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Rights of the Child



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The Children of Haiti, Blasphemy and More

While we are writing, thinking and discussing about children's rights, one of their most important rights is being violated: the right to shelter and food. In Haiti the situation is worse than disastrous. There is help from all over the world, water and food are being supplied and medical care is being given wherever possible. However, equally important are the tasks of clearing the ruins and giving people shelter. We have all seen images of the havoc that the earthquake wrought. One can imagine how difficult it must be to start again, to give back to the victims not only housing, and schools, but also their dignity and their ability to support themselves.

My great concern is for the children. One of the first things I heard after the disaster was that it was very important to gather the children in order to protect them. The first thought was, of course, that they needed protection from starvation, diseases, and required psychological help etc. I was wrong. They had to be protected against kidnapping for adoption, probably with the best of intentions – “those poor children, we can give them a better life” – but without knowing anything about their background, without knowing whether they were orphans, or whether they had a family that could care for them, and above all without thinking of the consequences of bringing a child into a family in a completely different environment. But much worse was the threat of bringing them into the sex industry. The horror of such an eventuality is beyond comprehension. I hope helpers will succeed in protecting these children.

We heard from some of our member organisations that they wanted to donate for the victims. Indeed sometimes it seems that only religious groups help, that our help is not visible. Richard Dawkins' organisation “Non-believers Giving Aid” (NBGA) has been launched in the UK. The money raised by NBGA is forwarded to

the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders. Now it will be seen that Humanists, freethinkers, atheists also show their solidarity with people in great need. And where we don't have the expertise ourselves, we outsource to those who do. This is a model that can be used in the future as well.



On our website www.iheu.org you can read that the United Nations is in danger of creating a global blasphemy law that would make religious criticism a crime. The paper from IHEU, “Speaking Freely About Religion: Religious Freedom, Defamation and Blasphemy”, has been issued as the UN General Assembly begins to consider a new resolution against “defamation of religions.” “We all commit blasphemy according to some religion or other,” says the report's author, Matt Cherry. “Whether you criticize abuses by religious leaders, crack a religious joke, or simply share your religious views, you are offending someone else's religious feelings. Blasphemy laws, like the one being pushed at the UN, just give powerful religions the legal cover to punish anyone who dares disagree with them.”

Humanists have to be aware of the dangers of being one and living like one. One of our consultants, Leo Igwe, has been harassed in Nigeria. For a full article about it, go to our website and read “Nigeria must end Harassment of IHEU representative Leo Igwe”.

Dear reader, a lot of work lies ahead of us in all parts of the world, in all international organisations, but some institutions are much more under threat than others. All of us can help.

Sonja Eggerickx

Women in the 21st Century

There was a time, as late as the early twentieth century, when women in the west weren't allowed to vote, when leading universities like Cambridge and Harvard didn't give them equal status (women students went to Radcliffe, not Harvard, and Cambridge didn't give out degrees to women students till 1947, though they were allowed to sit for exams!) and when their main role was to be a homemaker. If at all women entered the work area, it was as factory workers. Factory girls, in fact, were proud of their profession, since they considered themselves emancipated from the drudgery and powerlessness of being a housewife. Fortunately, a lot has

changed since then. In America, women make up more than 50 percent of the workforce. 60 percent of the degrees awarded by universities in the US and Europe went to women, major corporations like Pepsico and W L Gore have women at their helm. More than 40 percent of the members of the Swedish Parliament are women. In the Spanish Cabinet there are more

*Sangeeta Mall**



Sangeeta Mall

*Sangeeta Mall is Editor, *IHN*.

women than men. It can be generally agreed that in the last 50 years, women in the west have made giant strides in both education and the workplace. Soon, in the US, for instance, there will be more female than male enrolments at university level.

It is no coincidence that in all the countries where the lot of women has improved so dramatically, the political system is democratic. When there is free choice, every citizen has access to the same level of service, and the artificial barriers that disadvantage some sections of society are automatically dismantled. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom to choose one's profession, all articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are only possible in a democracy. And so is equal access to the law.

I live in a country where this realisation is happening gradually, where we are moving towards equality before the law and where we all, men and woman, will be free to choose our profession. Though India is a democracy, yet the rights of women are severely curtailed. There are far more men than women in the workplace, and the gap between male and female literacy, though narrowing, is still significant. And yet, constant media attention to the issue of female disempowerment, particularly in the rural areas, ensures that the political class is kept on its toes where women are concerned. Protests, campaigns, media reports, are all methods by which the status of women is constantly highlighted in the public sphere. India is not even close to what the west has achieved in the last fifty years, but freedom of expression, the cornerstone of any democracy, is ensuring that more and more women get their due in society. The growth of the service sector in recent years and the explosive speed of urbanisation has also enhanced the contribution of women to the formal economy and brought it into the limelight.

Contrast this with the situation in the Islamic countries. In Saudi Arabia women cannot drive, are not allowed to work where there are men and can only attend segregated schools and universities. The *Shari'a*, and not civil law, governs personal and social contracts. Women have to seek male approval for every act. There is no concept of equality before law. A woman witness's testimony is given half the weight of that of a male witness. In Iran, a woman can inherit only half as much as a man, and a female victim of an accident is entitled to only half the compensation awarded to a male. All women are required to cover their heads, though they can show their faces. In Pakistan, female literacy rate is only half of the male literacy rate, while, in Afghanistan, it is only one third.

The world, as a whole, is nowhere near granting women equality. The rate of progress is uneven, to put it mildly. And with increasing Islamisation over the last fifty years, the threat to female advancement is increasing.

Cultural backwardness is closely related to the social status of women. Societies where women have succeeded in becoming empowered have advanced in every field of life, art, culture, literature, science, and economically. These are the societies that do not hesitate to question

entrenched shibboleths and succeed in advancing through new discoveries. On the other hand, societies that continue to treat their female population as chattel have nothing new to contribute to the world, and have nothing better to offer to their members than centuries-old regressive practices.

When we talk of the rights of children, the first issue that arises is that of the rights of their mothers. Deprived, disadvantaged, dispossessed women cannot bring up strong children. Female backwardness only leads to the perpetuation of backwardness, for how can an uneducated woman bring up an educated child? Would Iran and Iraq have had so many child soldiers in the Eight Year War if their mothers had been granted equal status in society? In Pakistan, would so many children have been taught in fundamentalist madrassas if their mothers had been empowered to contribute to their education and to Pakistan's economic progress? And so, would so many terrorists have been born? What are the chances of women priests preaching radical, political Islam in mosques across Europe? Since there are no women priests, the question becomes moot.

The Islamic countries wish to become world leaders. How can they when one half of their population remains enslaved? Leadership, in the modern world, can be wielded only through greater participation, and not the sword. In any case, the tide in favour of modernisation has now reached a point where it cannot be turned back. Nations and societies that recognise this, and go along with the imperative of female empowerment, will necessarily keep progressing, the tyranny of the bomb notwithstanding.

The role of organisations like IHEU, which courageously fight against advancing Islamisation in fora like the Human Rights Council, becomes all the more critical, for one of the outcomes of their plea for modernity will be the increasing emancipation of women, and greater access to human rights around the world.

It's Your Turn

Do you have anything interesting to say to our readers? Have you had a personal experience that has strengthened your belief in Humanism? Have you 'converted' anyone? Is there anything going on in your part of the world that you think others would like to hear about? Are there organisations out there that have found something path breaking in the course of their work? Then do send in to the IHN at editor@iheu.org your write-up of not more than 1000 words, and, subject to suitability we will publish it. Write in to connect with all the other Humanists out there!

Sambhavi Gudi Iona, Badi Iona?

Anatomy of a Campaign to Put a Child in School

*Babu Gogineni**

For the last few weeks Humanists, rationalists and human rights activists have been waging a huge battle against the forces of fundamentalism in Andhra Pradesh in South India. This is a battle that involves all sections of society, including the media, the police, the justice system, aggressive fundamentalists, the Dalai Lama as well as Humanists and rationalists. It is a battle that is being watched with keen interest in millions of homes as it unfolds on live TV and through public discussions and newspaper articles.

The campaign started publicly with a complaint made by me, representing IHEU, along with a dozen collaborating intellectuals and organisations, to the Andhra Pradesh Human Rights Commission. The campaign's slogan, 'Sambhavi Gudilona Badilona?' has now become a byword for TV programs, for newspaper articles and also discussions as all citizens are challenged to take a stand whether Sambhavi, a child of 7, who, it is claimed, is a reincarnation of a Buddhist goddess, should be in school or remain in the temple.

How the fraud became public

On the morning of 16 August, several Telugu news channels telecast the 'news' that Sambhavi, a child of 7, was claiming to be the reincarnation of a childhood friend of the Dalai Lama. Some of her claims were that Tibet would be free in 2010, that there would be a great event in 2012, that the Dalai Lama is a friend of hers and that he would visit her soon in Surya Nandi temple in Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh. If this were not enough, she also claimed that the medieval Telugu soothsayer Veerabrahmendra Swamy's predictions would come true in 2012 and 2014. Sambhavi's caretaker, Usha Rani, claimed that the former had miraculous powers.

The news channels asked me, along with other rationalists and atheists like Dr. Vijayam and Lavanam of Atheist Centre, Vijaywada, to comment. They had also invited some orthodox Hindus. I took the rationalist stand that this was all nonsense. On the claim that the child was in touch with the Dalai Lama who had accepted that she was his childhood friend, and was seen with her, I asked the news channels if they had verified it with the latter. In any case, since the Dalai Lama believes in reincarnation, I pointed out, and is also desperate to bring Tibet back into focus, and since this is the 50th anniversary of his escape from Tibet, and the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, he might be using this as a well-timed publicity gimmick. In any case, some of the Dalai Lama's religious beliefs border on the ridiculous, not to say dangerous. However his



Dalai Lama with Sambhavi

influence is limited since of the 300 million Buddhists in the world, divided into Hinayana (or Theravada), Mahayana and Vajrayana sects, he represents only the latter, associated with

the Tibetans, and so he cannot be said to represent all the Buddhists. The TV channels expressed interest in our views on the Dalai Lama.

Since then several colleagues like JVV leaders T.V. Rao, Ramesh, Radical Humanist C.L.N. Gandhi, rationalist lawyer Madhusudan, feminist Volga, head of CEASE Child Labour and industrialist Kotapati Murahari Rao, and myself have been at dozens of TV discussions and public meetings.

Our questions

We asked the following questions at public discussions:

1. What was Sambhavi's real name in this life?
2. What was her name when she was a friend of the Dalai Lama in her previous birth?
3. As Sambhavi is reputed to have met with the Madhyamika philosopher Nagarjuna who died many centuries ago, why did she not meet with the Buddha as well?
4. Who were Sambhavi's real parents as only Usha Rani, who is parading as Sambhavi's caretaker, seemed to be around?
5. What were the economic interests behind this claim?
6. If the Dalai Lama was visiting Surya Nandi to inaugurate Buddha Vijayam – the ashram being built for Sambhavi – what were his interests?

Sambhavi's 'Claims' and our rebuttals

The Dalai Lama has been talking of late in several voices, making even some Tibetans angry: he offered to be reborn even before he died; on another occasion he said that he would be reborn outside Tibet, and as a girl; on yet another occasion, outraging the really orthodox, he even said his reincarnation could be elected by the people of Tibet! Was he coming to nominate his successor? We also pointed out that the soothsayer Veerabrahmendra Swamy's predictions were hardly what someone could take credibly – there is no authentic text, nothing has been predicted in advance in a verifiable manner – there is only myth, legend, pulp fiction and popular cinema around his personality.

In any case, this silly salad of adult superstition and unconvincing stories of ancient soothsayers occupied TV screens for the next two months in Andhra Pradesh. While some channels turned a skeptical eye towards the developments, the highest TRP- rated TV9 had several



Babu Gogineni

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The Humanist Poster and Poser

special documentaries. Almost all the channels boasted special interviews and discussions with the 'spiritualist miracle' celebrity child. Most recently, *Sakshi* Newspaper, which has the largest circulation of all Telugu newspapers with 1.2 million copies per day, shocked us with a mindless analysis of Sambhavi's divinity in a two-page Sunday special.

Thanks to all this media promotion, the Telugu people soon knew everything about Sambhavi, who is a lovable looking child with charming mannerisms: she was the daughter of Bengali *brahmins* living in Varanasi, she was made a *sanyasin* (ascetic) at the age of four, and once she went into a trance and travelled to the Himalayas where she met the Dalai Lama and also read Tibetan manuscripts. The child's 'caretaker', Usha Rani, claimed that Sambhavi expressed concern for the Dalai Lama's health and suggested that the Dalai Lama became healthy again after Sambhavi prayed for him. We were all told that Sambhavi holds regular telepathic conferences with the Dalai Lama with regards to the future of Tibet and that there were many secret matters that they discussed. We were told that she speaks fluently five languages, blesses whoever prostrates in front of her, and that the devotees were quickly benefitted emotionally and economically. Sambhavi came to the town of Surya Nandi with a famous film singer's family and when she arrived there she immediately started speaking Telugu, an alien language, and chose to establish her ashram there!

What did Sambhavi Say?

But all the reports from the gushing journalists, the charming childish talk of Sambhavi and the halo of the Dalai Lama's support could not hide the real estate business being set up in and around Surya Nandi, the eagerness of Usha Rani to promote her ward's supernatural claims, or the incoherence of the child and the political nature of the statements being made through her. Here is a sample:

- India is doing well because India has Buddhism
- The Chinese and Pakistanis are bad people. They will be punished.
- Tibet will be free in 2016; China will become democratic in 2012.
- I was born for Tibet's freedom and I will do anything for Tibet's freedom
- There is a giant statue of the Buddha in the soil in Tibet – it went inside the soil because otherwise China would take it away. It will emerge from the earth as a ray of light.
- The Dalai Lama was the deity Balabadhra in the past life and I (Sambhavi) was the goddess Ugra Taraka Devi

- Lord Siva (a Hindu god) lives in Tibet. Hanuman (a Hindu god) will go to Tibet, worship Siva after which he will free Tibet.
- All non-vegetarians will be destroyed when Veerabrahmendra Swami will be reborn as Veerabhoga Vasantarayalu in Surya Nandi on 14 January 2012. He will also pull out the eyes and the hearts of non-believers.
- Jagan Mohan Reddy, son of late Rajasekhara Reddy, will become the next Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh

How to Stop This?

In addition to the media hype surrounding the Dalai Lama's impending visit, there was also news that India's richest industrialist, and one of the world's wealthiest individuals, Anil Ambani had donated Rupees 10 million or USD 200 000 to Sambhavi/Surya Nandi temple. The Dalai Lama, it was announced, would come on 21 December when he would inaugurate Sambhavi's ashram.

Matters were becoming urgent since if the Dalai Lama declared that Buddha Vijayam was Sambhavi's ashram, she would never be able to have a normal childhood. This is how, in Nepal, Hindu maidens are made 'Kumaris', who are, till puberty, considered divine and after nearly a decade of isolation from the rest of society are thrown out of temples to fend for themselves.

Our strategy

- The Andhra Pradesh State Human Rights Commission had to be approached.
- The National Commission for the Protection of Rights of Children had to be alerted.
- Cooperation of fellow Humanists and progressives needed to be invited.
- Ground had to be prepared for international action, and Roy Brown had to be consulted for campaigning at the UN in Geneva should local remedies fail.
- It had to be ascertained whether the Dalai Lama and Anil Ambani really supported Sambhavi.
- The question of Sambhavi needed to be made a household issue for which the media needed to be involved.

In cooperation with Sri Kotapati Murahari Rao, President of CEASE Child Labour and Treasurer of the Rationalist Association of India, and the well known novelist Pydi Chandra Latha, a list of possible collaborators was drawn up and MVV, JVV and Rationalist Forum of Hyderabad were also consulted.

We first approached Prof. Shantha Sinha, the Ramon Magsaysay Award winner for Human Rights and India's first Chairperson of the National Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Children, who heard our arguments about Sambhavi with great sympathy. She even suggested that the Commission itself could approach the High Court to save the child.

20 November: Universal Child Rights Day

We then announced to the media that our day of public action would be 20 November 2009, which marks 20 years of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and 50 years since the UN's Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

The response from the media was most helpful for the progress of the campaign. Zee 24 Hours offered to partner us in this campaign. They organised a two-hour live discussion on Sambhavi. Their cameras followed us throughout the day and they came with us to the Human Rights Commission.

The Chairperson of the Commission, Mr. Justice Subhashan Reddy, heard us all with great sympathy and concern for the child. Others present and involved were A.B.K. Prasad, senior journalist and former Chairperson of the Official Languages Commission, the noted feminist and editor Kondaveeti Satyavati, feminist and leader of Asmita, Mrs. Volga, the educationist Prabhakara Sastri, the child rights activist Sri. Achyuth Rao, JVV's T.V. Rao amongst others. Two children, Ms. Sahasi, granddaughter of MVV's Hanumantha Rao, and Arun Gogineni were also present, reminding all how happy a normal childhood could be.

We submitted to the judge respectfully that

- This was not a religious debate, but a human rights struggle.
- Children who have been identified as the reincarnation of a dead person have always been psychologically damaged much before adulthood.
- Sambhavi has the right to play and to a normal childhood and should be brought up in the loving care of a mother.
- It appears that the child has been indoctrinated for nearly 3 years and has lost touch with reality. Such mental abuse should attract all the relevant civil and criminal provisions of the law.
- It is not the religious views of the parents but the best interests of a child that are paramount.

We urged the judge to take action:

- For the rehabilitation of Sambhavi into normal life with the help of child psychologists.
- To the State government and its relevant departments to take immediate steps to halt the abuse.
- To summon Sambhavi's parents and Ms. Usha Rani and the relevant birth records of Sambhavi to ensure that she has not been a victim of abduction and exploitation.
- To issue notice to the Dalai Lama to ascertain if he and his organisation have a role to play in this.
- To issue notice or guidelines to the media so that they will report such matters with sensitivity.

We also submitted that we were offended that a crime of abuse of a child is being portrayed as a spiritual achievement, to the detriment of the child's best interests.



Front Page News

In response, recalling that when previously a child was being used for TV reality shows, he had passed orders putting it under the protection of a Government Child Home, the Honourable Judge passed instant orders to the Collector of the Kurnool district to present a report on the parentage of Sambhavi as well as whether the human rights of Sambhavi were being violated. In view of the urgency, the Collector was given just 10 days to report – till 30 November 2009.

Gudilona, Badilona?

Golla Venkatesh worked with me to create a poster and a banner for the campaign with the question 'Sambhavi Gudilona, Badilona? Manavavadula, Hetuvadula Prasna'. (Humanists & Rationalists Ask: Should Sambhavi be in a School or in a Temple?). The curtain was raised for launching a new debate in all sections of society on questions that matter to us all. Along with Sri T.V. Rao of JVV and Sri C.L.N. Gandhi of the IRHA we shared our media responsibilities so that the voice of reason could be heard by a large number of people.

Role of the Administration

The Child Welfare department had done nothing for Sambhavi in the last two and a half months. The Endowments Department took no action from the time Usha Rani illegally occupied the temple. The District Collector, who ordered an inquiry by the Nandyal Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) on 24 November, was even reportedly setting up facilities for the Dalai Lama's visit, but showed no interest in the plight of Sambhavi. Could we trust the Administration?

In spite of the risk involved, I went to Kurnool and Nandyal towns to give evidence to the inquiry commission.

As expected, and planned, the meeting with the Collector was widely reported in the media. After two months of seeming inaction and negligence, the Collector was suddenly put under public pressure. He did not have the courtesy of offering a seat to our delegation and even showed his impatience that we went to the Human Rights Commission rather than to him.

The next day we met with Dr. Madhavi Latha, the former scientist from ICRISAT who is now the RDO and the Inquiry officer, along with the Deputy Superintendent of Police Samayjohn Rao and Zubeida Begum, the Integrated Child Development Scheme Officer. Dr. Madhavi Latha met us after first questioning Usha Rani for four hours: defying the notices to appear, Usha Rani arrived without Sambhavi or the child's supposed father Soumya Acharya from Varanasi. "We will not bring Sambhavi to the inquiry as she is a child", said one of the persons present there. "There is no need to bring her", said her lawyer to the TV channels.

The Hindu Right Wingers

A group belonging to the Student Federation of India that arrived with no prior information to us – but to support our petition – was arrested by the police. Members and leaders of the Hindu right wing VHP and RSS groups started shouting slogans against us, giving dire warnings to rationalists for interfering with Hindu religious affairs. They picked up a fight with me. The

police advised us to leave as the VHP activists were becoming increasingly difficult and aggressive.

We filed the petition to save Sambhavi; she has to go to school and cannot be exploited in the name of religion. She has shown no miracles and should not be called a goddess. And we filed the petition not just on behalf of the rationalists but on behalf of all the religious and non religious people who were morally offended by how the child was being abused and whose humanitarian instincts were waiting for a formal avenue to express themselves.

The official inquiry was conducted for another two days. Sambhavi was finally produced in front of the inquiry officer. Usha Rani was ordered out of the temple by the Endowments Department and the local villagers also largely expressed their disbelief in Sambhavi's miraculous powers. We were confidentially passed on recordings of telephone threats made by Usha Rani to some journalists. Others have received threatening phone calls. We are keeping a record of those numbers.

The District Collector has sent an interim report to the Human Rights Commission saying that there are no miraculous powers to the child, that Usha Rani had no legal custody of the child, and that she and Sambhavi's supposed father were making so many contradictory statements that the administration wants to verify whether he is the real parent of the child.

The Collector has asked for special teams to be dispatched to the respective native places of Soumya Acharya and Usha Rani, confirming our original complaint and suspicion that this child may have been abducted. He has ordered that a caretaker and a police constable should be posted with Sambhavi to watch over her till such time that clarity emerges about the child's

parents; he passed orders that Usha Rani and Soumya Acharya were prohibited from taking Sambhavi from the village without government permission. As I write this, the Minister for Education has said on TV that he does not rule out the Government taking over the welfare of the child. The Home Minister has ordered a Crime Investigation Department inquiry into the matter.

People continue to ask us why we are interested in Sambhavi when there are millions of other children. Our reply: there are millions of children, all of who deserve our concern and help, but they are not being paraded as gods and goddesses. Every child has to be rescued child by child. We started with Sambhavi because if we do not take up the case of Sambhavi no one else would. But this can only be a small contribution to a national effort in a country that is 139th in the comity of nations for living standards and has the world's biggest concentration of child labour. We all have our duty cut out to help the vulnerable children. Though we were planning to write to the Noble Peace Prize Committee if the Dalai Lama visited Sambhavi, he chose not to do so.

But one thing is already achieved: not only did we touch the common people's hearts, not only did we expose the hysteria in society as a crime against a child, we also convinced the main players and changed the terms of the debate. Our responsibility in the matter has increased because of the public's positive expectations despite the sloganeering of the right wing VHP and RSS. But the only test of victory for our efforts and our campaign would be when Sambhavi is freed from the clutches of her own people so that she could grow to her full potential. The first positive steps have been taken.

It could well be that we will need to involve friends from all over the world in this campaign.

Children Should Be Heard

A Conversation with Barbara Bennett Woodhouse

Margaretha Jones*

Barbara Bennett Woodhouse is among the United States' foremost experts on children's rights. She joined the Emory University Law faculty in 2009 as the L.Q.C. Lamar Chair in Law. She also serves as the co-director of the Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic. Her scholarship and teaching focus on child law, child welfare, comparative and international family law and constitutional law. Her book Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children's Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate published in 2008 tells the tragic untold story of children's rights in America.

MJ: Thank you for taking the time to have this conversation. At present you are teaching at Emory Law School in Atlanta. How did you get involved in children's rights issues? And how does the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the CRC, guide/influence your work here in the United States, even though the US has not ratified this treaty?

BBW: I became involved in children's rights through being involved with and sharing the lives of children. Like all of us, I was a child



Barbara Bennett Woodhouse

myself. I grew up in circumstances that were unusual for many Americans but not for children in the rest of the world. My parents were musicians who had few material resources. For much of my childhood, we lived in a house my father and mother built with their own hands and we



Margaretha Jones

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had no running water or electricity or central heating, but we had a very secure and loving family life. I entered law school at age 35, as a second career, when my youngest child started school full time. I had been a nursery school teacher, a mother, an adoptive parent, and a foster parent and I had been active in my community on issues of children's education and quality of life. These experiences made me appreciate the importance of meeting children's emotional and educational as well as their material needs.

In law school, I took part in the pioneering Columbia Child Advocacy Clinic and represented foster children in court proceedings. In those days – the early 1980s – advocates in the U.S. were pushing for increased recognition of the rights of children under the Constitution of the United States – including equal opportunity, to have a voice in courts of law, to be protected from discrimination and interference in their family lives. My first exposure to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was not until after I became a professor of law. It was 1990 and I heard Cynthia Price Cohen speak at a conference of the International Society of Family Law. She had been deeply involved as a U.S. negotiator. I found the articulation of children's rights in the CRC to be much richer and more complex than the models I had been used to using. The CRC recognizes an obligation on the part of States Parties to meet children's needs for nurture and sustenance and education and to help parents in their role as parents and as guardians of their children's rights. This is a much more positive vision of children's rights and it has inspired my scholarship as well as my advocacy for children.

Now twenty years later, it grieves me to say that the U.S. still has not ratified the CRC but the impact of the CRC is being felt around the world.

Many of us here in the U.S. have been hard at work educating the American people about the CRC and advocating for its ratification. In my book *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children's Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate* (Princeton 2008), I show that children's rights are not antithetical to U.S. traditions but deeply rooted in our history.

Pointing to children in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Labor Movement in the early to mid 1900s, I argue that American children have earned their place as holders of human rights.

I hope my work will play a role in hastening the ratification of the CRC by the U.S. To the extent the U.S. refuses to join the rest of the world in accepting the CRC, we will become increasingly isolated and irrelevant.

MJ: One of my concerns is that children have the right to be heard and their views taken very seriously, in other words the right to participate. Article 12 in the CRC expresses this and it is such a misunderstood concept among parents, schools, politicians, policy shapers, law makers etc, etc. I remember several years ago, the NGO

Committee on Children's Rights here in New York convened a meeting for NGOs to talk about the concept of child participation, and one of the representatives of a major NGO actually walked out.

BBW: I am always shocked and disappointed at the lack of understanding shown by many adults towards the child's right of participation. The saying that "children should be seen but not heard" is still alive and well when it comes to actually listening to what children have to say. But imagine depriving a whole class of people of one of the most fundamental of rights – the right to express one's views in matters concerning one's own welfare.

We recognize that the stakeholders in any policy discussion have a right to participate. Why not children and young people?

At the 2002 United Nations Special Session on Children, we were able to see first-hand the benefits of children's participation. As the leader of the delegation from a major U.S. NGO – the American Bar Association, I witnessed what it means to have youth present and speaking out. I will never forget the color and liveliness and energy of those several days in May. Hundreds of delegates below the age of 18 (the "U-18s") came to New York City from nations around the world to meet with each other, to draw up a report to the General Assembly and to participate in the Special Session panels and discussions. They were so articulate and so well informed and it was a pleasure to see the intelligence and diversity of perspectives they brought to this discussion. Anyone who actually works with children and youth knows that they have a lot to say. Given appropriate structure and modes of expression, even very young children have something important to tell us. It takes some extra work and involves some risks, but let's stop being afraid to listen and start learning from youth. I love this quotation from an organization that encourages children's participation:

"Social change does not come easy, and involving young people does not make it easier. But it does make it better."

MJ: In one of your writings you mention that "Child Rights" is the 3rd revolution after 1) changes in Work/Family structures, i.e. women's movement, and 2) the scientific revolution regarding child development and the impact of genetics and environment.

This 3rd revolution made me think of a fairly recent different concept regarding Human Rights implementation. We used to talk almost exclusively about Human Rights Education and now I hear more and more 'Human Rights Learning.'

BBW: The new focus on "Human Rights Learning" as opposed to "Human Rights Education" is consistent with a growing appreciation of the agency of all learners, not just children. At one time, we might have been excused for thinking of education as a process similar to filling a car's tank with gas. Teachers pumped "education" into the passive and empty student and then sent the student onto the road of life with a nice full tank. But we now

appreciate the active role that the learner plays in the process and we see how learning actually changes the architecture of the brain. We learn and grow by interacting with and by engaging with ideas. This is true of children as well as older learners. In the University world, we are beginning to talk about “Engaged Learning” as the ideal. Instead of “teaching” facts, we create contexts and situations in which learning is an active and interactive process that leads to full

integration of ideas into the brain and the soul of the learner. Children, who are the most voracious and accomplished of learners (think how much a child learns between birth and age three), should be our role models for engaged learning. Children can teach us a great deal about human rights that we might not have known or appreciated without their voices and perspectives.

MJ: Thank you so much for all the work you do on behalf of children.

Children’s Rights?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), signed in 1989, has been opened to ratification since November 1989.

This Convention has been ratified by the French Government, but:

1. Formal restrictions have been introduced, on several Articles:
 - a. On Article 6, in order to avoid any application in France which could reduce the right of women to abortion
 - b. On Article 30, concerning minorities: there are no minorities in the French Republic; all citizens are supposed to have the same rights.
 - c. On Article 40, where some parts are not compatible with French laws
2. Just before this ratification, the French Government contacted 15 experts to gather their opinion on this Convention. The story has been told by one of them, Aldo Naouri, in his book *Eduquer ses enfants – l’urgence d’aujourd’hui* (“Educating our children – a priority for today”). After discussion, the 15 experts, who did not know each other before, reached the unanimous conclusion that the French Government should not ratify this Convention, which is not at all suited to our country; the Convention would increase ill-treatment of children by enslavement of parents. But when they went to the Ministry, they were told that for diplomatic reasons, the French Government had already ratified the Convention.

More generally, the Convention of the Rights of the Child is not compatible with the French Republic, where only citizens over 18 may have rights. Children are legally dependent on adults, generally their parents. This is connected with what the philosopher Condorcet propounded: the French Republic can survive only if citizens are educated. This has been the source of the

obligation for the State to offer public education.

Giving rights to children is against this principle. An example is of the 46 members of the German Parliament who proposed in July 2008 to establish a real universal suffrage by giving the right to vote in all general elections to children from birth. In the press, they called them “Pampers electors”. This proposal has been refused by the German Constitutional Court.

In France, we saw a direct application of this Convention in June 1989 with Article 10 of the “orientation law for education” by Lionel Jospin, the then Prime Minister. This Article allows free expression by pupils, including about religion, in public education. It is a contradiction of the French Separation law and public education tradition. After the summer holidays, in September 1989, we got the first problems with religious signs in these schools. These problems are directly connected with the UNCRC.

The first question then is: is this Convention useful? Read carefully, the UNCRC provides the answer. No, since all children’s rights could be formulated in terms of obligations for Governments or citizens. It was possible to protect the children without giving them formal rights.

The second question is: what are the consequences of this Convention? One of them is given above. More generally, the CRC regards children as if they were young citizens. But they are not, they are future citizens. Giving them rights will disturb families, increase the difficulties of parents in educating their children, and create conflicts.

*Roger Lepeix**



Roger Lepeix

*Roger Lepeix is Treasurer, IHEU

*I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in the kindness of human beings.
I am so absorbed in the wonder of earth and the life upon it that I cannot think
of heaven and angels.*

– Pearl S. Buck

Children's Rights: Taking them seriously without spoiling them

Sonja Eggerickx

All over the world it is considered 'normal' for women to give birth to children. It is also 'normal' to view children as the future of a family, a village, a town, a nation, the world even. It is therefore hard to understand why children had to wait until November 20 1989 for the Convention on the Rights of the Child to be accepted by the United Nations.

I live in a rather wealthy western European country, Belgium. We have separation of religion and state. Child labour is forbidden by law, although there are infringements. We have strong legislation against child abuse and any form of violence against children. All children are guaranteed schooling until the age of 18. We even have a special telephone helpline for children where they can ask for information, for help, or a talk about their problems. A coalition of organisations works for children's rights and for some years there has been a civil servant with special responsibility for children's rights.

Of course, Belgian children on average enjoy a much better life than millions of children in the non-western world. But there is a gulf between theory and practice. To begin with, there is a difference between social classes, the rich and the poor. Of course it looks irrelevant whether you wear clothes from an ordinary shop or from a very well known, exclusive and expensive one. But in reality it is not! Children are teased because of their 'poor, vulgar' clothes; they don't belong to the group of those who are considered the elite. Exclusion occurs for other reasons, such as racism, discrimination against immigrants (even if they are third generation and have Belgian nationality), against refugees – in brief against everyone who is not lucky enough to belong to the 'right' group or, by extension, who is not tolerated or labelled as good and useful, by that elite.

One out of ten Belgian children is a victim of some kind of abuse. Child abuse is the second most common cause of child deaths; and more than 80 per cent of child abuse happens in the family. That is one of the reasons why many cases of violence are not reported: children don't want their fathers or mothers to be punished nor do they want to be separated from their parents.

Nevertheless, statistics still show that children living in Belgium live a better, happier life than millions of other children. But children don't live in statistics; they live in real life. That means that those who are discriminated against really suffer. Belgian children not only have a right to education; they have an obligation to undergo it. In practice we see that the more academic education, preparing children for high schools and universities, attracts mainly 'white' pupils, children from the upper and middle class. Vocational schooling leading to manual labour is mainly for poorer groups, the 'immigrants' (no matter how long in Belgium), whose roots are not Belgian, nor even European, or who come from the new EU members in Eastern Europe. Although everybody

will tell you how important manual work is for the economy of a country, vocational schooling is in practice considered inferior.

In addition, girls from this disadvantaged group tend to be sent to schools where they are prepared for traditional 'women's work'. Their freedom to leave their homes is often restricted, so that, as a result, their

opportunities to mix and play with native speakers of the language are limited, and then they learn the language less well. All schools are officially gender-mixed, but the schools that teach housekeeping skills have few male pupils and are thus an obvious choice for parents who want to keep their daughters apart from boys.

So while we have laws that attempt to give equal opportunities to all children, the practice is different. Of course, it seems logical that parents should be able to choose a school for their children, and I am not suggesting that the Government make that choice, but there is still a long way to go to make both parents and children aware of their freedom and the possibility of moving away from a conventional model.

Let's have a look now to the 'average' Belgian children, and I presume that it is about the same in other Western countries. They have enough to eat, live in decent houses, have beds, parents and toys, and go to school from the age of 3 until 18. They can make choices about what to wear and what to eat and have access to a range of information, including information about their own rights. Most children are wanted by their parents who have usually chosen to have only one or two offspring, a family of more than three being exceptional. Parents read books and watch television documentaries about 'good education'. They all want to be the best parents in the world. They try really very hard. Often both parents have a job outside the home, and after work they pick up their children from nurseries or schools. They arrange for the children to attend after-school music classes, sport clubs or other improving activities.

Parents and children are stressed because they have to run from one activity to another, and of course children do protest. Sometimes they are just hanging around at home. Just hanging around is seen as negative; parents want their children to play and they buy them a lot of toys. But they also want their play to be constructive, so they buy educational toys that develop particular skills in the children. Unfortunately, this removes all initiative on the part of the children. The result is very spoiled children: little princes and princesses who are totally egocentric.

In some cases this may be an exaggeration, but it is



Sonja Eggerickx

not completely untrue. I want to plead for the right of children to be bored! Nobody likes to be bored, of course, but it is a great stimulus and opportunity to find something to do for oneself. The child learns to make choices: perhaps to learn that it can be enjoyable to spend time with others and that – if more people are involved in doing things together – everyone needs to agree rules. Children should also have the right to fall and hurt their knees, or even to break arms or legs. They need protection from real dangers, of course, but they need to discover for themselves the limits of behaviour. They are so overprotected that play is no longer fun: Their expensive clothes could become too dirty, or worse, torn, and of course they could hurt themselves. But by exploring your possibilities, you learn to accept that you are not necessarily good at everything you would like to do; by playing with others you can learn responsibility towards them; you can also learn that in order to be respected you have to respect others in turn. Of course, some children will try to bully or terrorise others, and then adults should intervene – they should ensure that the children do not imitate the grown-up world! But at the same time children must learn to live with frustrations, victories and defeats. And every adult knows that this is part of life.

We often apply double standards: we arrange beauty contests for babies and children. They are dressed as mini-starlets. Fashion models sometimes start work when still only 13! And yet at the same time we are afraid that people might think teenagers older than they really are. And those who ape the dress and behaviour of their elders are condemned by public opinion, yet at the same time there is no opposition to the exploitation of human beings for commercial ends.

Then there is the problem of teenage mothers. When we allow youngsters the right to explore and give

expression to their sexuality, it is absolutely necessary to give them sufficient advice to lead them to behave responsibly, and they must also have access to contraception.

And finally I come to education. It is indeed necessary for all children to be educated, not only in schools, but also at home. They need to be educated in how to behave towards others, how to care about them. They must learn the meaning of solidarity, empathy and respect for others, and at the same time they must have respect for their own bodies. They must learn that children have rights but also limits to freedom. They have to learn that in society there are not only rules to regulate questions of life and death, but also everyday rules which can sometimes look silly or absurd, but which can in fact make life more workable. We have to teach our children that only tolerance will lead to a democratic and humane society, and that it is sometimes necessary to allow people to be extravagant or simply to behave in ways different from those that are called 'normal', provided such behaviour does not endanger others.

Education is a never-ending struggle to impart rules, values and norms without forcing their acceptance, to provide a framework for building a life that feels comfortable and allows space for others. We have to improve children's rights all over the world.

Respecting children's rights doesn't mean spoiling children. We don't want them to grow up as selfish, irrational adults, who think only about themselves and neither care about others nor struggle for a better society. But we must also protect them from abuse and from being made to work like adults. We must not ignore their own wishes and needs.

The children's treaty is there; it's our duty to make nations, people and individuals respect it.

Child abuse by Religions

Child abuse is universal. It has no national, regional or local boundaries. It is recognised as a crime. Recruiting children for wars, using kids for sex and trafficking, mutilation of female genitals in young girls, making children work as labourers and similar issues are declared as violations of the rights of the child by the UN. There are acts to prohibit child marriage.

The right place for children is school. Several countries have passed legislation to implement this right. However, the world has yet to recognise one major form of child abuse.

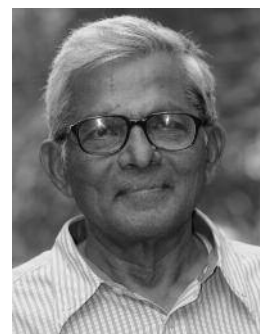
Preaching religion, brainwashing with holy books, forcing kids to memorise religious doctrine in madrassas (Islamic schools), Sunday schools, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu religious training classes, all these activities are

systematically abusing kids. This is a major abuse of the rights of the child that is not generally recognised.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by General Assembly resolution UN (44/25 of 20 November 1989). A few relevant articles are quoted below.

Article 7: The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

*N. Innaiah**



N. Innaiah

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States Parties shall ensure the implementation of these rights in accordance with their national law and their obligations under the relevant international instruments in this field, in particular where the child would otherwise be stateless.

Article 8: States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference.

Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to reestablishing speedily his or her identity.

Why do we call religion as child abuse? Children are taken for granted by parents. They entrust the kids to religious priests (mullahs). In the religious schools children are brainwashed with superstitions, blind beliefs, fear of God, Satan, hell and so forth. All these preachings are based on religious scriptures. The holy books cannot be questioned. The cause and effect process is not applied to superstitions. The blind beliefs are repeated until children internalise them. What happens to a child when she is taught about superstitious practices repeatedly? Her senses receive superstitions. Then the thalamus puts them in the sensory cortex. The analysis takes place at that level. If superstitions are repeated, they reach the amygdalae. They generate the response. Amygdalae, which are located in the temporal lobe, are central to guiding the individual.

If the superstition is not repeated the child is likely to ignore and later forget it. But religious priests and parents, as well as religious schoolteachers, repeat the superstitions. These then make deep roots in the brain.

What they abuse in Madrassas and Sunday Schools

The teachers not only repeat the superstitions but compel the students to memorise them even though the latter cannot understand the meaning at that level. The amygdalae send instructions to the hypothalamus and again the manipulation occurs. That is how all religions inculcate blind belief in God, the soul, reincarnation, heaven, Satan and hell.

Mental abuse

Fear and anxiety are systematically etched on children's minds. Fear is the bedrock of the Koran's teachings. While Allah is portrayed as kind and compassionate, children are taught about the killing of adversaries and experiences in hell if one goes against Islam. If God has predetermined everything, children cannot comprehend why some are condemned to hell. Does God decide *a priori* on sending people to hell? How can such a God be a personification of compassion and love? Children are bound to raise such questions.

The punishments mentioned in the Koran run counter to modern civilisation. According to Sura 5:38, the punishment for the first offence of theft is amputation of hands and for the second, amputation of legs. The offender is then jailed. Sura 5:33 lists beating, amputation, killing, and deportation among the punishments for opponents of God and his messengers. Sura 4:15 says that women found guilty of adultery on



Students at a Madrassa: Courtesy Internet

the basis of four witnesses have to be kept under lifelong house arrest. Sura 24:2-4 prescribes one hundred whiplashes for prostitution.

One finds two sets of suras with contradictory views. In the earlier version there is religious tolerance. Faith and rituals are left to individuals with no element of compulsion. "Wish peace of mind to those who do not believe in your religion or God", say some suras. Suras 10:9, 50:45, 2:256 and 2:62 exemplify these thoughts. In contrast, suras like 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 22, and 47 exemplify religious intolerance, cruel punishments, and killings. Suras 22:9 and 47:4 make it plain that the Koran does not show tolerance toward nonbelievers.

The Koran calls for waging a religious war called jihad until the entire world is brought under Islam. Worshippers of other religions have to be eliminated (see suras 2:256, 4:74, 4:76, 8:12, 8:15, 8:39-42, 9:5-6, 9:39 and 16). Those who surrender in Muslim campaigns are called Thimmas or slaves, and they do not enjoy any rights. Taxes like "kharab" and "jijia" are extracted from them. Islam does not agree that all are equal in the eyes of law.

Children are taught these things in religious seminaries called madrassas. Thus the seeds of hatred toward other religions, and belief in Islam are instilled in children at an early age. They are unable to shed the early influence even though they might study science and technology later in their life. Some of the Islamist terrorists are well-educated but that does not prevent them from undertaking terrorist activities.

The suras in the Koran are a sure sign of how indoctrination of children stunts their growth.

How do the Christians abuse children ?

The Bible preaches love, compassion, forgiveness, and other values. Yet when it comes to children, it changes its tune. Proverbs in the Bible talk about the need for corporal punishment in the interest of the child. Refraining from beating is tantamount to hating, says one proverb. The cane rescues the soul from hell, says another (Proverbs 13:24, 23:13-14). Devout Christians who believe that the Bible contains the ultimate truth do not find anything wrong in punishing children. Teachers thrash children in the name of driving Satan out from them.

There is a constant conflict between science and the Bible, both of which children study. Where there is a conflict, children are advised to ignore science and blindly believe the scripture. Their curiosity is stifled as they are prevented from questioning. If the miracles in the Bible are narrated as fiction, nobody has any objection. Children can read, enjoy, and forget the stories. No harm befalls them. The trouble only arises when they are advised to believe and practise what they are taught as facts.

Christians, who condemned Galileo for centuries, today confess that they were wrong. The Pope has officially declared this. As per the Bible, the earth is flat and is the center of the universe, and the sun revolves round the earth. Science established that the Bible version was a cock and bull story.

Christians question Darwin's theory of evolution and want the story of God's creation to be taught, citing the Bible as proof. They forget that there are two theories of creation in the initial chapters of the Bible. Children should not question which of them is correct.

Even if a child later becomes a scientist or computer engineer or doctor, it would be difficult to erase her early beliefs. The scientific method that they apply in their discipline, they hardly apply in other walks of life. That is the problem.

Terrorists, suicide bombers and extremists are the products of these early religious schools. Mutual hatred of religions and gods and rituals are inculcated in those religious schools. Child abuse has its deep roots in religious superstitions. That must be recognised. Future generations should be saved by addressing this major abuse.

Examples of Religious Influence

There are many glaring examples of child abuse by religion and its impact in later life. One is the case of Dr. Madhavana Nair, the retired head of the space research center at Sriharikota in Andhra Pradesh, India. When the space center was ready to launch a rocket Dr. Nair took the replica of the rocket and placed it at the feet of Lord Venkateswara, a local god in Tirumala Temple in South India. After receiving the blessings of the Lord he declared the launch of the rocket. Rationally he knows that there is no established causal relationship between

launching a rocket and God. But Nair is a religious believer from childhood and he brought his personal belief into the scientific realm. This action of such an eminent space scientist influences others, and sets a bad example.

Similarly Dr. Abdul Kalam, former President of India, was a space scientist. He visited a cult guru, Satya Sai Baba, in his ashram and received his blessings after touching his feet. This again sets a bad example to the people of India. Had the visit been personal, it would have been different. But he visited in his capacity as president of the country. The Constitution of India specifies observing scientific temper as a duty of all citizens. However, the President, who is supposed to lead the nation, did not perform this duty. He narrated in his autobiography how religion had a deep impact on him when he was a child. He could not get rid of those influences even though he became president and earlier worked in space technology centers.

An inquiry-based curriculum is woefully lacking in religious schools as well as in many private schools. Dogma is passed on from generation to generation. Parents find it difficult to free their children from religious indoctrination imbibed in school.

If a child seeks evidence for various phenomena, that should be encouraged. That is the antidote for blind belief. It is very difficult to convince parents that they should not pass on their religious beliefs to their children. They consider it as their right. They also view it as justified behavior.

It took centuries to convince parents that child marriages are wrong. Similarly it may take a long time to convince them about religion. But it is necessary to save children from the clutches of superstitions and priests. Children are indoctrinated with religion from birth. They should be free to develop critical thinking and a scientific temper to learn about the world. They have a natural curiosity to question, to know. This curiosity should be encouraged right from the beginning. When children are taken to churches and mosques, blind belief commences. Parents have to guide children into sifting out the real from the mythic. This is an uphill task, but given enough time, not impossible.

Children's Rights – A UN Perspective



*Sylvain and Temma Ehrenfeld**

Since the 1980s, advocates for children have increasingly agreed that children need their rights to be protected by international law. Charity is not enough to protect children around the world. International law exists: November 2009 was the twentieth anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the first legally binding agreement setting standards for the care, treatment and protection of all persons below age

eighteen. The treaty covers child labor, child marriage, child soldiers, juvenile justice, trafficking, violence against children as well as the fundamental right to birth registration, to acquire a name and a nationality. Embodied in law violators can be held accountable.

More countries have ratified this human rights treaty than any other. About 70 countries have incorporated children's codes into national legislation based on the convention's provisions. The US has, unfortunately, not

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ratified this treaty. American law reflects many of the provisions and ratifying the Convention would send an important message of humanity to the world.

As part of the treaty, the UN has established the Committee on the Rights of the Child to which countries have to provide regular reports. These reports allow us to track global progress.

While many problems remain, there has been progress in the past two decades. The number of under-five deaths fell from 12.5 million in 1990 to less than 9 million in 2008. The number of children out of primary school declined from 115 million in 2002 to 101 million in 2007. Currently, around 84 percent of children of the appropriate age are in primary school. Immunization programs and vaccines have saved millions of lives and helped reduce global measles deaths by 74 percent since 2002.

The declaration spurred many developing countries to register all births. Still, an estimated 51 million children were born but not registered in 2007 and one in four developing countries register only half of their births. Unregistered children are legally invisible. They risk losing access to medical care, education and passports, and as adults the right to marry, vote, open a bank account or to inherit.

Child labor is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Children miss school when they work. UNICEF estimates that 150 million children between ages five and fourteen are working, mainly in agriculture. Brazil has helped some 27 million citizens climb up to the middle class since 2002 in part by paying a monthly allowance to

families who keep their children in school and take them for regular health checks. Inspired by this success almost twenty countries including Chile, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey and Morocco have adopted adaptations of this scheme.

More than a third of women aged twenty to twenty-four report that they were married by age 18, often much younger and sometimes without their consent. The average age of first marriage is very gradually increasing in many countries.

At any one time, more than a million children are being held by the justice system, usually for offences such as running away from home, truancy, living on the street, alcohol abuse or illegal immigration. In Myanmar, children are legally responsible by age seven. Five countries have executed a child since January 2005.

The US has about 2000 people under age 18, serving life sentences, which violates the convention if they do not have possibilities of parole. In 2005 the US Supreme Court declared the death penalty unconstitutional for juveniles and recently announced it will consider the constitutionality of life sentences for minors in two Florida rape and robbery cases. In one, the crime was committed by a thirteen year old.

How we treat children and the vulnerable is an important gauge of the humanity and hopefulness of our culture. Children are the future and represent our vision for the years to come.

Much work still needs to be done. The United Nations will continue to push countries to protect children's rights, providing the bedrock for better lives.

Child Rights and Witchcraft in Nigeria

Leo Igwe*

Child witchcraft is the superstitious belief that children can be witches and wizards or that infants can or do magically turn themselves into birds or insects to suck blood or mysteriously inflict harm. It is the belief that children have evil powers, which they can use to destroy people, particularly their family or neighbours.



Victim of witchcraft accusation displays his wounds

Witchcraft on children takes three forms: accusation, confession and persecution.

Children are accused of being witches and wizards. They are blamed for whatever goes wrong in their families. This could be death, disease, business failure, accidents or childbirth difficulties. Children are accused of witchcraft at home by parents and family members; in churches by

ignorant and unscrupulous pastors; at shrines by primitive-minded traditional medicine men or witch doctors; or on the streets by mobs and gangs.

Children are forced to confess to being witches and wizards or to have taken part in witchcraft activities by family members or by mobs, in most cases through physical and mental torture.

Children alleged to be witches and wizards are persecuted through torture and inhuman and degrading treatment, which sometimes leads to their death. Such children are starved, chained, beaten, macheted or even lynched. In churches, pastors subject children alleged to be witches and wizards to torture in the name of exorcism. Witchdoctors force such children to drink potions (poison) or concoctions that can kill them or damage their health.

In Akwa Ibom State, superstition about child witchcraft is common and widespread. Most people in this state, as in other parts of Nigeria, believe that



Leo Igwe

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children can indeed be witches and wizards or that children can take part in witchcraft activities.

This misconception has caused most people to endorse the persecution of children accused of witchcraft, or at least to be indifferent to child rights abuses that are committed in the name of witchcraft. Most members of the public regard witchcraft accusers, witch persecutors and killers as heroes, not villains or criminals. Recently, the situation in Akwa Ibom has become so bad that it has attracted both local and international outrage. Thousands of children alleged to be witches and wizards have been tortured, driven out of their homes or killed. Some of the child victims rescued by public-spirited individuals have found refuge at a camp, the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network, in Eket. And it is in response to this very ugly and embarrassing situation that the government of Akwa Ibom State signed into law the Child Rights Act in December 2008.

The Child Rights Act

According to Governor Godswill Akpabio, the Child Rights Act was passed “to protect children and posterity.” According to him it would be “futile to make the gains we have made in terms of development and progress without preparing the next generation for sustaining our legacy.”

The Child Rights Act protects the growth of perceptual, emotional, intellectual and behavioural capabilities and functioning of Akwa Ibom children under 16 years old. It empowers them to enjoy physical, social and psychological well-being through the enforcement of their physical, mental and emotional freedom from abuse.

The implementation of the Child Rights Act will create a conducive atmosphere for the development of the child. It will bring to an end child abuse by penalising abusers. The law guarantees comprehensive government protection for Akwa Ibom State children. It strengthens the mechanisms for the defence and protection of children.

Specifically, the law prescribes up to 15 years’ imprisonment without the option of a fine, or both, for offenders in child stigmatisation, accusation of witchcraft



Children in a happier moment

or torture cases. It empowers the government to seal off premises of any organisation used to perpetrate child abuse.

The role of the masses in the implementation of the law

I want to point out that when it comes to stamping out a complex phenomenon like child witchcraft, the government cannot do it alone. The government needs the cooperation of the people and all the citizens of Akwa Ibom to succeed in fully implementing the Child Rights Act.

The government needs the people’s help in identifying and prosecuting offenders. Child rights abuses in the name of witchcraft have been going on for some time because offenders have not been prosecuted or punished. We need to report to the police all those who stigmatize or label children witches and wizards whether they are our parents or family members, our pastors or traditional medicine men. We need to inform the police of any witch testing, witch screening and witchcraft delivering churches, centres or 'clinics' anywhere in the state.

The prosecution of some pastors arrested in connection with child witch stigmatization and persecution in the state is currently stalled because people are not coming forward to testify against them. The child rights law will not be enforced if people are afraid of reporting or testifying against parents, family members, pastors or witch doctors or anyone alleged to have labelled children witches or wizards.

The people of Akwa Ibom should rise up to the challenge of helping the government implement this important legislation.

Rights of a Child in Kenya

*Boaz Adhengo**

Kenya has a population of 15 million children, constituting 54 percent of the total of 28 million. Over 12.6 million Kenyans, majority of who are children, live in absolute poverty.

Kenya ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on July 31, 1990. The enactment of the Children's Act of 2001 gives effect to the obligations of Kenya under the CRC and the *African Children's Charter*. Since its ratification, Kenya has been working to implement its ideals in domestic legislation concerning childcare and protection.

Kenya's formal child protective system has been developing since the country's independence in the early 1960s. Legislation addressing children's issues is in place since then and includes the Children's and Young Person's Act, the Guardianship of Infants Act, and the Adoption Act. These statutes

remained in legal force up and until March 2002, when the new Children's Act of 2001 was enacted. For these 40 plus years, there has also been a Children's Department, which is a part of the Ministry for Home Affairs and is



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specifically tasked with dealing with issues of implementation of childcare and protection and juvenile justice. For example, the Department operates childcare and protection institutions, such as rehabilitation centers for children considered as being in need of care and protection. Furthermore, there are children's courts all over the country, with magistrates specifically assigned as children's court magistrates. The Nairobi Children's Court, however, remains the only physically separate, child-friendly court in the country. All children's courts are courts of first instance, which means that they fall under the High Court in the court structure. Finally, the private sector (nongovernmental organisations) runs foster care and reception centers and programs that cater to children without family care. These must be registered with the Children's Department.

Below is a discussion on six thematic issues discussed in a state report to the UN Convention on Rights of the Child in March 2001 with concern to *education, juvenile justice, refugee and internally displaced children, children with disabilities, children of pastoralist communities and street children.*

Education: The cost-sharing policy, under which parents contribute up to 65 percent of schools' recurrent costs, has a seriously limiting effect on access to education. Up to 46 percent of school-age children (5-14 years) are out of school. The net enrolment rate is estimated to be 60 percent. Pre-school enrolment has stagnated at 35 percent for the last 10 years, largely because poor families cannot afford to send their children to school. The non-formal education sub-sector is yet to be effectively linked to the formal structure so that its products are absorbed in the mainstream education system.

It is recommended that pre-school and primary education must be made free and compulsory, and expanded to attain universality. The policy on non-formal education should focus on redirecting its recipients to the formal system. NGOs should press for free and compulsory education and supplement State efforts in the development and financing of the sector.

Juvenile Justice: Up to 85 percent of the children who go through the Kenyan juvenile justice system do not deserve to be exposed to the criminal justice process. Consequently, more harm than good is done to them. Also, the system is not child-friendly. Personnel do not possess specialised child-handling skills. Emphasis is laid on institutional care, which is not always appropriate as proved by the frequent wrongful placement of children in Approved Schools. The institutional facilities hold two to three times their capacity, and most are in squalid conditions.

It is recommended that a social catchment policy be put in place to rescue and re-direct children in need of care and protection before they enter the criminal justice system. The Judiciary should urgently train the personnel throughout the juvenile justice system on more child-sensitive practices and procedures. The residential facilities should be refurbished as a matter of priority. Closer Government-NGO collaboration is highly

recommended in the provision of legal assistance to children within both the criminal and civil justice systems.

Refugee and Internally Displaced Children: By close of the year 2000, Kenya was host to 46,974 child refugees (23 percent of the total 206 106 people sheltered in the country). There are currently no special child-focused measures in the refugee handling programmes. The 1991/2 and 1997 ethnic clashes in parts of Western, Rift Valley and Coast regions displaced an estimated 300 000 people, over 50 percent of who were children. This exposed the government's incapacity to protect Kenyans endangered by armed conflict. The government was not only slow in providing protection to non-combatants, but its post-clashes intervention has also been limited. Today, a decade since the clashes first erupted, many families are yet to be permanently resettled, with harrowing effects on their children.

It is recommended that the resettlement programme should be hastened to provide lasting relief to the affected children. The government should develop a rapid-reaction emergency strategy to guard against future crisis, and to facilitate fast intervention in conflicts resulting in disruption of settled community life. The strategy should include mechanisms for community-based peace building, conflict resolution and reconciliation. The donor community should help build the capacities of the government and NGOs to effectively deal with the dual challenges of internal conflict and refugees.

Children with Disabilities: There are an estimated 1.5 million children with disabilities in Kenya. These children are most neglected in terms of policy efforts and direct programming. The 1998 report by a commission appointed to look into laws on persons with disabilities offers nothing to children. The draft Bill the commission recommended is silent on critical issues like provision of basic education and health, and the problem of child concealment.

It is recommended that a multi-sectoral intervention approach be adopted focusing on preventive care, increased resource allocation to special education, integration into ordinary schools and special programmes for those with multiple disabilities. The draft Bill on Persons with Disabilities should be reviewed, enacted and implemented expeditiously. The population of persons with disabilities should be computed precisely to facilitate effective planning. NGOs must continuously lobby for the required policy and legislative action, and supplement the government's efforts in provision of basic services.

Children from Pastoralist Communities: Insecurity and the poor state of infrastructure have seriously limited access to basic social services in the pastoralist regions. School gross enrolment rate (GER) averages at 30.5 percent, compared to the national average of 88.8 percent. Only 70 percent of infants are completely immunized by the age of two years and 20 percent of children are malnourished. Less than 50 percent of families have access to safe drinking water.

It is recommended that more resources be allocated for children of pastoralists and innovative efforts made to increase their access to education, health services and supplementary nutrition, with special attention to the girl-child. Economic empowerment for the communities is essential. NGOs should supplement government efforts by supporting education, health, feeding and security programmes.

Street Children: Conservative estimates indicate that 300 000 children live and work on the streets in Kenya, with over 50 percent of them concentrated in and around the capital Nairobi. Though there is still no exact data on their population and distribution, it is clear that their numbers are increasing rapidly owing to poverty, HIV/AIDS and the collapsing family structure. The ethnic clashes sharply pushed up the numbers. Not only

are street children locked out of the social services mainstream, but also their very basic right to life is at risk with each passing day. Police harassment, sexual molestation, economic exploitation and the serious risk of disease stalk them daily. The street children problem remains a serious national challenge.

It is recommended that the government should immediately declare the street children problem a national challenge and institute special policy and legislative action as a matter of priority. The government in collaboration with NGOs must come up with community and family re-integration programs to divert the children from streets. The long-term target in all these efforts must be the primary causal factors of poverty, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, the high cost of education and the disintegration of the family-care systems.

Adopt a Dalit Village

Dalits are the people formerly known as untouchables. They have been historically excluded from human society, and were deprived of the most basic opportunities. This discrimination affects every aspect of life: health, housing, education, work, marriage, social interaction. For most Dalits, there is no opportunity to escape from caste-imposed discrimination. Tens of millions of Dalits are trapped in debt bondage. The largest population of Dalits is in India, where Hinduism and the caste system are traditionally associated with the evil practice of untouchability. Their

access to modern medical care is almost non-existent; they are exploited as vote banks with little hope of improvement, and they are targets for religious conversion. Rampant superstition, the practice of internal untouchability and desperate poverty are the hallmarks of most Dalit communities.

What can YOU do to help? Adopt a Dalit village!

Join hands with IHEU and adopt a Dalit village. It will cost just £2,000 or €3,000 or \$4,000 a year to make a positive difference to the lives of nearly a thousand Dalit men, women and children. That is just \$4 a year per person. The details of this scheme and how your money will be used are available at www.ih.eu.org/dalitfaq.

There is tonic in the things that men do not love to hear. Free speech is to a great people what the winds are to oceans ... and where free speech is stopped miasma is bred, and death comes fast.

– Henry Ward Beecher

Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones. I am not afraid.

– Marcus Aurelius

Ban the burqa? A Canadian Muslim view

In the November edition of IHN, we reported on the position taken by the Federation Nationale de la Libre Pensée on the wearing of religious clothing in private life. The article argued strongly that while it is the duty of the state to ban all signs of religious membership in state schools and public services, it should refrain from dictating specific attire in the private domain. Since then, the American Humanist Association has issued a statement criticising the banning of the burqa by Massachusetts College and defending the wearing of the burqa in public.

We publish below a contrasting view from the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC), a Toronto-based organisation that speaks on behalf of liberal and secular Muslims. The article is an extract of a letter sent by the MCC to the Canadian Ministers of Justice and Citizenship.

The Burka and Niqab in Canada

As Muslim Canadians, we take ownership of and pride in the Canadian values of liberal democracy, gender equality, and universal human rights and the separation of religion and state. We value the fact our citizenship is based on human created laws and not on inherited race, religion, or gender.

As an organization, we feel one of the issues Muslim Canadians face today is the challenge of gender apartheid that is encouraged and practiced in parts of our community and is being promoted by vested overseas interests who have neither the interest of Canada or its Muslim citizens in mind.

Over the last few years we have seen an increasing presence and a disturbing growth of Muslim women concealing their identities behind face masks that are at times called burkas and by others as the niqab or the face-concealing veil. This spread of the burka is linked to a number of unregulated after-hours private Islamic schools that have opened in Canada's urban centres. At these schools, young women are being urged to drop out of the public school system, leave the workplace and wear a face mask to conceal their identity and become totally segregated from mainstream Canadian society, which is often described as immoral, unclean and labeled with the derogatory term "kufaar".

We, as ordinary Muslim citizens of Canada, feel it is our obligation and responsibility to take the lead in opposing this harmful trend and ask for legislation or regulations that will discourage the growth of this practice. The dropping out of Muslim women from the workforce is leading to the further marginalization of the Muslim community in Canada.

We ask you to set up a task force that would study the roots of this phenomenon, the risks this poses to broader Canadian society and the steps that need to be taken to ensure Canada does not end up in a situation like the one prevailing in the UK. In Britain, large parts of the Muslim community have become isolated from the rest of Britain and consider themselves hostile to all things British.



Niqabi women in Toronto



Our objection to the burka or the niqab is based not just on our concern for the Muslim community, but also its impact now and later on the rest of Canada. Our opposition to the facemask is based on five separate, yet related, areas that affect all Canadians.

They are: security, safety, health, gender equality and the misuse of religion for political ends.

Security

In July this year, an armed man dressed in a burka robbed the Scotiabank in Mississauga and made off with an undisclosed amount of cash. Had this been an isolated incident, one could have overlooked the fact that a so-called religious attire had been used instead of the typical facemask to hold up a bank. Such hold ups have been reported south of the border too where in one incident in North Carolina the bank robber in burka was caught on video with a gun pointed towards the teller. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania there were multiple robberies (three banks and one real estate office) in a sixteen-month period in 2007-08, including the murder of a police officer. The United Kingdom has seen a spate of crimes committed by burka-clad thieves. Jewelry stores – some owned by Muslims – have been targeted in the West Midlands, in Glasgow and in Oxfordshire. Two travel agencies were attacked in the adjoining towns of Dunstable and Luton while an armoured truck driver was assaulted in Birmingham. All were committed by burka clad thieves. Robbery is not the only motive; teenagers in London used niqab-style face coverings when stabbing a younger boy. In Holland, pickpockets have worn Islamic face masks. Finally, known terror suspects have escaped arrest by wearing burkas, including one suspect who got away from Heathrow Airport in London.

The use of the burka or niqab as a disguise of choice for criminals is not unique to the West. In Jordan, one news report indicates that 50 people committed 170 crimes using the burka or niqab during the past two years, or roughly one incident every four days, a crime wave that has prompted some Jordanians to call for restricting or even banning the burka. Both Mulla Omar and Osama Bin Laden are said to have escaped arrest

while hiding behind a burka, while the head of the Red Mosque uprising in Islamabad was apprehended while attempting escape draped in a burka. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Taliban have been relying on burqa-clad jihadis to commit suicide bombings. A Taliban commander, Haji Yakub, was killed in burka as he tried to escape a house in Ghazni Province while attacking U.S. forces. A Taliban operative, Mullah Khalid, attacked a police patrol in a crowded market in Farah Province, killing at least 12 people. About fifteen suicide bombers in burkas armed with suicide vests, Kalashnikovs, and grenade launchers drove to government buildings in Paktia Province and killed 12 persons. Pakistan has suffered two such attacks, one, operating from a rickshaw, killing 15 people.

Safety

In October 2007, a Calgary school bus was involved in a roadside accident in which one girl was killed. Although no news outlet was willing to report this, news clips of the driver showed she was wearing a very restrictive head covering that had almost certainly compromised her peripheral vision and could have been the reason she slammed into a truck parked on the shoulder on a clear day.

Health

New studies in England and Ireland have found that Muslim women who wear the burka or niqab (and their breast-fed children) tend to get rickets due to an insufficiency of vitamin D, through lack of exposure of their skin to sunlight. A study released by British National Health Service doctors said hijab and burka-wearing women were putting their health at risk because they do not get enough sunlight, an alarming number who wear the burka are suffering from bone deficiencies due to lack of vitamin D.

Gender equality

The MCC agrees that the state has no place in the bedrooms or wardrobes of the country. However, if the status of any woman in Canada is affected by what happens in the bedroom or wardrobe, be it spousal abuse or the forced wearing of attire meant to marginalize girls or women, then we feel the state must intervene. Society has a role to play to ensure the human rights of girls and women are not being compromised behind closed doors.

The MCC has been one of the few Muslim organizations that have spoken out against gender apartheid that is practiced in parts of our community. We have spoken for gender equality and believe no man should be allowed to force his doctrine of male superiority and dominance over women, even if the victim consents to such degradation. The goal of gender equality stems from a history that for centuries society has tolerated and accepted injustice towards women.

UNICEF defines gender equality as "levelling the playing field for girls and women by ensuring that all children have equal opportunity to develop their talents" while the United Nations Population Fund declared gender equality "first and foremost, a human right." Gender equity is also one of the goals of the United Nations Millennium Project, with the goal to end world poverty by 2015; the project claims, "Every single Goal is directly related to women's rights, and societies where women are not afforded equal rights as men can never

achieve development in a sustainable manner."

With the growth of the burka as a garment that conceals a woman's identity, the likelihood of such a woman entering the workforce and becoming a contributing member to the economic well being of the family and society is seriously compromised. Despite the protection of the Charter*, the fact remains that women wearing burkas will have difficulty finding employment. From engineering to medicine, bank tellers to police constables, pilots to paramedics, the chances of women wearing burkas not finding themselves in these positions are high. Increasingly, these women will become financially and economically dependent on their husbands, fathers, brothers, or sons, or on the state for subsistence.

We do not need to look far to see the adverse effects of women's role as male dependents. In 2008, a United Nations-sponsored report warned the nations of the Arab World, that it was the disempowerment of women that was proving to be a critical factor crippling these nations' ability to join the first rank of global leaders in commerce, learning and culture.

Misuse of religion for political ends

We believe that the facemask worn by some Muslim women [is about] political symbolism that reflects the contempt of radical Islamist groups for Western civilisation. Today, the only forces that demand Muslim women to cover their faces are: the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Arab World [and Europe], Al-Qaeda, and the Saudi religious establishment. All four groups see women as a source of sin and objects of sexuality, and Canada and the freedom of women in Canada and the West as manifestations of evil sexual depravity. Yet it is worth noting that leading clerics and scholars from both the Shia and Sunni communities have stated quite explicitly that the burka or niqab are not an Islamic requirement, but a cultural and tribal custom.

The MCC believes therefore that the wearing of a facemask is not a religious issue and the argument that it has the protection of the Charter, as 'freedom of religion', does not withstand scrutiny. A political symbol does not have the status of religious belief, especially if its meaning is rejection of and contempt for western civilization, and for the women who exercise their hard fought right to not be judged as mere sexual objects and the source of sin. Pressure on young girls to conform to the belief that they are sources of sin was demonstrated in Montreal in 2006 when the head of a mosque told young girls that if they did not cover themselves, they risked getting raped and might end up as unwed mothers. He went on to say that on the Day of Judgment, God would punish these girls for getting raped because they enticed the rapist by not covering themselves.

As a nation, a country and a society, [Canada has] travelled over 200 years to ensure that women are not considered second-class citizens or the possessions of men. We can ill afford to let culture or tribal custom compromise the equality of women.

* According to Section Twenty-eight of the Canadian Charter, "... the rights and freedoms referred to in [this Charter] are guaranteed equally to male and female persons."

How Islamism is taking on the world – and winning

Roy W Brown*

Throughout Europe we are seeing worrying signs of a new Islamic assertiveness: condemnation by self-appointed Islamic leaders of every perceived insult to Islam, demands for special treatment for Muslims in schools, hospitals and the workplace, and for the acceptance of *Shari'a* law for the settlement of family disputes. But this phenomenon is not confined to Europe. It is part of a global campaign, orchestrated by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the OIC, for the world-wide acceptance and adoption of Islamic norms and values.

For the past 20 years, the OIC, which represents all 57 Islamic States at the UN, has been pushing for international recognition of a unique and special status for Islam.

At the United Nations

The first step by the OIC was the adoption in 1990 of the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam ^[1], a document which the OIC claims is “complementary” to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ^[2] but which actually turns the Universal Declaration on its head, replacing individual rights by “rights” based exclusively on *Shari'a* law.

When I presented a paper at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2008 on behalf of IHEU, highlighting the incompatibility between the Cairo Declaration and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ^[3], I was stopped on a point of order by the Pakistani delegate who said that “any discussion of *Shari'a* law in this forum is insulting to our faith”. This extraordinary objection was actually upheld by the president of the Council, Ambassador Doru Costea of Romania ^[4]. If threats to the universality of human rights cannot be addressed in the world's supreme human rights body, where can they be discussed?

The OIC have since announced plans for an Islamic Charter of Human Rights based on the Cairo Declaration, and a new international Islamic Human Rights body for which the OIC is seeking, and will probably obtain, UN recognition ^[5]. Should they succeed the UN will have accepted that the Universal Declaration no longer applies to more than one billion of our fellow human beings living in the Islamic States.

But the ambitions of the OIC are not restricted to their own countries. Every year since 1999 they have introduced resolutions in the Human Rights Council and, since 2006 in the UN General Assembly, “Combating Defamation of Religion”, with the objective of restricting all negative comment about religion, Islam in particular. Every year these non-binding resolutions have been adopted by the Human Rights Council with a comfortable two to one majority, with only the liberal democracies among the 47 member states of the Council voting against. When this resolution was first introduced

in the UN General Assembly it was adopted by a similarly impressive majority.

Freedom of expression – and the idea that criticism of Islam should be permissible – is anathema to the Islamic States, and combating defamation of religion has been their weapon of choice in their fight against that freedom.



Roy W Brown

But the western liberal democracies, and every child of the Enlightenment, understand that it is freedom of expression that underpins all our other human rights. Without freedom of expression, how are we to expose and challenge tyranny, corruption and intolerance in all its forms? One hopeful sign, however, is that support for these resolutions has been declining in the UN General Assembly every year since 2006, as a result, no doubt, of the massive negative publicity that the concept of defamation of religion has attracted from NGOs and western delegations. ^[6]

In their latest move this year, the OIC has begun pushing for additional “complementary” clauses in the legally binding Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, the CERD, that would extend protection to religions (for which read “Islam”) thereby making defamation of religion, or blasphemy, a criminal offence under international law.

For the Islamic states there is no distinction between religion and state, *Shari'a* law is deemed to be God's law, and any criticism of *Shari'a* law is itself considered blasphemy, punishable by death. The implications of this are quite simply outrageous. To take just one example, calls to liberalise the draconian punishments for homosexuality or the stoning of women to death for adultery would themselves be considered blasphemous and punishable by death.

The Islamist Agenda

The agenda being followed by the Islamic States at the UN was set many years ago by the founding fathers of modern political Islam. Writers such as Maulana Maududi in Pakistan, Sayed Qutb, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, all called for a new political awakening among Muslims, to combat western imperialism and to work for an Islamic world. Qutb set out his plan for Islamic conquest in his book *Milestones* ^[7], an agenda followed assiduously and successfully by his successor as leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Bana. The first step in the conquest of the non-Islamic world is to sensitise the population to Islam and to establish Islamic values alongside those of the indigenous population. This agenda is being followed assiduously by

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his grandson, Tariq Ramadan, the media's favourite "moderate Muslim", but who has never deviated from this agenda. His apparent impatience with the extremists and jihadists is actually on the grounds of timing, not substance. The West is not yet ready for total submission to Islam, and to promote these ideas at this stage will only generate opposition. (You bet it will, Mr Ramadan). He prefers the softly-softly approach, described by some observers as "stealth jihad".

The OIC, however, makes no bones about its objectives: they are clearly set out in the ten-year plan of action adopted at the OIC summit in Mecca in 2005.^[8] Together with worthy exhortations to eliminate poverty and improve education in the member states of the OIC, we see calls to present Islam as the religion of peace, to enter into dialogue with those states "hosting" Muslim communities, to set up a special UN body to combat "Islamophobia" and defamation of Islam, and to create an Islamic Commission for Human Rights based exclusively on *Shari'a* principles. One of my personal favourites is this:

"Call upon the OIC to contribute towards projecting Islam as a religion that guarantees full protection of women's rights and encourages their participation in all walks of life".

Note the hypocrisy.

The call is not to "ensure that women's rights are fully protected", but merely "to project Islam" as though they were!

Most worrying of all perhaps is the determination to strengthen the OIC itself, moving closer to the ideal of a global Caliphate and providing even greater influence for Islamism.

They are winning

However unreasonable the demands of the Islamists might seem, and how alien to our way of life and values, they are winning the war in the UN and in many western states as well. One key strategy of the Islamists has been to label any criticism of Islam or Islamic extremism as "Islamophobia", and to equate it with racism. In this they have been strongly supported by the former UN special investigator on contemporary forms of racism, Doudou Diene, a Muslim from Senegal who during his term of office succeeded in ignoring every manifestation of the endemic anti-Semitism in the Islamic world while focusing almost exclusively on Islamophobia, which he described as "the worst form of racism". The OIC were, of course, delighted with his statements and have been quoting him endlessly ever since. So all-pervading has been the malign influence of this man that he is still travelling the world advising governments from South East Asia to Northern Europe on how best to counter this phenomenon.

Diene defined Islamophobia as an "irrational fear or hatred of Islam", so no-one among the hundreds of advocates of freedom of expression that I know can be described as Islamophobic; their fears of radical Islam, far from being irrational, are well founded. But fear of being labeled Islamophobic – and of violent reprisals –

seems to have infected governments and the media throughout the western world. We see writers, comedians, politicians, playwrights and film-makers happy to attack Christianity while steering well clear of Islam. The newly released film *2012* is a good example. We can see the Vatican wiped out as the Earth faces extinction, but not the Kabaa in Mecca. Director Roland Emmerich and co-writer Harold Kloser admitted that they "didn't want a fatwa on their heads because of a film".

The future

To see what is in store should the Islamists succeed, we need look no further than Iran or Somalia today where, under *Shari'a* law, young people are being executed for crimes committed while they were still children, men and women are being stoned to death for adultery, homosexuals are killed and girls as young as eight or nine are being forcibly married off to middle-aged men.

The Islamists are skillful at playing the victimisation card. Yes, they are victims – but victims of an Islamic culture that segregates young Muslims from mainstream society, treats girls and young women as the property of their menfolk, and shows disdain and even contempt for the very values that have enabled them to come to Europe and to prosper.

I am certain that if western employers, the media and governments were prepared to stand up for our values, far from finding opposition from the Muslim community they would hear a collective sigh of relief, that they have indeed come to a country that is proud of its values and prepared to defend them.

After all, didn't the parents and grandparents of today's young Islamist extremists actually come here in search of a better life, away from the perpetual poverty and intolerance of those states where Islam holds sway?

We must oppose every attempt by the Islamists to introduce Islamic values into our society. Those values are totally alien to the values of the Enlightenment on which our modern democratic societies have been built.

We must oppose attempts to create parallel systems of justice. We must fight every step of the way attempts to create *Shari'a* courts. All of us, whether Humanists, Christians, Hindus, Jews or especially Muslims, must reject *Shari'a* law because, as the Islamic scholar Hassan Mahmud has said: "Muslims are the first victims of Islamic law." And, unless we are very, very careful, dear readers, we will be next.

[1] <http://www.religlaw.org/interdocs/docs/cairohrislam1990.htm>

[2] <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

[3] <http://www.iheu.org/node/3162>

[4] <http://www.iheu.org/node/3115>

[5] http://www.islamtoday.com/showmenews.cfm?cat_id=38&sub_cat_id=2164

[6] <http://www.iheu.org/united-nations-will-violate-human-rights-says-new-report-religious-freedoms>

[7] <http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/MILESTONES.pdf>

[8] <http://www.sciencedev.net/Docs/OIC%2010%20year%20plan.htm>

Blasphemy 2010: An Old Whine in New Battles

Matt Cherry*



Matt Cherry

“Blasphemy!” It’s a crime we thought belonged in the history books, even though we knew it still survived in the world’s few remaining theocracies. Yet, to the surprise of many, 2010 began with headlines dominated by blasphemy battles across Europe and at the United Nations. The new blasphemy laws come cloaked in contemporary garb, under the rather attractive guise of ending

the “defamation of religions”, but they pack the same old punch: debate is stifled and dissent punished. While religious leaders whine that their critics should be penalized for hurting religious feelings, it’s the freethinkers who face the threat of really getting hurt.

Humanists are fighting back, often in alliance with religious groups. The campaign against “the new blasphemy laws” has made some hard-won progress in the past year. But the few steps forward have been followed by some big steps backwards.

In early 2009 a strong statement against the concept of “defamation of religions” was made at the United Nations: “We believe that the concept of defamation of religion is not consistent with the promotion and protection of human rights,” said Michael Martin, foreign affairs minister for the Republic of Ireland. Opposing a move by Islamic states to pass a non-binding resolution against the “defamation of religions”, Mr. Martin protested that, “It can be used to justify arbitrary limitations on, or the denial of, freedom of expression. Indeed, Ireland considers that freedom of expression is a key and inherent element in the manifestation of freedom of thought and conscience and as such is complementary to freedom of religion or belief.”

The Islamic states ignored Mr. Martin’s argument. More surprisingly, so did his own government. Just months later, Ireland made blasphemy a crime under its new defamation law. And this time the Islamic states took note. But we’ll come back to that later.

Irish Blasphemy

Ireland’s ban on blasphemy was included in a defamation law that was passed, with a one vote majority, in July 2009. It outlaws any utterance or publication “that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion”. The Humanist Association of Ireland, an IHEU member organization, wrote to the Minister for Justice requesting that there be a constitutional debate before the blasphemy law was implemented. “To criminalise publication of views, whether serious or satire, is more in line with a theocracy rather than a

modern democracy,” argued the Humanists. The ministry rejected their proposal.

As soon as the Irish blasphemy law went into affect, on January 1st of this year, a group known as Atheist Ireland challenged the law by publishing 25 blasphemous quotations on its website. The quotes were from famous figures ranging from Dawkins and Rushdie to Jesus and Mohammed. “This new law is both silly and dangerous,” said Atheist Ireland’s leader, Michael Nugent, “It is silly because medieval religious laws have no place in a modern secular republic, where the criminal law should protect people and not ideas. And it is dangerous because it incentivises religious outrage.” Nugent says his group will challenge the blasphemy law through the courts if they are charged under it.

Axe Attack

Let’s hope that Ireland’s brave blasphemers will not have their lives threatened by the religiously outraged. On January 1, 2010 – the very same day that Ireland’s new blasphemy law came into effect – a man armed with an axe and knife broke into the home of Kurt Westergaard with the apparent intent to behead him for blasphemy. Westergaard has been a target of Muslim outrage since 2005 when he drew a cartoon of a man (that many presume is the Prophet Mohammed) with a bomb in his turban. Westergaard has received so many death threats that he has a safe room in his fortified home. Fortunately, the 74-year-old cartoonist was able to retreat to the safe room and call police while the attacker was still breaking through the home’s bullet-proof windows. He and his granddaughter escaped unharmed, while the attacker was shot and arrested after throwing his axe at the police.

Westergaard is just one of the Danish cartoonists, editors and publishers living in fear because they dared to poke fun at the religion of Islam. As well as hiding from assassins, these Danish cartoonists are facing a summons issued by a Jordanian court on charges of blasphemy. Jordanian prosecutors say that they hope the case “will help establish an international law against slandering religion.”

The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is working to impose just such a global blasphemy law through the United Nations. The OIC, which represents 56 countries with significant Muslim populations, has been sponsoring UN resolutions against “defamation of religions” since 1999. These have been passed every year by the UN Commission on Human Rights and its successor in Geneva, the UN Human Rights Committee. Since 2005, the UN General Assembly itself has adopted resolutions against “defamation of religions”. So far, these resolutions have not had the force of international law, but the OIC is working to change that.

*Matt Cherry is an International Representative for IHEU. He leads the IHEU delegation to the United Nations in New York and is vice president of the UN’s NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Fighting Back

IHEU has been leading the campaign against the blasphemy push at the UN. Our teams in New York and Geneva have pushed back with policy papers, briefings and lobbying within the UN. In a comprehensive report titled "Speaking Freely About Religion: Religious Freedom, Defamation and Blasphemy" (reprinted in the last issue of IHN), IHEU rebutted the claims that freedom of expression must be restricted to protect freedom of religion, and detailed how outlawing "defamation of religions" would violate many long-established principles of international law.

Furthermore, IHEU's analysis suggests that the concept of outlawing "defamation of religions" is derived from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's own laws against blasphemy. Within Pakistan, the blasphemy laws have been used by the dominant form of Islam to persecute dissenting Muslims, minority religions, freethinkers and anyone who dares criticize Islam or the oppression and atrocities carried out in its name. In effect, the blasphemy law is a way to protect the dominant religion from any criticism or competing ideas.

Just ask Dr. Younus Shaikh, the Humanist leader in Pakistan who spent more than three years on death row after being charged with blasphemy in 2000. Or Dr. Taslima Nasrin, the Humanist writer from Bangladesh, who listened to a mob of 300,000 people demand that she be hanged for blasphemy. In response, her government issued an arrest warrant against her for "hurting religious feelings." In both cases, IHEU successfully campaigned to save the lives of these courageous Humanists. Yet both must still live in exile and in fear of zealots willing to take a life to avenge hurt feelings.

All of this work by IHEU is producing results at the UN. For example, efforts to include language against "religious defamation" in the 2009 "Durban II" UN anti-racism agreement were a complete and unexpected failure. Yet we still have a long way to go to win this battle. On December 18, 2009, the UN General Assembly again adopted a resolution against "defamation of religions." After intensive lobbying by a diverse collection of non-governmental organizations including IHEU and

many religious groups, the majority for the resolution shrank to just 19 UN member states (80 in favor, 61 against, and 42 abstentions). In 2008 the majority was 33 and in 2006 it was 57. So despite another loss, the tide appears to have turned. And the resolutions remain legally non-binding.

But making progress in the new blasphemy battles is slow and difficult work. And when progress is made it can be easily reversed. Just look at Ireland. For years, human rights champions had pointed out that blasphemy laws were disappearing across the developed world. When Ireland bucked this trend by introducing a new law against defamation of religion, the OIC took note.

Last autumn the OIC opened a new front in their attempt to use the UN to outlaw blasphemy. At the obscure Ad-Hoc Committee on the Elaboration of Complementary Standards, the OIC is proposing to add an amendment about "defamation of religions" to the International Covenant on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The wording for the amendment is taken verbatim from the new Irish blasphemy law. Since ICERD has the force of international law, the amendment would outlaw 'defamation of religion' in all countries that ratify it.

Taking Action

The experiences of the past year show that we can make progress against blasphemy laws or we can fall back and lose one of our most fundamental freedoms. Humanist individuals and organizations must step up the campaign. One place to start is to ask your government to oppose the UN resolutions against "defamation of religions." To help argue your case you can use IHEU's policy paper "Speaking Freely About Religion: Religious Freedom, Defamation and Blasphemy" (download it from: <http://www.iheu.org/UN-blasphemy-report>).

As long as blasphemy is treated as a crime, good people will continue to be silenced, imprisoned and killed for speaking their conscience. We should be using human rights agreements to help them; not creating phony "religious rights" to protect their oppressors from criticism. But it is now clear that we are not going to win this battle without a long and hard fight.

The Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill

Death penalty proposed for consenting same-sex relations

*Peter Tatchell**

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill currently before the Ugandan Parliament proposes the death penalty for certain consenting homosexual acts. Sponsored by the Ugandan MP, David Bahati, the Bill is expected to be debated and voted on in the coming weeks.

Although there have been reports that death penalty clauses will be dropped, to date the Bill has not been amended, watered down or scrapped. All the original provisions, including the death penalty, remain.

Indeed, the Bill's sponsor, MP David Bahati, said in early January that he stands by the Bill



*Peter Tatchell is a human rights campaigner and advocate for the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender people: www.petertatchell.net. You can read his report on the tyranny of President Yoweri Museveni's Ugandan regime at: <http://www.blackstarnews.com/news/135/ARTICLE/6164/2009-12-18.html>

and will not withdraw it. The full text of the bill can be found at:

http://www.ukgaynews.org.uk/Archive/09/Nov/Bill-No-18-Anti-Homosexuality-Bill-2009_Uganda.pdf

Summary of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill

The Bill proposes the death penalty for two classes of same-sex acts. First, for 'aggravated' homosexuality, which is defined as gay sex with under 18s or disabled persons and gay sex by a person in authority or by a person with HIV, even if they use a condom.

The death penalty is also proposed for 'serial' homosexual acts, meaning for persons who have repeated same-sex relations ie. more than once or twice.

The Bill extends the existing penalty of life imprisonment for same-sex intercourse to all other same-sex behaviour, including the mere touching of another person with the intent to have homosexual relations.

Life imprisonment is proposed as the penalty for contracting a same-sex marriage.

Promoting homosexuality and aiding and abetting others to commit homosexual acts will be punishable by five to seven years' jail. These new crimes are likely to include membership and funding of LGBT organisations, advocacy of LGBT human rights, supportive counselling of LGBT persons and the provision of condoms or safer sex advice to LGBT people.

A person in authority – gay or heterosexual – who fails to report violators to the police within 24 hours will be sentenced to three years behind bars. This will potentially criminalise parents and teachers. They will be required to inform on their loved ones and their pupils.

Astonishingly, the new legislation has an extra-territorial jurisdiction. It will also apply to Ugandan citizens or foreign residents of Uganda who commit these 'crimes' while abroad, in countries where such behaviour is not a criminal offence. Violators overseas will be subjected to extradition, trial and punishment in Uganda.

This bill is in many respects even more draconian than the extreme homophobic laws of countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is part of a wide attack on civil society and is symptomatic of Uganda's drift to Mugabe-style authoritarianism.



Protesters rally against Uganda's anti-gay legislation, outside the Uganda High Commission in London

Existing anti-gay laws in Uganda – and their consequences

The Uganda Penal Code Act of 1950 (Chapter 120) (as amended)

Section 145. Unnatural offences.

--Any person who-- (a) has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; (b) has carnal knowledge of an animal; or (c) permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, commits an offence and is liable to imprisonment for life.

Section 146. Attempt to commit unnatural offences.

--Any person who attempts to commit any of the offences specified in section 145 commits a felony and is liable to imprisonment for seven years.

Section 148. Indecent practices.

--Any person who, whether in public or in private, commits any act of gross indecency with another person or procures another person to commit any act of gross indecency with him or her or attempts to procure the commission of any such act by any person with himself or herself or with another person, whether in public or in private, commits an offence and is liable to imprisonment for seven years.

The current anti-homosexual laws were originally imposed on Uganda by the British colonial administration in the nineteenth century, during the period of imperial subjugation. They are not authentic Ugandan or African laws.

The consequences of this already existing legislation can include long terms of imprisonment for homosexual relations between consenting adults in private.

Criminalisation also often leads to the failure of police to protect the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) victims of mob violence. It gives a green light to blackmailers and to police harassment of LGBT people, including the framing of LGBT Ugandans on false charges.

The outing of LGBT people by the Kampala tabloid newspaper, *Red Pepper*, has resulted in some victims losing their jobs and homes. Others have been disowned by their families and forced to go into hiding.

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill is just the latest of many attacks on the LGBT community of Uganda.

In recent years, the Ugandan government of President Yoweri Museveni has passed a law banning same-sex civil marriage, fined Radio Simba for broadcasting a discussion of LGBT issues, and expelled a UN AIDS agency director for meeting with LGBT campaigners.

Some years ago, a heterosexual Anglican bishop of the West Buganda diocese of Uganda, Christopher Senyonjo, was denied the right to preach and denied his pension by the Church of Uganda after he defended the human rights of LGBT people.

Humanists Help Haiti

Humanists have reacted generously to the disaster in Haiti. In response to the disastrous earthquake and ongoing suffering in Haiti, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is partnering with a new disaster relief fund called 'Non-Believers Giving Aid'. Humanists are invited to make humanitarian donations for Haiti through the new fund at: www.GivingAid.RichardDawkins.net.

Non-Believers Giving Aid was created by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason and will give all money collected to two secular organizations providing aid in Haiti: Doctors without Borders and the Red Cross (donors can choose how their gift is split). The new mechanism will remain open for future disaster relief work.

Many IHEU member organizations have joined Non-Believers Giving Aid, including the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Association. Other IHEU MOs have set up their own fundraising efforts for Haiti or made direct donations. The Norwegian Humanist Association donated 100 000 Norwegian Krone (almost 20 000 US Dollars) to the Red Cross for Haiti aid. The Skeptics and Humanist Aid and Relief Effort (SHARE) – affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism – is forwarding donations to Doctors without Borders in Haiti. As of January 22, SHARE's Haiti relief drive was about to exceed \$90 000.

Humanist Charities, an adjunct of the American Humanist Association, is working with a less prominent project to provide food, water, medical supplies and rescue tools to Haiti: Sebastian Velez, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard University and director of the Children of the Border project, is currently on the ground working to distribute supplies. With help from Humanist Charities, Velez's team of volunteers provided the first shipment of medicines and rescue tools to arrive in the devastated city of Jacmel. The

group has been working tirelessly since then to provide aid to the region, including to an orphanage that had not received food for four days. As of January 22, 2010, Humanist Charities had raised more than \$50 000.

In recent years, the Dutch Humanist group HIVOS (the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation) has provided tens of millions of Euros to support development projects throughout Africa, Asia and the Americas. Today HIVOS is forwarding donations to its long-time partners working on the ground in Haiti. Go to Alliance 2015 for more information.

IHEU president, Sonja Eggerickx, explained the generous Humanist response to the Haiti disaster: "Humanists have joined the global outpouring of support for the victims of the devastating Haiti earthquake. Sometimes, Humanists have created their own charitable agencies to fill a need that is not being met by others, but more often Humanists prefer to do their charitable work with others of different beliefs, rather than setting up competing agencies just so that we can promote 'the Humanist brand.' And most of us make humanitarian donations without drawing attention to our Humanist beliefs. Now a new approach is growing: Humanist charities that appeal to specifically Humanist donors but then forward 100 percent of the donations to the best qualified mainstream charity. This raises the profile of Humanism and ensures the maximum support goes to the best and most inclusive aid organizations. I hope this generous and assertive approach will grow as our community of Humanists grows."

Matt Cherry



Matt Cherry

Report of the National Conference in Malawi

On September 4-5, 2009 the Association for Secular Humanism (ASH) organised a national conference on Humanism, Religion and Witchcraft in Malawi. It was held at the NCIC hall and attracted over 40 participants. The conference was preceded by a press conference on 3rd September. All the major media houses were in attendance including Television Malawi. The national conference was sponsored by IHEU, HAMU, CFI, BHA and the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR). Goodwill messages were received from the Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists.

Leo Igwe, the IHEU representative, in his keynote address, thanked Humanists for the work of promoting

Humanism in Malawi. He was happy to note that the Association is now registered, has an Executive Director and its visibility has been raised in the country. He thanked Dr. Paul Munyenembe, the Chairman of ASH for providing the required leadership. He assured the membership of support from IHEU, other Humanist friends and organisations worldwide. He called upon ASH to sustain this momentum to ensure that Humanism grows and

*George Thindwa**



George Thindwa

*George Thindwa is Executive Director of the Association of Secular Humanism

awakens in the people of Malawi and Africa from their dogmatic, superstitious and supernatural slumber.

Leo was concerned with the witchcraft problem in Malawi. He stated that witchcraft is a primitive superstition, and it should be eradicated, though efforts to eradicate this belief and the problems it is causing in Malawi are being undermined by Christian fanatics who use the Bible to justify witchcraft accusation, labelling, persecution and killing. Most people in Malawi and Africa cannot draw a distinction between the reality of a belief and the reality of what is believed in. Witchcraft has no basis in reason, science or common sense, he said. He was firm that the time has come for Africa to do away with such primitive superstitions and asked Humanists to take this message of enlightenment and intellectual awakening to all parts of Malawi, particularly since that Malawians are considering reviewing the Witchcraft Act.

Dr. Munyenembe thanked the donors for the financial support for the conference. He said that the event was taking place at the right time, as Malawi was awash with evils such as ritual and albino killings, harvesting of human body parts, witchcraft accusations of children, rampant religious superstitions and irrationality. He told participants that Humanism is not communism, religion, nor Satanism. He pointed out that Humanists are free from superstition, non religious, believers in science, and oppose superstition and supernatural beliefs; and among Humanists one is likely find atheists, free thinkers, rationalists, skeptics, secularists and agnostics. As Humanists, we are committed to building a liberal, democratic and scientific country, and promoting human rights including the fight against HIV/AIDS. Dr Munyenembe briefed the members on the progress made to date by ASH, i.e. increased membership, acquisition of an office and having an Executive Director. He thanked all those present for attending the conference.

Dr Munyenembe made a presentation at the conference on, "The Difference between Scientific and Supernatural ways of Knowing". In his paper, he said that there are serious differences between these two methods in that science relies on observation, theory and experiment, it is precise in defining issues, and is rational, while the supernatural method is conservative, almost unchallenged and based on belief in gods, angels, and spirits, it is vaguely presented and evades tests and is subjective. Supernatural ideas are mainly based on revelations, intuition and speculations. He pointed out that the dangers of unjustified supernatural beliefs and dogma had resulted in loss of life in the Kenya bombings in 1998 and USA on September 11, 2001. In Malawi, supernatural beliefs have led to ritual killings and victimisation of children accused as witches. He concluded that reliance on supernatural beliefs leads to the prescription of wrong solutions to real problems.

Pastor Chakwera of International Christian Assembly thanked Humanists for being tolerant by inviting religious persons to the conference. He acknowledged how fear and superstition has derailed progress and how some religious beliefs have resulted in violence and other evils. Nonetheless, he disagreed with the assembled Humanists on the issue of abjuring supernatural beliefs



in his paper titled "Anti-Supernatural Bias" in which he accused Humanists of being intolerant towards supernatural explanations.

Titus Munthali's presentation on "Witchcraft in Malawi and the Way forward" tackled the origins and background of witchcraft. He then provided three horrific examples of witchcraft that have occurred recently. The first example involved five children of ages between two and eleven years in Mzimba District, who are alleged to have fallen from a magic plane claimed to have been under the control of Mr. Machilika. One child, nine year old Clementine Phiri, died. Mr. Kachilika is reported to have admitted to teaching these children witchcraft when quizzed by the police. People in the area went amok and torched the houses of the accused witch. A second case was from Blantyre District where witchdoctors were called from Mozambique to sort out a case of an unknown vampire that was terrorizing Ndirande township where residents were raped, had their faces mangled, found dead or chased at night. A third case was in Mulanje district where a woman is said to have given birth to a stone. The women claimed that her sister-in-law had bewitched her.

Mr. Munthali stated that witchcraft belief is a real problem in Malawi. He proposed advocacy action to educate people that witchcraft is not real. He said that people should learn to know that belief does not confer reality on what is believed in. Therefore, the participants concluded that it was sad that people should continue to suffer because of witchcraft. They agreed to press the government to take stern action against witchcraft accusation and labelling, particularly on children. Participants also agreed that the Association should seek financial assistance to undertake an advocacy project against witchcraft.

C. Chifunda's presentation dwelt on cultural and oppressive practices that keep women in bondage in Malawi while Mr. Magola's paper tackled harmful and superstitious beliefs in the health sector. Chifunda's paper stated that some injustices against women have some basis in the scriptures where women are presumed to be inferior to men. Some of the oppressive practices were given, eg women take no prominent positions in the church, inheritance of widows, women being discouraged from using family planning methods. Mr. Magola's presentation cited some harmful cultural practices such as mothers shunning hospitals because they believe that nurses kill children at delivery; men suffering from malaria because of the belief that treated mosquito nets interfere with reproduction; pregnant

women being discouraged from eating eggs to avoid having their birth canals closed, pregnant women being discouraged from crossing a river before delivery etc. These two papers showed that beliefs have a detrimental effect on the promotion of gender equality and health. Members agreed that the Association should engage with other stakeholders to eliminate harmful religious and cultural beliefs in the society.

The paper by Ollen Mwalubunju “Religion, Nationalisation, and the Growth of Humanism in Malawi: Prospects and Challenges” showed that Christianity and Islam were introduced in the 1800s. These religions have grown to the extent that 90 percent of Malawians are either Protestants, Roman Catholics or Muslims. There is also a heavy presence of religious preachings and songs in private and public radio stations including TV. Many religions have also established their own radio stations. Despite this religiosity, Mr. Mwalubunju advised that there are a lot of opportunities for the growth of Humanism because of the dropout in church attendance in Britain where Christianity originated. The expansion of science and technology should encourage scientific thinking in the current belief system, and with economic development, superstitious beliefs will begin to be questioned and rational and critical thinking will take roots. He stated that there is already a national concern for the negative effects of some religious beliefs and superstitions that the Humanist movement can capitalise on. He pointed out that many challenges remain for the Humanist movement because Malawi is a heavily dominated religious society. The introduction of religious studies in

schools, religious media campaigns and strong religious influence in decision making circles are some of the challenges. Some strategies were suggested for the promotion of Humanism, eg the need to design awareness programs based on common areas of concerns, holding of debates in colleges and secondary schools, starting Humanist ceremonies, identifying progressive NGOs and formulating joint programs and printing and distribution of awareness materials.

Mr. Koloko of Bunda College mentioned some challenges faced by the student Humanist associations. He said that the main problem is lack of follow up by continuing students once the devoted students leave college. The outgoing students leave a gap that is difficult to fill. He promised to resolve this problem.

There were also presentations by Humanist organisations from Nigeria and Tanzania with the aim of allowing Malawian Humanists to learn and draw lessons from the experiences of other Humanist groups. Finally, Leo took the participants through some exercises on critical thinking. They were asked to raise as many questions as possible on some common religious beliefs and witchcraft stories that appeared in the media. It was discovered that with critical thinking, most of the beliefs and stories were proved to be false.

This is a brief of the issues discussed at the National Conference on Humanism, Religion and Witchcraft in Malawi. The main report of the proceedings and an Action Plan arising from the deliberations are being finalised. The conference has led to the visibility of Humanism and recognition of the efforts that the Association is taking to promote it.

Who pays, wins: Nigerian Justice 2010

Leo Igwe*

On Tuesday, January 5 2010, at about 7 am some armed police officers and soldiers led by two local criminals, Edward Uwah and Ethelbert Ugwu, stormed my family compound in Mbaise in Imo state in Southern Nigeria. They arrested me and my aging father. We were detained briefly at the local police station in Ahiazu before we were transferred to the zonal police headquarters in Umuahia. The officers threatened to beat us when we asked them to allow us to clean up and change our clothes. One of the soldiers brought out his gun and threatened to shoot my father when he wanted to make phone calls to alert other family members of our arrest. The police held us throughout the day without giving us food and water.

At the zonal police headquarters in Umuahia, a police officer read a petition by Ethelbert Ugwu who alleged that in September 2009 I with my father, three brothers and one Mr Gregory Iwu conspired, murdered and attempted to conceal the murder of one Mr Aloysius Chukwu who died in September last year. According to family sources, Mr Chukwu died in a local hospital after a brief illness. We made statements in response to the

allegations and were later released on bail.

In 2006, a local girl, Daberechi Anomgam, then aged 10, was raped by Edward Uwah (55), a university teacher. Her father filed a complaint with the police, and since 2007 I have been working with the family to ensure that she and her family obtain justice.



Leo Igwe

But since then, both Edward Uwah and Ethelbert Ugwu, a local criminal, have brought several police actions and framed allegations against me and my family members, Daberechi and her family, and some other members of the community opposed to their criminal schemes. My father, who is over 77 years old and whose health is failing (he is diabetic), has been detained six times at the local and zonal police stations in connection with this case. Two of my brothers have been detained three times and on one occasion in 2008, one of them was beaten and brutalised by soldiers and mobile police officers brought by Ethelbert Ugwu.

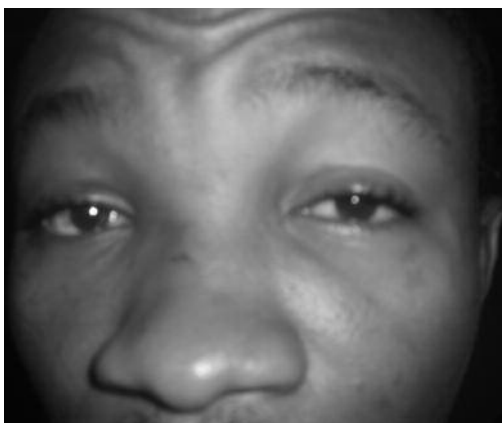
*Leo Igwe is IHEU International Representative, Africa

Both Ethelbert and Edward have filed three civil suits against me, my family members and Daberechi's father at three different courts, claiming damages of over 500 million naira (\$3.3million). They have written petitions calling for my brothers to be sacked from their jobs and expelled from the college.

The police officers in Ahiazu and Zone 9 in Umuahia have aided and abetted these atrocious and criminal acts by their irresponsible handling of the case and their readiness to arrest and detain anyone as long as they are given some money. On a particular occasion in 2008, my father was arrested by police officers sent by Edward Uwah as he was leaving the court premises after attending a sitting of one of the civil suits also filed by Edward Uwah. The next day I flew from Ibadan and on arriving at the police station I was also detained. I had not known that I was among those accused by Edward Uwa – on this occasion of breaking in and stealing. He alleged that we broke into his house and stole some items, and then scattered some juju and charms on the floor! I was released on bail. The petition ended there. Uwah never produced any witnesses and the police never charged him for providing them with false information.

As a result of my efforts and those of other Humanist and human rights activists in Nigeria and across the world, Edward Uwah is currently standing trial at a local court for indecently assaulting Daberechi. But in order to try to undermine the case, Ethelbert Ugwu managed to have himself appointed as prosecutor! However I got a lawyer to help Daberechi's family apply for a withdrawal of the fiat, and in November the Director of Public Prosecution in Imo state cancelled the fiat.

Unfortunately the police have refused to arrest and investigate Ethelbert Ugwu despite several petitions against him at Ahiazu and Zone 9 (Umuahia) police stations. The police are part of the problem because most police officers do not carry out their duties with integrity. When it comes to police arrest and investigation in Nigeria three things



Inhuman injuries



matter most: money, money and money!

In most cases, police officers carry out their investigation to favour whoever 'mobilises' them or gives them a bribe. The way you are treated at police stations is determined by how much you pay or are ready to pay the officers – whether as a complainant or a suspect. And in my community as in other rural communities in Nigeria, most people are poor and cannot afford to bribe the police. Hence criminal minded individuals are having a field day with police officers and soldiers.

This nonsense must stop.

Pressure must be brought to bear on the police authorities in Nigeria to make them stop all acts of harassment, intimidation, illegal detention, and extortion of money from the members of my family and community, including the family members of Daberechi Anomgam. Pressure must be brought on the police authorities so that they carry out their jobs responsibly. They must immediately arrest, investigate and prosecute Ethelbert Ugwu, Edward Uwah and their partners in crime, including the police officers and soldiers whom they have used over the years to raid my community, assault innocent citizens and obstruct justice.

No amount of intimidation, police action, extortion, harassment, legal suits, trumped up charges, fictitious and malicious allegations, petitions against me and my family members will stop me from fighting for justice for this girl child and for humanity at large.

Leo Igwe, Owerri, Imo State, 7 Jan 2010.

On January 9, Sonja Eggerickx, president of IHEU, wrote the following letter to Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, President of Nigeria, to ask his office to intervene to end the police harassment of Leo and his family. The IHEU request was also sent to the Nigerian attorney general, minister for the police, and the governor of Imo State, where the Igwes live.

H.E. Umaru Musa Yar'Adua
President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria
Office of the President
Aso Rock, Abuja
Nigeria

9 January, 2010

Your Excellency,

I am writing as president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) to express my

serious concern about the treatment of my Nigerian colleague Leo Igwe. IHEU is an international non-governmental organization with Special Consultative Status with the United Nations and Observer Status with the African Commission on Human and People's Rights. It employs Mr. Igwe as one of its representatives in Africa, working to promote Humanism, human rights and peaceful development in the continent.

Mr. Igwe and members of his family, who all live

near Owerri, Imo State, have been subjected to a sustained campaign of harassment by local police involving multiple arrests on trumped up charges since 2007. For example, Leo's father Oliver Igwe, who is 77 and in failing health, has been arrested six times on false charges since 2007. Two of Leo's brothers have been detained three times each. Most recently, Leo and Oliver Igwe were arrested on Tuesday, January 5, 2010 and detained at the local police station in Ahiazu before being transferred to the zonal police headquarters in Umuahia. There were threats of violence by the police and the two were kept in harsh conditions that could have proved fatal to Oliver Igwe, who is diabetic. Following protests from around the world, Oliver and Leo Igwe were released on bail. But then on January 8, Leo's brother Uche Igwe was taken into custody by the State Security Service. He has now also been released.

The ongoing campaign of harassment has been instigated by two wealthy local citizens, Edward Uwah

and his associate Ethelbert Ugwu. Mr. Uwah is facing trial for the rape of a ten year old girl, Ms. Daberechi Anongam. Mr. Igwe and his family lead the campaign to bring this horrific case of child abuse to trial.

We therefore urge your Excellency to intervene to ensure that the authorities drop the baseless charges against Oliver and Leo Igwe and end the police harassment of Igwe and his family.

Yours sincerely,

Sonja Eggerickx
President, International Humanist and Ethical Union

cc. H.E. Chief Dr. Ikedi Ohakim, Governor of Imo State
Michael Aondoakaa, Attorney General and Minister of Justice

Dr. Ibrahim Lame, Minister of Police
H.E. Bob Dewar, UK High Commissioner to Nigeria
H.E., Dr Dalhatu Tafida, Nigerian High Commissioner to the UK

Human Rights, Human Plights

*Rob Buitenweg**

It is a well-known fact that many people live in abject socio-economic misery, exploited, slaving in horrible working conditions, without enough food, housing, health care and education. In this globalised world they are not far from their more fortunate brethren. We are only a few hours' travel time away from the street child in Bolivia, from the raped woman in Darfur, from the HIV infected man in South Africa, from the homeless in New York, from the powerless untouchables in Asia, from the victims of the earthquake in China, or of hurricanes like Katrina or Nargis.

How is this widely known and nearby human misery possible despite the socio-economic human rights, like the right to adequate housing, to food, to health care, education, mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments? Why is there hardly any mention of socio-economic rights in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, although they are about the same subjects? Why does the international community readily allow this violation of socio-economic rights to continue, while the violation of civil and political rights, like the right to freedom of belief and freedom of expression, raises enormous indignation and abhorrence? Why do I have the impression that even many Humanists care more about civil and political rights than about socio-economic rights? In short, why are socio-economic rights treated as second-rate rights although the UDHR itself says that socio-economic rights are indispensable for human dignity?

I think one of the reasons is that a spirit of libertarianism has pervaded the ideas and policies of many people, countries and international organisations, like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Even if they do not call themselves libertarian they seem to be infected by libertarianism. Libertarianism sees

freedom as the most important value. We Humanists also attach much value to freedom. However, I think we should be cautious not to interpret our Humanism as libertarianism. Because closer examination of libertarianism reveals that it suffers from illusions. I will deal with some of these illusions now.

Libertarians are fond of civil and political rights. After all, these rights protect and promote freedom, because they require others, in particular the government, to refrain from interfering with people's lives, with their belief, their expressions. They prescribe to others to stay out of people's private domain. Socio-economic rights, however, cannot count on much sympathy from the libertarians. Libertarians are even opposed to these rights. Socio-economic rights do not promote and protect freedom. They do not require others to refrain from doing something, on the contrary they imply a duty for others, in particular governments, to actually do something, for instance to provide people with adequate health care or food. Even worse, these rights are in conflict with the right to freedom and the right to property. In order to implement these rights, the well-off are forced to pay taxes as a contribution to the improvement of the position of the least-advantaged. That amounts to a violation of the lawful property of the well off, or so the libertarians claim.

But I would like to ask them, can we be sure that the well off are the legitimate owners of their property? Is their property so sacrosanct that asking them to give up part of it, is beyond consideration? Nozick, a famous libertarian, argues that people are entitled to the goods they possess, if the history of these goods is legitimate, i.e. if the first acquisition in the distant past and the subsequent transfers have been legitimate, i.e. have taken place on a voluntary base, and, if – when they have not been transferred legitimately – measures have been

taken to correct the injustice of the transfer.

Well, if *that* is the procedure that makes property legitimate I would claim that most property is illegitimate, as often property will have been and is acquired through force and manipulation. Somewhere in the history of possessions something would have gone wrong. Are not the well-off – are not many of us – the heirs of robber knights, colonisers, plunderers? Nozick does not deny that, but it does not disquiet him. He says that possible iniquities and injustices in the history of goods are corrected or compensated for by the healing effects of the capitalist system. Capitalism, the free-market, has ensured that the position of the poor of today is much better than the position of the poor in the past. That makes the current distribution of property legitimate and inviolable.

But, *that is a hasty conclusion. That is an illusion.* The point is not whether the position of the poor of today is better than that of their fellow-sufferers of the past, the question is whether the poor wouldn't have been and wouldn't be better-off under a system different from the capitalist system, for instance under a system that respects and implements socio-economic rights. I think they would have been and would be better off. That unmasks the healing pretensions of capitalism. And, that implies that the property of the well off is not so sacred that they should not be forced to contribute to the implementation of socio-economic rights by giving up a small part of their wealth to alleviate the misery of the poor.

Nozick's fellow libertarian Hayek does not say that the current distribution is just, but he argues that socio-economic situations cannot be called just, nor can they be called unjust. Justice and injustice are notions that presuppose human involvement and socio-economic situations, like poverty, are not the result of human actions. Poverty may be hard but it cannot be called unjust, just like it cannot be called unjust when people fall victim to a hurricane.

I would say, also *this is a hasty conclusion, it is an illusion.* Socio-economic situations do not appear out of the blue. They are the sediment of conflicts between people about wealth and resources. Conflicts may sometimes remain below the surface, but they exist in every society and in global relationships. And, poverty is the result of these conflicting struggles for life. The vulnerable and the weak are pushed aside by the powerful, sometimes and in some societies by violence, but often and in most societies through socio-economic measures, import-duties, trade-policies.

It must be admitted that often socio-economic misery has not been caused by *intentional* actions. By buying products produced by child labour, I do not intend to cause misery but perhaps I do. By putting my money in the bank that invests it in a company that has factories where workers work in horrible working-conditions I do not intend to cause misery, but maybe I do. Am I then responsible for the misery I cause? Are we responsible for the unintended result of our actions? To some extent we are. Someone who causes a traffic accident without being at fault but who does not care about the victim,

commits an act of injustice. Likewise people may be said to have committed an act of injustice if they cause socio-economic misery and they refuse to take steps to alleviate the suffering they have caused. Supporting socio-economic rights is a means to discharge one's responsibility and to take steps to alleviate the suffering one unintentionally may have caused.

Libertarians attach value to freedom, but they interpret freedom as freedom from interference by others, in particular the government, and they see civil and political rights as a way to realise this freedom. And they think no more needs to be said about freedom. But, *thinking that freedom is "freedom from interference, period", is a hasty conclusion, it is an illusion.* At least three objections can be made.

1. Freedom from interference is important, but, so one may ask, what is the worth of that freedom if people do not have shelter against cold and rain, if they don't have access to education, if they starve to death? If their civil and political rights are respected one may jubilantly say that these people are free, but that is a *hasty conclusion, it is an illusion.* One cannot but admit that the worth of this freedom is rather small. To make their freedom worthy or to enhance the worth of their freedom not only civil and political rights but also their socio-economic rights should be respected.

2. And, we can bring up another argument against the statement that "freedom is freedom from interference, period". Let us try to find out why freedom from interference is important. Why is it important that others mind their own business? Libertarians themselves say that freedom from interference is important because we can achieve our goals and realise our values, that we can have at our disposal our talents and the fruits of our talents. If people are free from interference they can follow their dreams and aspirations. In short freedom from interference enables people to live their lives as they think fit.

I agree with libertarians: being free to live your life as you think fit, being free to determine the course of your life, that is the freedom everything turns on. That is also the freedom that we Humanists adhere to. But thinking, like libertarians do, that freedom from interference guarantees this substantial freedom, is a *hasty conclusion, it is an illusion.* For, sometimes people are free, to the extent that nobody is interfering with their lives, but due to miserable socio-economic circumstances they are not free to live their lives as they think fit.

It looks like there are three freedoms: firstly, substantial freedom, to be free to live their lives as people think fit, that is the top-freedom; then the freedom from interference, the absence of coercing others, which can be called negative freedom; thirdly, positive freedom, the presence of enabling circumstances. To enjoy substantial freedom, i.e. to be able to live their lives as they think fit, people not only need negative freedom, but also positive freedom. Negative freedom is served by civil and political rights, positive freedom, by socio-economic rights.

3. One could also agree with libertarians that freedom is

freedom from interference, period! But, so one could continue, thinking that only civil and political rights are needed to protect and promote that freedom from interference, is a *hasty conclusion, it is an illusion*. True, civil and political rights protect and promote freedom from interference by saying that people may not be prevented from expressing their opinion or practising their belief. But, socio-economic rights also promote and protect negative freedom. They do that by saying that people may not be prevented from providing themselves with necessary resources. The powerful, so this argument runs, deprive the poor of food, housing, health care. They do that, not with their bare hands but by oppressive political arrangements. For instance, there is said to be a global food crisis. But, are you, are we, in want of food? Is there a shortage of food, or is most food taken by the well off, leaving the rest to the poor? Socio-

economic rights say that the well off may not take all the resources and leave only some crumbs to the weak. In this way socio-economic rights are interpreted as protecting freedom from interference.

Whether one sees socio-economic rights as rights that protect the worth of liberty, as rights that protect positive freedom, i.e. the presence of enabling circumstances, or as rights that protect negative freedom by prescribing to the powerful not to deprive the poor of access to socio-economic goods, they are aimed at freedom, just like the civil and political rights.

We, Humanists, regard freedom as indispensable for a dignified life. We should then be concerned about the right to freedom of belief, the right to freedom of expression and other civil and political rights, but we should also be concerned about socio-economic rights. After all, human dignity is at stake.

Forthcoming Attraction

The May 2010 issue of *IHN* will have a special feature on **New Debates in Science and Religion**. Readers are requested to send in their articles of not more than 2000 words before 31 March 2010 to editor@iheu.org on this topic. As part of this section, there will be an interview with renowned Humanist, Prof A C Grayling.

Thoughts on the Haitian earthquake

Roy W Brown*

In a TV broadcast following the horrific earthquake in Haiti on 12 January, the billionaire televangelist Pat Robertson told his audience that the Haitians had brought it on themselves by making a pact with the devil when they gained their independence from France 200 years ago.

The Archbishop of York (No 2 in the worldwide Anglican hierarchy) was interviewed on BBC Radio 4 about the Haiti earthquake. The interviewer John Humphries asked him: Where was God?

The archbishop's answer was somewhat convoluted (I am being kind) but boiled down to this: God created the world, and we know what God is like because we have seen Jesus. He is with us. But having created this wonderful world, it is a world where bad things happen, and when they do God does not intervene to prevent the innocent from suffering.

This God is clearly different from the God of Pat Robertson who believes that bad things only happen to bad people. But however inhuman it may seem to blame the victims for their misfortune, this is logically more consistent with the idea of an all-powerful God who could have prevented the earthquake but chose not to. But can we really accept that every one of the 50 000 men women and children who died in the earthquake deserved to die? Such a thought is truly inhuman.

If, however, they did not all deserve to die, then can a

God who chose not to intervene be all loving? At the very least it suggests that if he is all loving, he is also utterly incompetent.

The Christian answer to this that I have heard is that death is merely the beginning, a release from our suffering here on Earth. In that case, what of the tens of thousands who were not killed but badly injured, many of whom, given the complete lack of decent hospital facilities in Haiti, will no doubt die slow and agonising deaths? Does God not care for them?

One of the first scenes on our TV screens after the earthquake was of a group of young orange-clad missionaries boarding the first plane out of Port au Prince. They no doubt believe that God was calling them away from helping the victims because their prayers were needed back home in the Bible Belt.

But to return to the logical fallacy of an all-powerful, all-merciful God. A more tenable hypothesis is surely that no God had anything to do with the earthquake; it was the result of tectonic forces stressing the crust of the Earth below Port au Prince to breaking point. Maybe science will one day enable us to predict earthquakes, but until it does we are on our own.

Please give what you can to the earthquake victims. Disasters will happen, and no God is going to intervene to prevent it, or help the victims. It's up to us.

How are we Human?

Dr. Prasad Golla*

Some of us claim we are Humanists. That's our identity. However, the fundamental question as to how we came to be human goes unanswered many times.

It is as wide open a question as what one means by God. Every one of the believers has a different answer to this fundamental question. A question shouldn't be that open for interpretation. It is almost certain that any simple answer is wrong. It is not even incorrect.

So, how did we come to be human?

To answer that question isn't easy. (No one said it was.) That is the first myth we need to break. It is a complex question which deserves a lot of our respect. It takes some time to understand and answer.

Firstly, we need to delve into the origin of life on this planet. How did life come about on this planet and how did, as a consequence, humans come to exist?

The first signs of life on Earth date back to 3.5 to 3.46 billion years. It is important to remember that there is no evidence of life before that on our planet. We find traces of life in the form of bacterium which lived and died leaving their fossilized remains. Where some left their "shells", others left behind traces of their activities; those that powerful microscopes can reveal.

But bacteria are complex beings by themselves. Although just a few millimeters across they are gigantic as far as the molecules they embody. Viruses are an order smaller than bacteria. Then why can't viruses be the elements of life?

The simple answer to that is that viruses are not "complete" beings. They cannot do anything on their own. The essential function of reproduction is piggy-backed on to other organisms. They deceive others to perform the functions that they themselves lack the ability to do. Bacteria do those functions on their own. Usually, viruses attach themselves to the self-replicating mechanism of other organisms so that they can replicate. Viruses don't eat or breathe. And as a consequence viruses don't produce energy from their own activities, unlike bacteria.

So, we take bacteria as the fundamental elements of life on this planet. In fact they are the most dominant group on this planet. Their living mass as a whole on this planet hasn't been superseded ever since they first appeared on this planet 3.5 billion years or so back. The plant and animal mass of this planet falls far short of bacteria's total mass even today. They are prolific beings. And they cannot be wiped out by any catastrophe, whereas plant and animal life is deeply vulnerable.

The surface to volume ratio of a bacterium is such that the equation of life favors them as millimeter (microscopic) organisms. The ratio falls as any being increases in size (hence volume.) This ratio is so favorable that between 3.5 billion years and 570 million years ago, the only organisms that existed on this planet were the various unicellular organisms. The oxygen and

food intake favors bacteria more than a multicellular organism, hence life didn't seek anything more. There was no reason to.

In the Cambrian age, from 570 million years ago, we find evidence of multicellular organisms. We do not know why the Cambrian age is special. Maybe there was an upsurge of oxygen during that period. (This is the period right after the snowball earth.) This is not to say that the bacterium didn't have the evolutionary capabilities to form colonies of multicellular organisms until then. There is evidence that the required mutations for such a transformation had taken place much before, a couple of billion years before the actual multicellular beings came about. But why then didn't the multicellular organisms form?

Not just because there was now a reason to break the "golden" ratio that we mentioned before. There wasn't a need to break that ratio before the Cambrian age. The life form was already dominant in the way of bacteria. Why would the less "stable" multicellular organisms form? There isn't any evolutionary or survival advantage. In fact, multicellular organisms helped maintain the proper buoyancy and hence were evolutionarily desirable.

Once that came about there was a proliferation in both plant and animal life on the planet. The Cambrian period of the Earth, which lasted only about 30 million years (about 570 to 540 million years) – a geological blink of an eye – saw the explosion of multicellular life. Insects, worms, crustaceans, etc. formed and dominated the earth (or tried to). They never really superseded the bacteria – nothing ever did – but the fossil records show rich number of them from the Cambrian period.

Four factors give the illusion of randomness: Mutations, genetic mixing, natural selection and planetary cataclysms. In fact, they are random. None can be foreseen. Evolution essentially is blind. Each of these factors needs further elaboration.

Natural selection weeds out the characteristics in beings that do not impart in them any benefits for survival. There is no 'end design.' There is no grand architect. There isn't any intelligence in the design.

The bacteria – the cells in any organism, whether unicellular or multicellular – continue to mutate and evolve. Essential mutations take place at the cell level even today. It is the selfish gene, as Dawkins put it.

People had difficulty seeing man evolve from a chimpanzee. A chimp has 99 percent of the proteins and DNA (Nucleic acid sequences) similar to that of man.



Dr. Prasad Golla

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Though this fact is made much of, the real difficulty should be to see a unicellular bacterium evolve into mammoth beings such as the dinosaurs. We find plenty of evidence for all this of course. No one in their right mind can deny that dinosaurs lived and walked this earth. Their remains are found abundantly everywhere on this planet.

Like the dinosaurs, millions and billions of species came and went. They were driven to extinction because of changing environments. Environs are as dynamic as the species that live in them.

Those that couldn't adapt, and were hence ill-fit to live, were eliminated. We humans have contributed to the extinction of many a species in the name of our own survival. The vanishing of big game on continents as humans invaded them is proof aplenty. There is evidence that we literally drove them off the cliffs.

There are countless episodes of violence, deceit, and valor in our history as humans. Yet we are not the dominant beings on this planet. Bacteria are.

But the fundamental question as to how bacteria came about on this earth is still not answered. We just said that viruses which are smaller are not organisms. Then where did the bacteria come from? We can summarize the answer in one word: Panspermia.

Panspermia "seeds disseminated everywhere." For us this hypothesis means that life came to earth from elsewhere; specifically from space; by some means; and that life didn't spawn on this planet. The planet, in fact, is not the womb, it's just a home.

This isn't an outlandish proposal. The more we delve into it, the more sense it will begin to make. For the basic molecules of life to come together, there should exist the right conditions. Scientists are in agreement, if not totally, that such conditions never existed on earth. Comets, with their water and amino acids, probably are better suited. Mars, our earth's sister planet, is, for example, better suited than earth itself for life to form.

The popular notion of the search for life on Mars is to look for little green men. Scientists don't look for them. Martian soil is sterile and barren. It took scientists some time to figure out that the rocks hold the key. They are now looking for traces of bacteria on and in rocks. Bacteria probably still live in these rocks and underground. However, they could be buried kilometers underneath the surface of the Martian soil. This is difficult to get to, to say the least.

It has already been shown that Mars had water. This was important because water is one of the essential elements of life. At least the carbon based life depends on it. But we do not know if water was essential, or there was anything else for such a cell to form. For now the

search continues. We continue to send probes to Mars every year.

The mechanism of translocation of life from Mars to earth is well understood and shown to be quite plausible. Bacteria can go into deep hibernation for prolonged periods. A Martian stone spewed into space because of volcanism or meteorite strike could have carried life. Such a rock could have fallen onto earth. Earth was atmospherically receptive at one time to accept without damage such a stone. A meteorite, which fell in the Antarctic continent a few thousand years ago, and discovered in 1984, showed signs of life along with the tell-tale spectrographic signature that it came from Mars.

That's as mythical as one can get when we talk of our origins as humans: that our life on this planet came from elsewhere. The rest is quite well supported by evidence.

From very humble beginnings we all evolved. The point is not to be ashamed of our humble background (We should admit it with pride.) Bacteria are quite complex and sophisticated "animals." They encapsulate our very being. We have billions of cells in our bodies.

The mitochondrion, the nucleus that gets passed from mother to child and never from the father, is a cell trapped by the bacteria. This capturing of "foreign cells" has made evolution a revolution. It put evolution on a fast track. Cohabitation – or as scientists call it Endosymbiosis – speeds up evolution. So does sexual reproduction.

The genetic material contained in the animal cell undergoes mutations. By sharing chromosomes from both the mother and the father the combinations explode. Such a zygote is better prepared to fight other bacteria and viruses, and be weeded out by natural selection if found unfit to survive.

There is ample evidence that a fast track evolution happened on this planet. But the culmination was never intended to be a human being; there was no intentionality on the part of evolution. Evolution represented as a tree with the leaves as the surviving species with the top leaf of the tree representing a human is totally wrong.

An appropriate picture is that of a unicellular organism forming the tiny stem representing 3.5 billion ago. The thin stem continues on till 570 million years ago. On this stem stands a bush. The bush levels and crops up to the present. Humans share the top with millions of other species. We aren't unique after all. Humans used intelligence as a survival tool; the other species specialized in other ways. Intelligence won out. By sheer chance humans stumbled on it.

It isn't surprising that the compelling story of how we came to be humans can only be retold by humans.

To YOU I'm an atheist; to God, I'm the Loyal Opposition.

– Woody Allen

Notice of IHEU General Assembly 2010

The IHEU General Assembly 2010 will be held in the Marriott Hotel, Hyderabad, India, on Saturday 7th August 2010 (9.30 am to 5.30 pm) and Sunday 8th August 2010 (9.30 am to 12.30 pm).

Forms are available on the IHEU website to register for the General Assembly, make nominations to fill the positions of 2 Executive Committee members and propose resolutions for the GA.

- **Resolutions for the General Assembly:** Member organisations (who are in good standing) may submit items for discussion or resolutions for the General Assembly, emailed to ga-2010@iheu.org – to be received 60 days before the date of the GA (i.e. by **8 June 2010**).
- **Nominations** for elections to the IHEU Executive Committee must be received by IHEU 45 days before the General Assembly (i.e. by **23 June 2010**) at the latest – emailed to ga-2010@iheu.org. The nominating organisation (who must be in good standing) must complete a form and the candidate must complete an acceptance form. There are 2 places available on IHEU's Executive Committee.
- **Registration for the General Assembly:** Everyone attending the GA must submit a registration form 40 days before the GA (ie by **28 June 2010**), emailed to ga-2010@iheu.org so that all delegates can receive the final mailing (which will be sent out by 8 July 2010) with the password to get the GA agenda and papers from the IHEU website. Delegates will also need to book accommodation directly with the hotel.

Member Organisations (MOs) are asked to send a one-page report of their activities in 2008 to ga-2010@iheu.org by **4 July 2010**, which will be circulated in the GA mailing. Any received after that date will not be circulated. MOs will not be required to give verbal reports at the meeting.

IHEU is also organising a 2 day leadership programme on 4/5 August and a Conference on Caste (following up the one held in London in 2009). There will also be trips available on Monday 9 August and Tuesday 10 August to Dalit projects near Hyderabad. The cost of the bus to go on these 2 trips will be 50 Euros per person. Participants will need to book and pay for these separately – details can be found on the IHEU website.

We very much look forward to welcoming registered delegates (representatives of IHEU member organisations, IHEU international representatives, IHEU Officers, paid-up IHEU individual supporters, volunteers and invitees) to the IHEU General Assembly 2010.

Robbi Robson, Secretary to IHEU General Assembly – ga-2010@iheu.org

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