and dangerous populism. Lucy Ash visits the station's headquarters to find out more about the shadowy figure behind it - "Father Director" Tadeusz Rydzik.

DRAMA ON THE HIGH SEAS As a belated celebration of Darwin's birthday, Fire and Brimstone Productions is presenting a play called Sea Change about the stormy relationship between Charles Darwin and Robert Fitzroy, captain of the Beagle - the ship that took them to the Galapagos Islands. Fitzroy - a fundamentalist Christian - was horrified when he realised where Darwin's thinking about the origin of life was leading. The Library in Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (nearest tube Holborn) on Friday 18 February at 7.30pm. Admission free.

The NSS is participating in a demonstration in Brussels organised by our French sister organisation Libre Pensee. The demonstration - which is open to secularists from around Europe - is calling for a secular EU free from religious domination. It is opposing Article 52 of the new constitution which enshrines the privileges of religious organisations around Europe. Sunday 3 April. The demo starts from the Gare du Nord at 1pm and should be over by 4pm, permitting a day return on Eurostar (Eurostar terminal is at the Gare du Midi. The only practical train out is the 08.34 from Waterloo, which arrives at 12.08, and then returning at 1741, 1756 or 2026).

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Editor Terry Sanderson