

points of view..

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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A RESPONSE TO LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING

BARBARA Smoker (*Life, The Universe and Everything* – February) refers to the spurious notion “why something rather than nothing” grasped so fervently by theists when the more puzzling conundrum would be “why nothing rather than something”, except in such circumstance no sentient being would be around to voice it.

Multi-level confusion arises in the concept of nothing. Biblically it is presented as a void which today we would take to be the emptiness of a perfect vacuum. But such a picture presupposes a volume which no matter how bare does inherently contain dimensions of space and time; quantum fluctuations might liberate, however fleetingly, creatures from the sub atomic zoo.

In an uncaused “Let there be light” a pair of virtual particles of opposite charge appear which preserves the energy balance of zero but briefly creates distance, the space between the particles, and may be said to set a clock ticking as this is an event and another may follow. A few years ago it was proved that energy can be extracted from a vacuum so confirming the Casimir effect of quantum forces found 60 years previously. Thus there is no need for a prime mover because a featureless void has potential and where there is potential there is something unprompted waiting to happen.

Do believers in a supreme being perhaps assume an absolute nothing? No matter, no energy, no vacuum, no potential, the absence of even an empty space? Such a pure nothing would deny any opportunity for a singularity from which our universe may have sprung. But this idea also denies the cosmological arguments of William Craig to which Barbara Smoker assents.

This real nothing allows no dimensions for any being to exist no matter how supernatural. Such nothing is very hard to envisage, if

only because the very act of imagining relies on picturing something. A prime mover may be postulated outside of our space and time (though how then could it interact with us?) but in its mere act of existing pure nothing is denied and there is no need then for a first cause.

Imagine yourself outside your home, your universe. Now imagine every scrap of furniture, furnishings, fixtures and fittings removed from your home leaving just bare walls. Next all air is extracted (imagination allows a perfectly sealed building) to produce a contained void. Then imagine the walls, floors and ceiling moving towards each other so extinguishing the space between until all surfaces meet and mutually annihilate. However, instead of a gaping hole where once your building stood there is pure nothing – suddenly numbers 21 and 25 either side are next door to each other with no trace of your number 23 nor the space it occupied. Your home has gone, not to any higher dimension, it no longer exists and you, no matter how resourceful, can interact with what is not there.

Extrapolate this effect to your street, your town, your country, the whole world and then onto the solar system, its host galaxy the Milky Way and beyond. We have two conclusions: any entity outside of pure nothing can not communicate in any way with it because there is no it; no matter how much of infinity we collapse into non-existence (or which did not exist in the first place) there remains an infinity of space in which events might take place.

Shivers may ripple down spines when we ponder the eternity that came before us and the eternity that will follow but such enormity is as nought set against trying to comprehend no eternity at all; never ending space and time seem trivial compared to ab-

sence of emptiness everywhere. Speculation as to into what our universe expands may be answered by theories of parallel universes or higher dimensions but all this would be disallowed if pure nothing reigned.

Neither imagination (mine anyway) nor science can frame the infinite existence of non-existence of space. Once we allow the existence of void then there exists a something, a place in which residents may be found which presuppose no creator for them to appear. Something rather than nothing would seem a more natural state of affairs.

Chris Oldman
Cheltenham

‘FREE-FOR-ALL’ SOCIETY

OH dear. It looks like I have to hold up my hands and admit I was wrong about your “libertarian” correspondent, Mark Taha. In his petulant and confused letter (*Points of View*, March), he says he supports a “free-for-all” society in which people can put up signs saying “No Blacks”, or refuse gay people goods and services.

What he fails to grasp is that real freedom doesn’t exist without structure, because one man’s freedom is another man’s oppression, hence the need to regulate our freedoms. His simplistic brand of “anything goes” idealism can only result in a nihilistic dystopia. In previous centuries, unfettered capitalist freedoms led to miserable and dangerous conditions for the working classes and saw children shoved up chimneys, not to mention 12.5 million Africans shipped to the New World as slaves. What about their freedoms, Mark?

In apartheid South Africa, the “No Blacks” signs Mark gushes approval for, were just a tiny part of a grotesque system that deprived

the majority of South Africans of basic freedoms, opportunities, dignity and provisions. In many African and Islamic countries, where gay people have no recourse to the law, they have no freedoms at all and lives are lived on a knife edge and sometimes snuffed out altogether.

Even someone as apparently hard-hearted as Mark Taha must be able to work out that societies that don't have laws regulating hatred and intolerance, or that don't underwrite the freedoms of their citizens, are rather less happy and free than those (mostly) Western societies that do.

He should also be reminded that the equality laws he so despises cut both ways. It is just as illegal to put up signs saying "No Whites" as it is to put up signs saying "No Blacks". It is just as illegal for a gay doctor to refuse to treat heterosexual Christian patients, or an atheist bus driver to refuse passengers wearing turbans, as for religionists to deny goods and services to gays or atheists. This is because a civilised society differentiates between private prejudice, which is perfectly legitimate, and public obligation, where prejudices have to be put aside for the sake of all our freedoms.

In Britain, hard-won freedoms, which were non-existent 20 years ago, such as those granted to same-sex couples, belong to all citizens – even if they are rights that you, Mark, have no intention of exercising. They may appear to favour minorities, but in fact, they are universal. These freedoms belong to all of us and are therefore worth defending against reactionaries and faux-libertarians alike.

Diesel Balaam
London

I KNOW Mark Taha (*Points of View*, March) and know that he is neither black nor gay. If he were, and had suffered vile abuse and violent attacks, perhaps he would be far less enthusiastic about "No Blacks" signs and turning gay men away from hotels. And I am sure he would ardently oppose discrimination and violence against people with an interest in minority sexual pastimes.

How would he close Britain's borders? Station armed guards at airports and along the coast? Surely as humanists we believe as did Thomas Paine that our country is the world.

He writes about extreme right-wingers being hounded out of their jobs for their political views. Has he forgotten that during the Cold War communists were sacked from government jobs because of their CP membership, and that the National Front campaigned against the employment of left-wing teachers? I was refused a civilian clerical job with the Ministry of Defence because of my communist and CND past.

When I was a trade unionist in the De-

partment of Social Security, I took part in the strike against the employment of BNP activist Malcom Skeggs at the Hither Green office. We did not want to deny Mr Skeggs the chance to earn a living, but we were very worried about his having access to having confidential information about claimants from ethnic minorities. Sometimes the rights of groups have to take priority over the rights of individuals.

Mr Taha advocates the legalisation of "soft" drugs, although there is still much research to be done on just how harmful they are. But what would he do about the cynical criminals who profit from the misery of others?

We do not need to import American law, but we do need a written constitution which describes and guarantees the rights and duties of the citizen as an individual, and of citizens as groups.

I hope I am no killjoy. I enjoy a pint, rock music and the company and affection of intelligent and beautiful women. But I would urge Mr Taha to think a little longer and harder before putting pen to paper.

Terry Liddle
London

ENGLISH USE AND ABUSE

BARBARA Smoker's letter about "affect" and "effect" (*POV* March) came in handy, as she sent me an advance copy of it, and I received it on the same day as I was invited

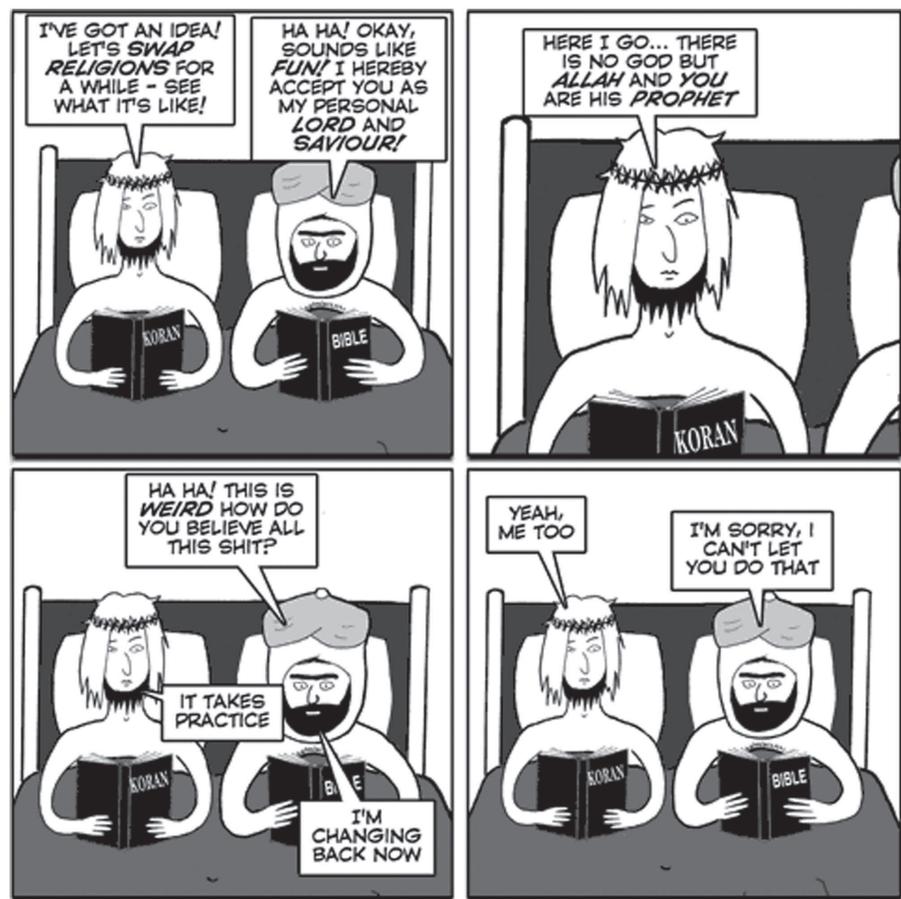
to give a talk on use and abuse of English.

I wrote back to Barbara saying that she was lucky to see "effect" or "affect" in print at all, as they had all but disappeared in the Australian media, both spoken and print. They have been replaced by the (American?) blunderbuss terms "impact" and "impact on". This provided me with a handy introduction to a 24-minute "sermon" which I am to deliver to East Melbourne's Unitarian-Universalists on April 15, with due acknowledgement to Barbara and the *Freethinker*, of course!

My subject will be *Gobbledegook, New-speak, Jargon, Correct and Corrupt Language*. And, as I have a captive audience of Unitarians, I intend to subject them at the end to a prophylactic dose of fine, vintage theological gobbledegook in the form of the Trinity, as laid down and defined in the Athanasian Creed. The Athanasian Creed is a splendid example of repetition, verbosity and opaque waffle, masquerading as wisdom, intelligence, subtlety and learning, but in reality having no sensible or credible substance. It is chilling to think that, once upon a time, your life would be in danger if you did not accept it!

Nigel Sinnott
Melbourne
Australia

Jesus & Mo



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