

Newsline 19th August 2005

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[Quotes Of the Week](#)

[Essays Of the Week](#)

[Organised Religion on The Slippery Slope To Oblivion In UK](#)

[Religious Education Needs Boosting Say Propagandists](#)

[Is Blair Having Second Thoughts on Academies?](#)

[I Believe in The FSM](#)

[Vatican's Claim to Be A "State" May Be Challenged In American Court](#)

[Australians Become Suspicious Of Their Muslim Schools](#)

[Atheists and Gays in Germany Target Pope](#)

[Iraqi Gays Living In Fear of Sharia Resurgence](#)

[Intelligent Design Leads Religious Renaissance](#)

[NSS Speaks Out](#)

[Have You Got Your Ticket for 'Secularist of The Year' Yet?](#)

[You Get Yourself A Badge And Suddenly Everybody Wants One](#)

[Letters To Newsline](#)

[Events](#)

[Television](#)

Quotes Of the Week

“Although the official line is that private backers should contribute £2 million to a city academy, in reality the Government is prepared to accept less – and in any case after tax is deducted, through the gift aid scheme, £2 million is worth just £1.2 million, peanuts to a billionaire who wants to influence the next generation.”

(Editorial, Daily Telegraph)

“The concept of a Muslim community, which has so readily and uncritically been accepted by everyone, suits the imams who can then keep their stranglehold on Muslims and helps maintain economic exploitation and oppression, especially of women.”

(Fawzi Ibrahim Times Educational Supplement)

Essays Of the Week

- [Religion is, at base, stupid](#)

(Justin Cartwright, *Guardian*)

- [Ten reasons why sharia law is bad for all societies](#)

(James Arlandson, *The American Thinker*)

- [Unfree under Islam](#)

(Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Wall Street Journal*)

- [Irshad Manji interviews NSS Honorary Associate Taslima Nasrin](#)

Organised Religion on The Slippery Slope To Oblivion In UK

Religious belief is declining faster than attendance at services in the UK, according to a new study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which found that parents' beliefs, practices and affiliations have the biggest impact on children.

The catchphrase 'believing without belonging' — found in much European research over the past decade and endlessly repeated by religious propagandists — is wrong, at least in its usual interpretation, says a team led by Dr David Voas of the University of Manchester.

Far from religious belief being relatively strong and robust, fewer people now have real faith than passively 'belong' to a religion. While ethnic minorities are increasingly important to religious life in Britain, the trend for them is similar, albeit from a much higher starting point. However, one factor which might yet very slightly slow the decline, says the report, is that religious parents have more children than others.

Unlike most previous research, the study looks at people over time and includes detailed information from parents, partners and children. It found that when it comes to religion, parents are the most important influence. The report argues that institutional religion now has a 'half-life' of one generation. In other words:

- two religious parents have roughly a 50-50 chance of passing on their beliefs;
- one religious parent does only half as well as two together;
- two non-religious parents will successfully pass on their lack of faith.

However, whatever the parents' beliefs, roughly one child in 12 (particularly girls) will opt for a denomination not adhered to by either parent. And women in their 20s are more likely than men to attend church, particularly when only one of their parents did the same. Dr Voas said: "How

children are brought up has an enormous impact on whether they will identify with a religion. Once people become adults, their religious affiliation is less likely to be affected by influences around them.”

However, his team also found that even where evidence appears to demonstrate that religious allegiance has been passed down from one generation to another, this conceals a lot of differences among individuals. He said: “Many people start or stop regular church attendance but the chance of churchgoers stopping is much greater than the possibility of non-worshippers starting to go to church.”

Secularisation has also changed the environment in which children are raised, says the report, reducing the likelihood of their socialising with religious people.

Among those with non-traditional beliefs, those people most likely to call themselves spiritual are those who once went to church, often only as children. Older people mostly describe themselves as religious, though not necessarily orthodox, whilst the middle-aged see themselves as spiritual rather than religious. Younger people most often hold their beliefs as part of a view of life which they do not even recognise as spiritual.

A Church of England spokesman was anxious to rubbish the findings and said: “Such claims are clearly not based on Church of England statistics that show a small but significant increase in average Sunday, weekly and monthly church attendance. Dr Voas seeks to undermine the accepted theory of large numbers of people believing but not belonging. Nothing in his report, however, alters the fact that 72 per cent of the population said they were Christian in the latest Census, and more than 77 per cent claimed a religious affiliation.”

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS said that “the CofE spokesman had claimed, rather desperately, that the study had not released ‘proper evidence’ and ‘There is nothing to back up the claims, and our recent statistics show that congregations are actually increasing.’ I doubt if this classic “shoot the messenger” outburst will have impressed the author of the report, Dr Voas. He is a leading academic in this area and his work is scrupulously researched and referenced, and widely published in respected journals.

“A Home office report shows religion to be now only the ninth most important attribute of people’s identity and two major surveys have shown that two thirds of secondary school children identify themselves as agnostic or atheist. If despite this and after 60 years of decline in attendance in their own pews, the Church of England ‘reacted with disbelief at the suggestion that faith was declining’ as was reported, I leave readers to draw their own conclusions about their judgment.”

- [*How the Church of England sees it*](#)
- [*“Stress” prevents Catholics going to church. Yeah, right.*](#)

Religious Education Needs Boosting Say Propagandists

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales claimed this week that “weak religious

education teaching” was leading to religious extremism. Brian Gates, the body’s chairman, said that inadequate teaching of RE had led thousands of teenagers to turn towards “misguided beliefs”.

His comments come as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority prepares to release what it calls “new teaching modules” to go with the new RE Framework which was condemned at the time of its publication as a “charter for indoctrination” by the NSS. The RE Council will meet Education Minister Lord Adonis next month to plan how best to further intensify the promotion of religion in schools.

Terry Sanderson, vice president of the NSS said: “Mr Gates is rather presumptuous to assume that because teenagers don’t embrace what he thinks are acceptable beliefs, that their own choices are ‘misguided’. Research shows that most teenagers don’t have religious beliefs of any kind, and perhaps that’s what he thinks is wrong. But it is not for schools to drill Mr Gates’s view of what is acceptable in religious terms into children – that is the place of churches and other places of worship, which can be accessed voluntarily. Our schools are rapidly becoming major platforms for religious enthusiasts to foist their opinions on an unwilling, but captive audience.”

Mr Sanderson added: “Reaction from the CofE to the new research from Manchester University this week (see story above) shows clearly that the church now sees its schools as the last hope of survival. When will someone in the government say clearly and unambiguously that schools are for teaching, not preaching?”

Is Blair Having Second Thoughts on Academies?

New reports this week suggest that Tony Blair is having doubts about the wisdom of setting up 200 privately-sponsored City Academy schools. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on Monday (15th August), Blair has begun to look into the value-aspects of the proposals. The plan has been to fund each project with £25 million of public funds, and £2 million from private sponsors who will then control the school privately.

The *Telegraph* reported that an advisor to the Prime Minister said, “Tony’s concerned about the way in which the city academies programme is just throwing money at the problem. He’s not sure it’s good value.”

The £5 billion scheme has come up against serious problems already in its early stages. Problems have sprung up negotiating with the sponsors, reports have come in that only half the 17 schools have improved their results, and even two of them have been criticised by Ofsted since they opened. Several have fallen into the hands of religious organisations anxious to promote creationism.

The Commons Education Select Committee Chairman, Barry Sheerman said, “It’s not in the prime minister’s nature to get second thoughts about something. He has been evangelical about academies and there’s nothing wrong with that. With the first wave on the ground it could be that they are learning from better partnerships. I hope the government’s listening.”

Sheerman said that “anyone in their right mind” should be re-analysing faith education, especially after poor unity among faith groups was highlighted by the recent bombings in London and questions over national religious identities among young people were raised.

I Believe in The FSM

A new element has been introduced into the debate about creationism and evolution in Kansas: it is the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Since the Kansas School Board gave serious consideration to granting creationism the same status as evolution in biology lessons, it has been bombarded with letters from believers in the Flying Spaghetti Monster, who are insisting that their deity — and its explanation for the origins of the world — be given equal recognition in schools.

The demands are backed up with very important looking graphs which prove, for instance, that “global warming, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters are a direct effect of the shrinking numbers of Pirates since the 1800s.”

The worshippers of the Flying Spaghetti Monster are convinced that their evidence for the existence of their deity, and its responsibility for the creation of all things, is as convincing, if not more so, as that of the Christian creationists.

Terry Sanderson, vice president of the National Secular Society was highly impressed. “At last, a sky god that comes with evidence! The NSS is thinking of opening a City Academy devoted to the creationism of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Unfortunately, it’s necessary to prove to the government our religious credentials by first opening a used-car dealership”.

- [Full details](#)
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Vatican's Claim to Be A "State" May Be Challenged In American Court

The lawyer who is suing pope Ratzinger in Texas for allegedly covering up the sexual abuse of children by a seminarian said this week that he would challenge the U.S. diplomatic recognition of the Vatican if the pope is given immunity in the case. Ratzinger’s lawyers have already asked President Bush to certify “Benedict’s” immunity from liability in the civil lawsuit since he claims to be a head of state – the so-called Vatican city-state.

- [Full story](#)
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Australians Become Suspicious Of Their Muslim Schools

According to a story in the *Times Educational Supplement*, State education ministers in Australia have ordered close scrutiny of what is being taught in Muslim schools after reports that hatred of

Western values is being promoted.

More than a dozen privately-run (but publicly subsidised) Islamic colleges are operating in New South Wales and Victoria. Former teachers in the schools have claimed that visiting imams had vilified Jews and attacked Christian beliefs. They said female students were routinely discriminated against in the colleges. The Weribee Islamic College in Melbourne confirmed that male and female teachers were segregated for “religious reasons” and to “stop sexual harassment”. Even non-Muslim women teachers were required to wear a hijab and long flowing coat (abaya) when they were on school premises.

The school was accused of siphoning off public money to build an offshoot in Jakarta, but the principal insisted that the money had come from donations.

See also:

- [How some Muslim faith schools are becoming madrassas](#)
- [Bristol Muslims call for segregated schools](#)
- [Let secular Muslims have a voice](#)
- [Belief isn't everything – Nick Cohen](#)

Atheists and Gays in Germany Target Pope

The pope's overblown visit to Germany for the proselytising event called World Youth (scandalously paid for from the public purse) is inevitably attracting opposition. The International League of Non-Religious and Atheists — a German secular group — set up a “religion-free zone” in Cologne for people looking to get away from the hype surrounding the endlessly whingeing pope's visit to the city.

“We don't want to insult any Christians, but we want to protest that one denomination has taken over an entire city,” said Jacques Tilly, a sculptor who created a float of a toothless dinosaur watching over a flock of sheep that paraded through the city. “We wanted to show that we are also still here.”

Meanwhile, German gay rights groups have asked for a meeting with Ratzinger. “Our goal is to ensure that people whose sexual orientation has been given by God are morally supported by the Catholic church”, the groups said in a statement on Tuesday. The organisations include Germany's Lesbian and Gay Association, the Cologne Lesbian and Gay Day, the International Lesbian and Gay Association, the European forum of Lesbian and Gay Christian Groups and the Ecumenical Homosexual and Church Working Group.

Strangely, there has been no response to this request from the Vatican. Perhaps the German gay Catholics will eventually get the message – the Church that you are so fond of hates you!

See also:

- [How your money was used to fund this Vatican propaganda jamboree](#)
 - [German youth has big problems with Ratzinger](#)
 - [and with Church doctrine](#)
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Iraqi Gays Living In Fear of Sharia Resurgence

According to Ramzi Isalam, a Muslim member of the gay human rights group OutRage! “Iraqi gay and lesbian people face blackmail, torture, rape and murder, according to our contacts inside the country. We urge solidarity with our queer brothers and sisters in Iraq. It is time for an international queer movement to defend the victims of Islamist terror in Iraq.”

Mr Isalam said: “We support Iraqi feminists, gays, democrats and socialists who oppose the imposition of Shariah law. The current shooting, bombing and stoning of women and queers in Iraq fills us with horror. We are shocked that the anti-war and gay movements are not speaking out in defence of the victims of Islamist, Baathist and Al-Qaida terrorism. We reject the foreign occupation of Iraq, and stand shoulder to shoulder with all Iraqis who are campaigning for a free, democratic and secular Iraq. All liberal, progressive Muslims who are being victimised by the fundamentalists deserve solidarity and support.”

Mr Isalam is a refugee from Islamist terrorism in Algeria. He was forced to flee his homeland after armed fundamentalist groups discovered he was gay and came to his house to kill him.

- [See this for an example of how gays in Iraq are treated](#)
 - [Toronto anti-sharia conference](#)
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Intelligent Design Leads Religious Renaissance

By Peter Hearty

Religion is enjoying a world-wide Renaissance, but while the demise of the medieval world heralded an upsurge in art, literature and science, this latter day Renaissance is a very different beast. To it, science is a mortal enemy. Science offers an alternative path to truth, to fill in the gaps

once occupied by an almighty god. It shows contempt for authority, demanding evidence and argument to back its assertions. There is no room for blind faith in a world of experts and peer reviews.

For four hundred years the European god has been in retreat in the face of this onslaught. Now the faithful are fighting back, and in the vanguard is the theory of Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design, or I.D., postulates that there are aspects of nature, particularly in biochemistry, which have so many interdependent parts, that they could not have evolved gradually. The only possible alternative is the intervention of an anonymous, benevolent, designer.

Except of course that the designer is not anonymous. We all know exactly who he's meant to be. The theory, and its chief protagonists, the Seattle based Discovery Institute¹, exist for one reason and one reason alone: to get the god of Abraham back into American schools, thus subverting the ruling of the Supreme Court and the American constitution². They failed with simple creationism, now they're trying a more subtle approach.

I.D. pretends to be a scientific theory. With typical religious dishonesty, there is no mention of their god. It uses the language of science, christening itself a "theory". It employs otherwise eminent biologists to find intricate mechanisms in nature whose evolution is poorly understood. It vilifies its detractors, portraying itself as a victim for daring to utter scientific heresy – the champion of the unorthodox. Then it demands equal billing in school science classes: "All we ask is that children be allowed to hear both sides of the argument".

Perhaps I.D. should be taught in science classes? As one commentator on the *Newsline* discussion forum said, it would take about five minutes to dismiss; to show that, once you abandon investigation and cause, you abandon science. The rest of the semester can then be spent on real science. But the I.D. zealots will not stop there. Give them a wedge in the science curriculum and it won't be long before they demand more. In a country where the science curriculum is decided by popular vote, there is everything to play for. In a democracy, it is not only human institutions which must be governed by the will of the majority, but the very universe itself.

Religions in the U.K. have no such fiddly little problems to contend with. Here, old fashioned creationism can be taught with government blessing and state funding³. Politicians have realised that most voters have little concern for the niceties of the science curriculum. Faith groups, on the other hand, can be persuaded to vote en-masse. All of a sudden, it has become respectable to wear a belief in magic on your sleeve. From Bush to Blair to Putin, leaders of every political colour are realising that believers have votes.

It is said that in the U.S. it is possible to have a black president, a woman president, even a gay president, but if you are an atheist then forget it. Surely such a state of affairs could never happen here? Yet we learn only this week that Robin Cook, one of the most intellectually admired and principled members of Tony Blair's ex-ministers, felt himself unable to join the National Secular Society for fear that it would damage his political career.

And therein lies the danger. Our religious leaders no longer wear vestments and mitres, instead they sit around the cabinet table. They do not preach damnation or proscription for those who fail to conform – those who do not share their enthusiasm for blind faith, any faith, are quietly sidelined. What use are voters who do not believe what they are told – who do not accept the authority of their religious superiors? And for that last bastion of rationality, science, they have the Theory of Intelligent Design.

- [1. The Discovery Institute](#)
 - [2. Edwards v. Aguillard](#)
 - [3. Question by Dr, Jenny Tonge, Prime Minister's Questions](#)
 - [And don't miss this](#)
 - [New Scopes trial for America](#)
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NSS Speaks Out

The NSS featured on the front page of the [Observer](#) last week in a story about Robin Cook's reluctance to accept an honorary associate-ship – despite his support for the organisation.

Keith Porteous Wood was interviewed in the programme "Essentials of Faith" on ITV on Monday.

Terry Sanderson had a letter in the [Herald](#) on Wednesday.

The NSS was quoted in a story in the [Daily Telegraph](#) on Wednesday about loss of religious belief.

The NSS was quoted in a story in the [Guardian](#) this morning about disestablishment.

The NSS had a letter in the [Scotsman](#) this morning about *Thought for the Day* (together with another one from member Alistair McBay).

Have You Got Your Ticket for 'Secularist of The Year' Yet?

The winner of the £5,000 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year has been decided, but you'll have to be there on the day to find out who it is. The day? That's Saturday, 8th October at lunchtime at a prestigious London hotel. Before the great announcement is made by Polly Toynbee, we'll be hearing from the comedian *de nos jour*, Stewart Lee, currently knocking 'em dead at the Edinburgh Festival (scoring 5 stars from the [Guardian critic](#)) and garnering this comment from Live Comedy Review: "Definitely the highlight of the Festival so far...a must for those who like their comedy topical, clever, dark and very funny indeed." The Herald said of him: "If he was to be damned as a blasphemer, then why not be hung for a sheep rather than a lamb. And it has to be said that on the blasphemy front, Lee has pushed the boat a long way out this year." The Observer said: "Don't see this if you thought *Jerry Springer*, *The Opera* insulted Jesus. Do go if you want to laugh so hard that you leave in pain, and if you want to see one of the most intelligent and courageous comedians currently at work."

There will also be some other surprises which, of course, wouldn't be surprises if we told you about them, On top of this there will be a fabulous three course meal with wine and coffee. The

whole shebang for £35.

Now, we don't want to panic you, but tickets are limited, and they're on sale now. If you want to come, you really have to book soon. Send your cheque to NSS Secularist of the Year, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. It's Darwinian in nature – first come first served, survival of the fastest. (Please mention if you have special dietary requirements).

You Get Yourself A Badge And Suddenly Everybody Wants One

It's the latest craze! Everybody's doing it! No, it's not hula hoops, it's not click-clacks, not even Rubik's cube. No, the latest is the National Secular Society badge! Everybody wants one. You can expect to see them popping up throughout the country as brave secularists don them to let the world know — with pride — that they belong to the best little group on the planet. In fact, the only group on the planet who can save it from the ravages of religious mania.

To hell with Alpha! Away with Hizb-ut-Tahrir! Shove off Scientology! Join the gang that really matters. Get your fabulously marvellous NSS lapel pin today! You can order on-line at the [NSS SHOP](#).

Letters To Newsline

Write to tas@secularism.org.uk (please keep letters brief so everyone can have their say)

From Alex Rayment:

Don't worry about the reported 16.9% increase in students taking "Religious Studies" at A-level. I left school in 2003, after completing an A-level in "Religious Studies". Most of the people in my class were either atheist or agnostic like me. One of our teachers was an agnostic, the other a liberal-minded Christian. Why on earth Religious Studies is called such at A-level is beyond me; the teachers were as mystified as the students. The course was actually a course in "Philosophy and Ethics" from a neutral standpoint (although there were still hints of religionist bias in some areas) which discussed a variety of ethical and philosophical positions: from animal rights to sexual ethics, from Peter Singer to St Augustine (who came across as basically insane), from the secular to the religious.

I imagine the only reason it is called Religious Studies is because of a lack of imagination on the part of the central agency which decides names, or perhaps it is called thus to appease the religious lobbyists who haven't yet noticed that A-level Religious Studies has had the propaganda severely/critically curtailed.

From Paul Partington:

I loved Sue Cauty's description of her atheist Christmas plans. The idea of celebrating religiously-flavoured special days with a non-religious ceremony based on simple universal positive values is a brilliant one. Christmas is, in a strict interpretation, just for Christians, whereas Family Day is for everyone – much better. So, Inclusiveness is one universal positive value. Sue's description also includes Love, Generosity, and Interconnectedness. Universal positive values, it seems to me, are

themselves interconnected and strengthen each other. What might be some others? What other ways could these values be incorporated into non-religious celebrations? Has this work already been started, and where can we find out more? Would this better be described as secular or humanist ethics? Is anyone else excited about this idea?

From Alistair James:

I love Christmas. Every year I see people spending their material wealth on material presents to give to their relatives (good selfish gene behaviour) and their friends (people they like because they like them not because God tells them to love everybody). I see people getting drunk and, at office parties, flirting and, presumably afterwards quite often fornicating. I see them eating to excess. And I see them putting up decorations of pretty lights, fat guys with a lousy dress sense and beards, fairies, Norwegian fir trees. Every year my heart sings at the complete and utter corruption and trivialisation of everything the Christians hold dear at what is their second most important time of the year. At their most important festival we send each other pictures of rabbits and over-indulge in chocolate. What's not to like?

From Barry Thorpe:

Marc Draco's suggestion that there should be a group effort to produce a book that answers childrens' questions about god etc.

I can offer my experience as a teacher in putting together material, but as I have no children I should have to rely on members who have young children to supply typical questions (and the age at which they asked them). Members could then suggest replies, or criticise mine, which would be honed after testing them on real children. A long process, I know, but we are in uncharted waters.

From Brian Jordan:

A couple of good ideas this week! On the book for children, I'd be happy to be involved – say helping with writing and publishing, rather than doing it. I've no experience with podcasting, but could probably learn to do it if nobody else turns up. Again, I'd be glad to help. There's a good explanation [here](#).

From James Vanlint:

The law is very specific about the equality of religion and belief, so if the BBC were to obey the law, surely the more religious content the more belief content, otherwise it won't be fulfilling its obligations, as a public service broadcaster. The BBC won't break the law, in fact or spirit, or will they?

How much longer will the BBC exclude us, in the way an insurance company that does not want to pay out on a claim might? The BBC treats us like the other four letter word you find at the bottom of a parrot's cage, not grit.

From Terry Thomas:

In the *Guardian* of 12 August it's reported that Salman Rushdie is calling for Islam to undergo a [Reformation](#). At the same time [Roy Hattersley](#) is accusing the British of being 'uncivilised' in 'demanding' that Muslims 'abandon their way of life'. Who is on the right track? Unfortunately neither.

Very few of us are demanding that Muslims abandon their way of life. Many of us wish that they would come to terms with 21st century life in the West if they wish to live an easy and neighbourly life. Even if all the problems allegedly faced by Islam in various parts of the world were solved it still would not satisfy those who are given to terrorist actions. The terrorists are inspired by their hatred of a world still enjoying the benefits of the Enlightenment and that they will not accept.

Neither will the West, nor ought the West give up the benefits that the Enlightenment gave us. And that's where Rushdie is missing the point.

The Reformation only gave the West a limited freedom from Rome which was soon dissipated as Protestants turned away from one heteronomous system to embrace others equally restricting. What Islam ought to do but will not is accept the benefits of the Enlightenment. They regard such benefits as weaknesses or worse.

This situation lies at the heart of the British Government's dilemma over trying to extradite those who act against our state with violence or incite violence. Islamic countries do not, on the whole, accept the terms of the Declaration of Human Rights, one of the benefits accruing to the West from the Enlightenment. Even if they accept the Declaration *de jure, de facto* they do not implement it. The terrorists and the inciters to violence themselves don't accept the terms of the Declaration but seek to enjoy the benefits of a state that does. They don't want to be sent back to torture and judicial violence but can we afford to keep them here where they are defended against torture and judicial violence?

If we are to defend our rights to peace and non-violence in the civil life of our country can we afford not to, if even temporarily, take steps that appear to undermine human rights and extradite them without full assurance that they will not be tortured or put to death? Otherwise the imbalance between a country that will try to maintain human rights will always be held to ransom by individuals and groups who do not live by the same code of human rights and will always act to undermine the very human rights that we have fought so hard to establish, including the right not to be governed by religion and superstition, even if our grip on that right is severely tested by our Prime Minister and his acolytes.

From Paul Gibbs:

"Imaginary Design" spread the meme! Never mind reacting to the anti-science movements risible "Imaginary Design" being taught as a scientific theory, how about helping to get "Human Rights Education" taught in our schools? Visit the [Amnesty International site](#) to learn all about HRE and discover how you can help make "Human Rights Education" part of the national curriculum.

From Paul Stevenson:

The Today programme on 13 August described Robin Cook's funeral in Edinburgh as 'defiantly secular'.

Oh Dear! Or could it have something to do with Tony Blair's absence.?

From Claudine Baxter:

Who betrayed Robin Cook? It is difficult to understand how a "defiantly secular funeral" (Guardian 12 Aug) can be appropriately held in a cathedral with a bishop officiating! Had Mr Cook been hiding behind his little cloud in the sky, looking down on the farcical "service" happening in his name, he would have been enraged, not "amused", he would have felt cheated, not "intrigued". Hence the importance of leaving detailed instructions in one's will!

From Steve Oxbrow:

I thought some of you might like to recollect the forthcoming 350th anniversary of the Massacre at Piedmont when on 24 April 1655 the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel II at the behest of Pope Innocent III, sent "an expedition" against the Waldensians, a Protestant sect that abjured all animal products in their diet and practised sexual abstinence as the perfect (pun intended) means of population control.

The Waldensians and Cathars evolved out of the Bogomils of many centuries earlier, from whom

we derive “the Bogyman” who will come and eat you in the night, the term “bugger” and hence “pardon my French”.

They too had been accused by the Catholic church of “unnatural sexual practices” and “infanticide”. Talk about judging others by one’s own low standards. To read the comment by Oliver Cromwell’s foreign secretary (yes that was John Milton’s day job!) see [Sonnet XVIII](#).

The Catholic Church has never apologised for this massacre of 20,000 innocents, mostly women and children. Has the church's attitude to other cultures changed one iota? Of course Cromwell’s army was hanging Catholics from trees in Ireland at the time!

From David Robins:

I enjoyed Muriel Fraser’s informative article on the legal status of the papacy (Newsline, 12 August) but I wonder if a trick has been missed in relation to concordats and their status as international treaties. I suggest that a treaty is a form of contract and thus is only valid if entered into in “good faith” (an unfortunate term!) Any element of fraud would invalidate the contract. Roman Catholicism being demonstrably fraudulent, it must follow that each and every concordat is null and void.

From Chris Hobson:

Paul Partington is absolutely correct in saying that I overstated my case by claiming that all religions are demonstrably untrue. However, Buddhists believe in reincarnation. Is there any evidence that reincarnation takes place? I am certainly not aware of any, and in its absence ‘demonstrably untrue’ may be too strong a statement to use but the burden of proof certainly rests on the Buddhists. After following Paul’s link, I also came across the statement that suffering is caused by desire. This seems to me to be a somewhat questionable assertion. Is he saying that all suffering is caused by desire? If so, this is certainly untrue, I could give many examples of suffering that is not caused by desire, and that is also totally beyond human control.

Another correspondent, sorry I can’t find the letter now, suggested that we fight the religious hatred law by using it against the religious. I don’t think this would be a good idea. I think that we should stay aloof and let the religious fight it out amongst themselves. I don’t think that they will disappoint us. When they libel and slander us we should politely correct them and then let it drop. I feel that this approach will serve our cause well.

From Rich A. West:

I was listening to another church advert (sorry, news item) on the Toady (sorry, *Today*) programme on R4 earlier. There was an interesting statement from a Catholic type on there – apparently the pope is “correct in his view that liberalism is not the only way, that democracy is not the only way”. Democracy is *not* the way? And I suppose a medieval-style Vatican dictatorship *is*?

From Fiona Weir:

Jack Gordon (*Newsline* 12 August) was perfectly justified in complaining about the *Kyrie Eleison* programme on Radio 4. This is a lunch time half hour which examines different kinds of music each week (this week it’s French pop). I should think the listening figures are quite high, with a captive audience, like myself, continuing to stay tuned after the news.

Kyrie Eleison offered the chance of examining hundreds of different examples right up to the present time. But rather than making this a musical feast (God *does* have some of the best tunes) this programme was hijacked by the church and quite out of character with what the usual audience would have expected: it became a religious rather than a musical experience. Mind you, we might have been suspicious. Why did they call the programme *The Quality of Mercy*? The usual translation of *Kyrie Eleison* is “Lord have mercy (upon us), there is nothing qualitative about

that.

Of course, now they've done the Kyrie they can run the whole gamut of the Mass: *Gloria, Credo, Benedictus, Agnus Dei*, etc! I'll bet they've thought it all out already.

Events

[The London Meetup of Brights and Atheists](#) is at 7pm on Monday 22nd August and features an activism proposal from Quentin Brodie Cooper: the Inclusive Schools Initiative. Come along and find out how you can get involved. Venue (no smoking): Back room on ground floor of Pitcher and Piano, 42 Kingsway, WC2B 6EY. (200m south of Holborn tube).

South Place Ethical Society Annual Reunion of Kindred Organisations 2005. Sunday 25 September, 2.30pm, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Keynote Speaker : Ms Azam Kamguian of the Committee to Defend Women's Rights in the Middle East. "Secularism and Women's Rights in the Middle East". All secular humanist friends welcome. Refreshments and entertainments provided. Enquiries 020 7242 8034/7.

Ethical Society Debate on the Existence of God. 7pm, Main Hall at Conway Hall, Tuesday, 18 October.

Motion: This House Believes the Christian God to be a Myth. Proposers: Joan Smith (NSS Hon. Ass) & Norman Bacrac (NSS Council). Against: Rev. Sandy Miller, Alpha Course & Holy Trinity Brompton,, Rev. Paul Cowley, Alpha for Prisons & Holy Trinity Brompton. Could be a humdinger. Admission free but please phone Ethical Society admin. to book place: 020 7242 8034.

Television

God's Rotweiler? (Channel 4, 8pm Monday 22 August 2005). (*This programme carries a warning to NSS members with blood pressure problems*).

The election of the whingeing, ex-Nazi-youth member pope Ratzinger ("Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me!") has provoked fierce criticism both within and without the Catholic Church. And yet, as this profile points out, Ratzinger started out as a "progressive theologian" (if that isn't an oxymoron). Here we are taken on a rather tense trudge through the nasty old bigot's life, with a special emphasis being given to his poxy opinions on homosexuality, women in the church and paedophile priests.
