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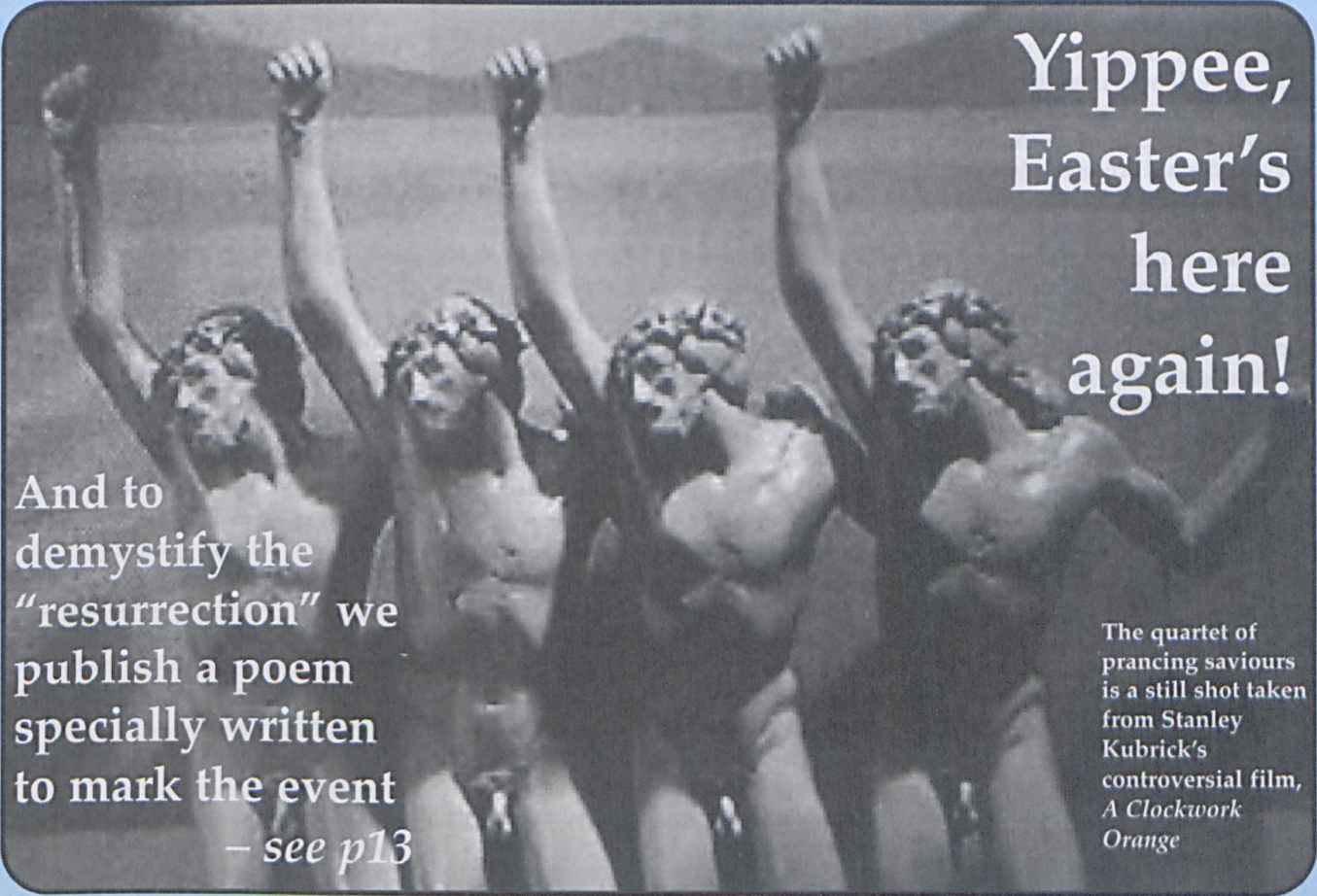
The

Vol 121 No 4  
April 2001

# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



Yippee,  
Easter's  
here  
again!

And to  
demystify the  
"resurrection" we  
publish a poem  
specially written  
to mark the event  
— see p13

The quartet of  
prancing saviours  
is a still shot taken  
from Stanley  
Kubrick's  
controversial film,  
*A Clockwork  
Orange*

## Also in this issue:

Barbara Smoker describes how the FBI  
dragged its feet over the murder of the  
O'Hairs, America's leading atheist family

— see centre pages

Destroying important cultural artefacts in the  
name of God — outrageous, but nothing new

— see page 5



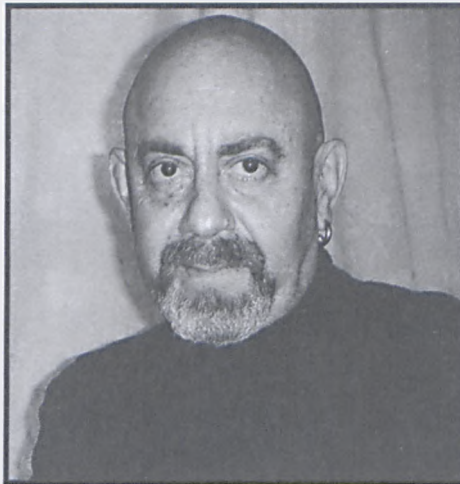
Madalyn Murray O'Hair,  
founder of American  
Atheists Inc, who  
disappeared in 1995  
along with her son and  
grand-daughter

# freethinking out loud: barry duke

OH, HOW my heart goes out to those poor souls in the media whose task it is to make religious programmes that are intelligent, challenging and watchable. Of course theirs is an impossible task, but because the broadcasters are under an obligation to produce a given quota of religious programmes each year, they have no choice but to persist in their efforts to find a formula that works.

It has so far eluded them, because such a formula simply does not exist: it's like searching in a pitch-dark basement for a black cat that isn't there. A bit like looking for God, really. However, the one technique that *would* prove a guaranteed attention-grabber and send the ratings soaring would, alas, not be deemed acceptable to Britain's religious leaders. It is this: run a religious series along the same lines as the Jerry Springer show. Fill a room with a volatile *mélange* of devout Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and the like, and ask representatives to come on stage and say a few words on a number of given topics.

"My God is Superior to Your God" would



make a belter of an introduction. Amidst screams of "infidel" and "blasphemer" turbans would come unravelled, fezes would fall to the floor, yamulkas would fly through the air and mitres be hurled across the studio. Heads would be cracked and eyes blackened with fists and broken-off chair-legs. The shaven-headed heavies would have their work cut out to prevent real murder being done.

"The Pope is the Anti-Christ" would make for another explosive broadcast, if filled with an audience of Catholics and Protestants.

Regretfully, this will never come to pass, and what we are destined to receive instead is more of the mind-numbing vacuity of programmes like BBC1's *Heaven and Earth* show, which is so devoid of intelligent content that I leave it to TV critics like the London *Evening Standard's* Victor Lewis-Smith to watch, then savage. Of the *Heaven and Earth* broadcast of February 25, Lewis-Smith had this to say: "There was a time when the God-slot was uncompromisingly and unapologetically Christian, but in today's predominantly atheistic society, the religious content has become as diluted as homoeopathic medicine, with no trace of the active ingredient, just the vague aura of an otherwise absent element. The latest result of this titration process is an hour of daytime trivia so insubstantial that even Richard and Judy would deem it lightweight, its Christian message lurking well beneath the surface. But surely, if we have to have religious programmes at all, wouldn't it be better for them to be presented by unreconstructed Paisleyite ministers threatening hell-fire and damnation, than by a bunch of luke-warm believers apparently possessed only by the love that dare not speak its name?"

He goes on: "Despite its blandness, this programme is vile from beginning to end, and I think it's the dishonesty and an air of studied inoffensiveness that makes it so thoroughly offensive ... the show's fundamental lack of intelligence cannot and should not be forgiven."

My sentiments exactly!

SILLY, yes, but have you ever considered how *sexy* adult baptism ceremonies can be – all those wet (in more ways than one) Christians emerging from pools, ponds and rivers with their soaked robes clinging to their often nubile young bodies?

Well, I can say in all honesty that the thought never crossed my mind – until I picked up a recent copy of America's *Freedom From Religion* newspaper.

Under the headline "But they're still all wet" the paper reproduced an advert for "the amazing new" Polylon Baptismal Robe which is made of nylon and polyester and designed to ensure that one's appearance before and after taking the plunge for Jesus is about as sexually stimulating as a damp toilet seat.

The ad points out that "most robes 'cling' when wet; however, the Polylon robe, because of the special backing, eliminates almost all 'cling' when wet".

Furthermore, "because Polylon robes cannot be 'seen through', they provide the ultimate modesty".

The oddest thing about the ad is the "before" and "after" photographs which accompany it. Three people – two adult women and a girl – appear in the former wearing the culotte-style robes, but emerge in the "after" shot as two men (one wearing gumboots!?) and a lad, thereby implying that baptism in these "modesty robes" might go a good deal further than merely hiding one's stiffened nipples.

I have always maintained that the killjoy element is more prevalent in religion than in any other aspect of life, and if the Polylon Baptismal Robe doesn't prove the point, nothing ever will.

HARDLY a day goes by without the media reporting on some or other foolishness or atrocity perpetrated in the name of Allah by Muslims around the globe.

In the same week that the fanatical Taliban in Afghanistan began destroying two giant representations of Buddha (the ancient statues were declared "idolatrous" and "offensive" to Islam), and the BBC reported on continuing massacres of Christians by Muslims in Indonesia, Prime Minister Tony Blair, on the occasion of *Eid al-Adha*, the celebration which marks the Prophet Abraham's willingness to obey God's command to sacrifice his son, welcomed greater Muslim participation in this country's public life.

Blair described Islam as a "deeply reflective and peaceful" and even a "beautiful" religion that "proclaims the sanctity of human life, the inviolability of human dignity and the equality of all, irrespective of race or background."

Will someone *please* tell me what planet this man is on?

## The Freethinker

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# School told to reinstate religion

A SCHOOL in east London which introduced a policy defining worship as "worship" and removed religion from its daily assemblies has been told it is breaking the law.

Ravenscroft primary school in Newham, east London, ran into trouble when the parents of one boy appealed to the local authority, the Education Secretary, and the High Court, to have religion reinstated.

The decision by the Department for Education is likely to have an impact on all schools which fail to provide Christian or other formal acts of worship, wrote Liz Lightfoot, the *Daily Telegraph* education correspondent in a report on March 8.

The parents, Mike and Simbee Salisbury, complained that Dominic, their son, was being confused by mish-mash of multi-cultural and humanistic messages.

Schools are obliged by law to provide a daily act of collective worship which must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".

But the school's policy document said: "Worship has to do with worth and worthiness."

Among the topics covered as "worship" were people in school, signs of autumn, warmth, preparation for winter, sounds, and pollution.

Mr and Mrs Salisbury said they were unable to exercise their legal right to withdraw their son because they never knew when "worship" was going to happen in the assemblies.

They first brought a complaint to Newham four years ago but the local education authority dismissed it. They appealed to David Blunkett, the Education Secretary, who also rejected their argument that the school was breaking the law.

Last January, however, Mr Justice Latham in the High Court gave Mrs Salisbury, a methodist of Chinese origin, leave to bring a judicial review of Mr Blunkett's decision that the school was upholding the law on religious worship. (Mr Salisbury died in 1998.)

The Department for Education asked her to delay the action until it had re-examined the case. Jacqui Smith, the schools minister, has now written to Andrew Panton, Newham's deputy director of education, pointing out that the school should hold a daily act of worship and asking for records to be kept.

She told the school to withdraw its own definition of worship, questioning whether it met the criteria in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

A spokesman for Newham said Ruth Pigney, head teacher at Ravenscroft primary school, was confident that the school complied

"with the arrangements for collective worship and the right of parental withdrawal from both collective worship and religious education".

## Putting Christianity on the curriculum

There is no danger that any school in Kent will try to emulate the Ravenscroft experiment, for, according to a report on March 3 by Steve Doughty, the *Daily Mail's* social affairs correspondent, pupils in 600 schools in Kent "are to be taught a radical new curriculum that stresses the virtues of marriage, patriotism and Christianity".

Tory-run Kent education authority – the county's biggest – wants youngsters to learn to take pride in their country and to respect its institutions, traditions, heritage and history.

The curriculum, backed by the county council, clashes heavily with the citizenship and sex education rules laid down by Education Secretary David Blunkett, and is likely to upset the teaching unions.

However, council leader Sandy Bruce-Lockhart declared: "Our schools are going to enable children to understand the importance of history and tradition.

"We are looking for a framework that underpins the strength of the values and beliefs of Middle England."

He added: "I am fed-up with the politically correct minority who are constantly trying to control the lives of the silent majority and we are doing something about it."

Teachers will be asked to impart respect for the rule of law and to give a special place to Christianity because of its status as the national religion.

In sex and social education, youngsters will be instructed to "value family and marriage as the foundation of a civilised society and a firm basis for the nurturing of children".

The curriculum says: "Pupils should take pride in our county and our country, and in our nation's great institutions, its traditions, heritage and history".

They should learn to respect religious and cultural diversity. And they should develop an understanding of the beliefs and practices of major religions, and especially of Christianity as it is the national religion and is important in our history, culture, language and architecture.

But the Kent blueprint does not mention the human rights heading the list of National Curriculum priorities for citizenship education. Instead, it says pupils should respect themselves as individuals, whilst developing an understanding, tolerance and respect for others and their differences, treating all people as equal.

According to the National Curriculum, secondary pupils must be taught the legal and human rights and responsibilities that underpin society, and the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the country.

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The successful candidate will be required to work at least three days per week.

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Please apply for further details by sending name, address and telephone number to General Secretary (R&AO), National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL or [kpw@secularism.org.uk](mailto:kpw@secularism.org.uk)



# reduced vat on church repairs

THE Government is to drastically reduce the VAT burden on repairs to "listed" places of worship, but other listed buildings will not be given an equivalent concession. The reduction will be from the standard 17.5 per cent to 5 per cent. Overruled by the EU from reducing the VAT rate on such repairs, Chancellor Gordon Brown has chosen an indirect way of achieving the same end. Places of worship will be able to claim grants equivalent to the difference between the two VAT rates on such repair costs.

The announcement was made as part of the March 7 budget and comes hot on the heels of the Government granting a substantial financial concession on church schools (reported last month).

I imagine the champagne must be flowing at Lambeth Palace, judging by *The Times* headline: "Surprised bishops cheer VAT refund". The announcement was as unexpected and welcome to their graces as it will be predictable and disturbing to secularists.

This privileged concession cannot, however, be regarded as an impulsive gesture; it was made with extraordinary tenacity, bordering on belligerence – the Chancellor ignoring at least the spirit of public representations from the EU hierarchy.

The National Secular Society also wrote to him. In considering the stance the Society would take, we took into consideration what our members might think. Some may not care about the survival of any church architecture. Others – probably the majority – might wish to see fine church buildings maintained, as long as the public purse does not bear any of the cost, directly or indirectly.

As a matter of political tactics, however, we thought that this religion-friendly Government would be much more likely to heed calls for equality for all listed buildings than they would for the Churches' concession to be abandoned altogether.

Our research had led us to suspect that the Chancellor might try to circumvent EU VAT rules to subsidise the churches, so we therefore also sent a copy of our letter to the relevant EU Commissioner. It concluded: "We understand that consideration is being given to alternatives to a VAT reduction, but unless a way can be devised that does not discriminate in favour of places of worship, no changes should be made in this area. In the longer term, we would ask you to ensure equal financial treatment for all listed buildings – whether in grants, loans, or taxes."

In the event, the Budget provided for grants to be made equivalent to the VAT reduction that the Chancellor previously proposed. This will require an expensive new bureaucracy.

The Church of England, in particular, had been complaining for decades to successive Chancellors about this issue on the pretext that most of the nation's architectural heritage consists of churches.

The church repair VAT announcement in the Budget, however, was the culmination of a remarkable sequence of events which the Society had been following closely both in the press and in *Hansard*.

The alarm bells started ringing with the Chancellor's pre-budget speech to the House

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## By Keith Porteous Wood, General Secretary, National Secular Society

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of Commons on November 8, 2000. He announced: "To assist the upgrading of listed buildings that are central to community life in all parts of the country, I can also announce that we are today asking the European Commission to reduce VAT from 17.5 per cent to 5 per cent for repairs to churches."

The Chancellor elaborated on the rationale (if such it can be called) in his pre-budget statement, published concurrently with the speech: "The Government is keen to preserve Britain's rich-built heritage for both current and future generations. Places of worship can play a focal point in rural and urban communities. The Government is attracted to the idea of offering a reduced rate of VAT for the repair and maintenance of listed buildings which are used as places of worship."

Brown's pronouncements were extraordinary, in that it is well known to politicians, economists and accountants that there are only a small number of special cases where concessional VAT rates are permitted. These are listed in an Annex to the EU's 6th Directive, and church repairs are most certainly not included.

Even more surprising was that the announcement had been made despite a widely rumoured message from the EU (which had apparently learned of this budget proposal in advance) that such a reduction in VAT rates would be *ultra vires* – outside his power. The rumours were confirmed in an exchange in the Commons on January 22 when David Ruffley (member for Bury St. Edmunds) cornered Stuart Bell (effectively the C of E representative in the Commons).

He asked Mr Bell if he were: "aware that [clergy in his constituency] are now very angry because they have discovered that the

European Commission is now saying that it advised Her Majesty's Treasury all along that such a cut would require a major change to EU law . . .".

Bell's reply confirmed that "various discussions are taking place between Customs and Excise and the Church VAT group". The Society had been aware of this; the Church had been very persistent, and Lambeth Palace had been directly involved.

Bell went on to reveal: "The scenario is not as pessimistic as [Mr Ruffley] paints it. We are considering possible derogations. Churches within other EU member states have the same interest in the matter. We travel on hopefully and believe that we will, in the end, reach a satisfactory conclusion. I again congratulate my Right Hon Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was the first Chancellor in 25 years to take an interest in the issue, on taking the lead within the European Union and on continuing to do so."

Pre-budget optimism was apparent elsewhere in ecclesiastical circles. The *Church Times* reported: "Next month's budget may contain a relief package for parishes, to compensate for the decision of the European Commission not to cut VAT on church repairs, the Treasury confirmed this week. The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, is expected to make an announcement introducing "special measures to help congregations pay for repairs to listed church buildings". A Treasury spokeswoman said that there were no details yet of what "the special measures" would be, but confirmed it was likely that some announcement would appear in the budget. Talk of grants at this stage, she said, was "pure speculation".

Pure speculation or not, we now know that grants were exactly what the budget contained. At that stage, however, we (and, I have since learned, the Church) had been unsure whether the Chancellor's publicising of attempts to reduce VAT were a cynical ploy to get the Church off his back. Were they, we had wondered, a prelude to his wringing his hands and announcing: "I've asked Brussels if I can do as you asked; now you have the answer"?

I have just learned that our son-of-the-manse Chancellor's childhood ambition was to be Moderator of the Church of Scotland, but failing that, Prime Minister.

I doubt if anyone else has regarded the PM's job as a consolation prize. Our potential Prime Minister has demonstrated the extraordinary lengths to which he will go to give the churches what they want. For secularists, that is the most sobering thought of all.

We'll complain to Brussels about the apparent circumvention of VAT rules – but don't hold your breath.

The world stares at the Buddhas of Bamiyan, shocked, unbelieving, helpless, outraged, as the giant archaeological jewels crumble under bomb shells and the detonation of heavy explosives. The majestic sandstone statues, the two tallest standing Buddhas in the world, carved into a cliff face of Bamiyan, have been towering over the ancient Silk Road to China for several centuries. They have survived Changez Khan's massacres and the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's cannon shots. Now they are destroyed, nothing left but rubble. A page of history has been torn.

Who are these Taliban who have destroyed priceless treasures as if they were mere stones, and who do not care a jot about the world's outrage over their vandalism?

The Islamic militia in Afghanistan which named itself Taliban consisted of "students" (talib) of the hundreds of seminaries in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. They emerged in war-ravaged Afghanistan in late 1994.

Afghanistan had suffered 12 years of war between occupying Soviet forces and US-backed Mujahadeen, before the UN negotiated an agreement for a neutral Afghanistan in 1988 and the Soviet troops withdrew. The war had devastated the country and killed two-million people. A further six million fled. After the Soviets left, competing armies and guerilla troops under Mujahadeen warlords fought fierce battles against each other and inflicted terror on the population. Mullah Muhammad Omar, who had been a guerilla fighter against the Soviets, returned from the war, disgusted over the blood-thirsty terror of the Mujahadeen, and built up an army of Islamic students against them, the Taliban. The Taliban vowed to liberate Afghanistan and defeated the warlords one by one. In the beginning, the population welcomed them as they promised to bring peace.

The brutal execution of former president Najibullah and his brother after the capture of Kabul in September 1996, however, showed that the Taliban were not at all peaceful.

The Taliban are fundamentalists and, with enormous religious zeal, they began to implement *Sharia* (Islamic law) in the country as soon as they came to power. They aimed to establish absolute rule of Islam and, in so doing, pushed Afghanistan into an age of darkness. They forced people to pray five times a day. They imposed bans on everything connected with modern life, freedom or enjoyment. They enforced strict dress code and forced all men to wear long beards. Women became the worst victims. They were forced to hide their bodies and faces completely under long dresses and veils and to be confined to

their homes. Girls were forbidden to attend schools, and women had to stop earning their living. Overnight thousands of women, among them university professors, became beggars. Life was divided into two categories: Islamic and un-Islamic. Anything or anyone deemed un-Islamic was banned, harassed and brutally

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### Sanal Edamaruku, President of *Rationalist International*, reports on a dreadful act of vandalism committed by the Taliban in Afghanistan

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punished. Latterly, thousands of ancient statues of Buddha in the country, including the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan, were declared un-Islamic and marked for destruction.

In the fundamentalist grimace of the Taliban we see the true face of pure religion: religion in power, religion perfect. It is characterised by irrationality, intolerance, destruction and violence. Human relations are reduced to commands in the name of religion, and total submission is demanded. There is a deep hatred for freedom and self-determination, for thinking, culture, art, beauty and any kind of enjoyment. There is total lack of humour. Taboos are attached to the human body, especially for women. But the ultimate hatred is reserved for competing religions and their monuments and objects of worship. Taliban is a state of mind. But it is not limited to Islam.

There have been "Taliban" throughout history, terrorising, torturing and murdering their fellow humans in the name of religion and destroying monuments and symbols of other religions, sometimes great treasures of culture and art. They were the Christians who burnt the religious images of the Byzantine Empire in the 8th century. They were the Spanish Catholics, who destroyed the ancient Muslim mosque of Cordoba and reduced the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan to rubble. They were Croatian Catholics who burned Orthodox churches in Ustasha Croatia and massacred thousands of Orthodox Serbs. They were

German Nazis who destroyed books and synagogues. They were Hindus who dragged down the ancient Muslim mosque of Ayodhya.

All of them had the same aim: to create God's Own Country.

The Taliban never bow to arguments; they are immune to appeals to reason and humaneness, as they possess neither.

"I don't care about anything but Islam", said Mullah Muhammad Omar following the outcry over his fatwa to destroy the Buddhas.

Taliban are dangerous partners in any negotiation and co-operation, as they are concerned with nothing other than the total rule of religion, and it is a tragic mistake to use fundamentalists and extremists for political expediency. It creates monsters. Movements on the political left world-wide supported the Islamic zealots in Iran to oust the Shah. The people of Iran, and the whole world too paid a huge price as a result.

The United States supported fundamentalists to ensure that the Soviets lost control in Afghanistan. It was *they* who created the Taliban.

It is too late now to cry for the Buddhas.



One of the two giant buddhas destroyed by the Taliban

## “believers don’t like it up ‘em”

THE National Secular Society and its honorary associates have managed to really put a fox in the religious hen house on the topic of church schools. Have you ever heard such squawking? The one thing the debate has clearly demonstrated is just how thin the skin of religionists is. They don’t take well to criticism, do they?

Or, as Corporal Jones was wont to say in *Dad’s Army*, “they don’t like it up ‘em, Captain Mainwaring.”

Of course, those who hold to religion have for centuries considered that their feelings and “sensibilities” are special and should be particularly respected and protected. Indeed, they invented the offence of blasphemy to ensure that they would be protected from criticism – however justified it might be.

Now, along come the secularists who dare to question the worth of religious schools – and just look at the reaction.

It doesn’t matter how rational and persuasive our arguments might be, we are branded “bigots” and “fundamentalists” by those believers who think that criticising religion – or anything it does – is beyond the pale.

When Richard Dawkins entered the fray with a reasoned and well-considered attack on the very concept of church schools in the *Times Educational Supplement* (written in his usual robust style, but in no way gratuitously offensive), the reaction was ferocious. Ian Flintoff in the *Independent* accused him of “atheistic bigotry” and showing “a by-now familiar intolerance comparable to the Inquisition”.

Yasmin Alibhai Brown, the Muslim commentator, went on to describe Dawkins and others who spoke out against the Government’s intention to increase the number of church schools as “fundamentalist liberal secularists”. She proposed that denominational or single-faith schools should be abolished and replaced with “faith-based” schools that taught all religions and didn’t favour any as special. That didn’t suit Ibrahim Hewitt of the Association of Muslim Schools UK. He thought Ms Alibhai Brown, who described herself as “a wine-drinking flawed Muslim female columnist”, was as bad as Dawkins – “she is just as much a liberal secularist as those she criticises,” he said. Indeed, in religious circles “secularist” is rapidly becoming a swear word to be spat contemptuously at those with whom they disagree.

Coincidentally, I met Ibrahim Hewitt, a Geordie who has converted to Islam after some experience in South Africa had convinced him that Islam was the only truly “inclusive” religion. We were both taking part



**The religious are now using words like “bigot” and “fundamentalist” to describe secularists. Aren’t they just trying to shift their own guilt? asks Terry Sanderson**

in a BBC programme called *The Heaven and Earth Show*. While sitting in the green room awaiting our call, the TV news was showing on a monitor. An item about the Taliban’s intention to destroy ancient statues of Buddha in Afghanistan came on screen. I turned to Mr Hewitt and said: “What do you think of that, then?”

“Being an art historian and a Muslim I’m torn,” he replied. “But in the end, they are just statues and Islam doesn’t approve of such things.”

I then went on to ask him his opinion of the Taliban’s cruel and vicious treatment of women. He shrugged complacently and said he didn’t believe everything he saw in the Western media.

I asked about his conversion – why had he done it? “Islam would say that no one converts,” he said. “We are all Muslims, it’s just that some of us don’t know it yet.”

I immediately turned to a Catholic priest who was also to appear on the programme and asked his opinion about that statement. The priest squirmed in his seat and made some comment about “we all ultimately worship the same God”.

I had hoped to draw the two of them out further on this, anticipating that another religious war would inevitably flair over the coffee and donuts, but the priest was called to have his make up applied.

The one thing that was apparent, though, was that no one in the room was prepared to challenge Mr Hewitt’s opinions, however outrageous they became or however uncomfortable they felt with them. The fragility of this multi-faith ethos was glaringly exposed. It is only by pretending that Islam is not an unyielding and totalitarian religion that the peace can be kept.

In the meantime, the Islamicists are given a free hand to keep making their endless demands for privilege without giving an inch of ground themselves.

Meanwhile, over in the *Church of England Newspaper*, Andrew Carey (son of the Archbishop of Canterbury) was commenting: “The debate on church schools has flushed out the true face of intolerance in our society. The best-known proponents of this intolerance, Richard Dawkins and Polly Toynbee, are pussycats compared with Peter Atkins, an Oxford professor, who wrote in the *Independent*: ‘No single type of school founded on religion, be it Church, Temple, Synagogue, Mosque or Voodoo tent, can contribute to the unification of society, even though it purports to instruct its members in toleration. Religions, being fundamentally irrational, are fundamentally intolerant of each other and schools set up on the shoulders of religions inevitably propagate that intolerance into future generations. Governments should not evade their responsibility to educate young people to be open-minded, tolerant citizens by encouraging the financial burden of education to be shared with those committed to intolerance and irrationality.’”

Mr Carey commented: “I’m always amused by fundamentalists of any stripe, utterly unable to understand the irony that underlies their contradictions. It is a sad comment on our society that we do not all receive such comments with a quiet chuckle, rising to a crescendo of laughter.”

The insults that are now being directed at secularists by believers have a very religious ring to them – “bigot”, “fundamentalist”, “intolerant” and “Inquisitorial”. Aren’t they just trying to shift their own guilt in these areas on to us? A bigot is an intolerant adherent to a creed. A fundamentalist is someone who insists that every word of their holy book is true. The Inquisition was set up by the Catholic Church. It’s extraordinary that on-the-ropes religionists are now using the language of their own shameful past to defame secularists and atheists.

And, of course, many of our critics are putting it about that atheism and secularism are themselves religions with dogmas just as fixed as those of any other “faith”.

They can’t quite grasp the concept of rationality. They can’t accept that some people might have rejected the supernatural simply because there is not a shred of evidence anywhere at any time that it exists. Nor can they accept that some people are prepared to change their minds on the basis of the evidence and take a stand on the basis of lack of evidence.

As our ideas begin to get a hearing, we must be prepared to “come out” as non-believers and correct the misunderstandings that are being fostered by cornered Christians.

Few would admit to having any special interest in goodness, while less reluctantly confessing to a fascination with its opposite.

That would be pointless to deny, as these examples will confirm: the popularity of crime fiction and of magazines and tabloids giving the lowdown on what real people get up to. Being coy about goodness is rather absurd, anyway, since badness can't exist without the possibility of the other. As terms, they could be likened to hot and cold, but they can't be measured on a graduated scale as they do not represent a physical property. They belong to the more elusive realm of psychology and relationships.

Concealing natural interest in the virtuous aspect of morality is just a self-protective habit, which custom has endorsed, to avoid being ridiculed as priggish. The ploy doesn't prevent us from dispensing moral judgements. Opinion about what we think good or bad is the stuff of daily conversation. Open commitment, though, to the side we claim to be on, could be of much more use.

if we really want the world to improve, we should take part in the process, not just cheer others on, or bleat about widespread wickedness, be it cruelty, callous disregard for others' welfare, corruption, or whatever.

Prior to some action, our ideas may require a bit of sorting out. For instance, a religion does no good to anyone. This is not to deny that well-intentioned folk who happen to be religious can do good deeds. But faith is not a recipe for clear thinking, the lack of which produces aberrations ranging from hypocrisy through degrees of humbug to fanaticism at the other extreme. Believing in God (Merciful and Compassionate though believed to be) is no substitute for dealing humanely with human beings, not to say other creatures. Obedience to set codes can stifle genuine morality. Free thought calls for courage to renounce the pious delusion of imparted revelation.

Serious personal reflection and discussion of what is meant by "goodness" is commonly treated as something not quite healthy to engage in. Except in educational contexts, of course. If you could not resist going on about the topic, you might well become in time a professor of moral philosophy. You could then spend your energies in endless professional debate as to how accurate or mistaken famous sages were, or are, in the conclusions reached. You could also be vaguely religious if you chose, perhaps by keeping philosophy and religion in separate mental compartments.

Those, who (as students, maybe) read philosophical treatises, don't necessarily get hooked, but may enjoy their minds being

stretched a bit. Becoming absorbed in careers not requiring these particular subtleties, perhaps only in retirement will the opportunity occur to appreciate, properly, the contributions to thought made by moral philosophers.

Being morally serious, though, isn't tied to academic study.

People have ideals, hopes and aspirations which they sometimes strive to keep from pub-

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### By Charles Ward

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lic view. These can be interlaced, unhappily for their peace of mind, with experience of "sins", follies, errors and failures. These, through embarrassment, shame, or fear of social consequences, they may also lock away. The fundamental requirement, not only for those who must disentangle their minds from false religious ideas, especially the appalling "guilt complex" Christianity foists on the devout, but also for all who realise how vital it is to develop ethical understanding, is thorough-going intellectual integrity.

Those who have not had much practice in this art might possibly benefit from professional help, if they can find the right sort. But here I wish to emphasise the ordinariness of preoccupation with being good and being bad. It is all part of a complex process of ethical self-education. This process has no necessary connection with organised moral education.

All forms of it are attempts to persuade, indoctrinate or coerce people into acceptance of some morality of preconceived design. Insofar as behaviour is thought to conform with the given pattern, methods employed are said to "work".

In self-education, one must find out what "works" and what doesn't. Blunders and wilful mistakes produce results found to be of no advantage either to self or society. In the short term, some immoral actions appear to "pay". Mental honesty is required in order to realise long-term advantages and in both respects to exercise appropriate control,

Some might consider ethical development analogous to scientific discovery, in which laws of nature have to be observed. Knowledge of what science has actually discovered is certainly an excellent foundation for ethical thinking, undoubtedly a dangerous pursuit in a philosophical vacuum. Yet one needs to remember that misunderstanding of science can be just as morally confusing as half-baked religious ideas. When scientific knowledge was inadequate, superstition flourished in scientific as well as religious circles. Learning how nature actually works, macro- and micro-cosmically and espe-

cially at the level of human physical and psychological experience, is important.

Moralists with a religious background tend to be worried because academia today knows nothing of a Moral Order in the universe. The probability of that was once tirelessly discussed by philosophers (if not by scientists) in somewhat theological or, at any rate, metaphysical language. There are still many people who remain impressed by such abstractions. The fear was, that, without such an Order, no reason or justification for "good" behaviour could be found. Many of us know of some who have made of nature's amorality an excuse for their own immorality. That, demonstrably, is sophistry, based on fallacy.

Popular thought is more tied in with out-dated and misleading ideas inherited from our religious past than is generally realised, even by some who are assertively "postmodern", as if the last word has been said and they have taken note of it. They are not the first to think so and are unlikely to be the last.

However, we do learn, if spasmodically, by experience. Our own, that is. Learning from others' experience is only made productive thus. We don't like others telling us what we *ought* to want. It's all right when, after digesting useful information, we tell ourselves.

That is ethical self-education. We make an effort to be good when we see for ourselves what we ought to be striving for. If desires stay at a kindergarten stage, so much the worse for everyone, including those who must divert time, ability and resources to controlling us until we grow out of it, if we ever do. Ulterior motives, right or wrong, simply get in the way of learning anything useful. Moral philosophy, after all, is merely a stylish way of describing cool, logical thinking about behaviour – not for those who clutch eagerly at each "new", "original" theory, as if presented with a philosophic golden egg.

Knowledge, then, not theory, is basic. My essay *Meaningful Life* is described as "a scientific approach to leading an ethical life".

The word *scientific* does not denote a formula; it indicates a method.

The last three words are not intended to portray self-conscious or prescriptive morality, both sensible to avoid. A positive ideal is suggested by the book's subtitle, *The Importance of Being Human*. This is what we can individually discover.

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Copies of *Meaningful Life*, £5 each, including p & p, can be obtained from Primrose Cottage, 16 Clay Lane, Wendover, Bucks HP 22 6 NS.

# How the FBI dragged murder of America's 1

**A**t last, after five years awaiting police confirmation of their murder, Madalyn Murray O'Hair (who had been 76), her son Jon Garth Murray (40), and grand-daughter Robin Murray O'Hair (29), are to be honoured at a memorial meeting to be held in Florida on April 12 (Maundy Thursday) at the start of the annual national convention of American Atheists Inc., which Madalyn founded in 1963.

Beginning to read the Bible straight through as a bright, inquisitive 11-year-old, she had come to the conclusion that "God was pretty mean", and lost her Presbyterian faith.

It was in June 1963 that she became a celebrity, when the United States Supreme Court upheld her contention (originally against the junior high school her elder son William had attended) that prayer sessions and Bible readings in public schools contravened the American constitution. The nationwide obloquy that this judicial success brought her only strengthened her opposition to the public encroachment of religion, and she became a stalwart champion of freedom of speech, conscientious objection, and the "wall of separation" between church and state.

The chief spokesperson for atheism, she was dubbed by the reactionary *Look* magazine (from which she would not have wanted support, anyway) "the most hated woman in America". And the label stuck. Indeed, she rather gloried in it. But it was not only the religious right which vilified her: many humanists felt that her aggressive tone and coarse language did their cause more harm than good. She was also, admittedly, given to bragging and exaggeration, and her right to the title of "Dr" was somewhat dubious; but she was the most courageous person I have ever known, as well as the most hard-working (eleven hours a day, seven days a week) in "the best of causes" – even when her diabetes would have justified her taking some rest. She was also less intransigent than people imagined: for instance, she co-operated with ministers of religion on particular issues where their aims were the same as hers.

Madalyn built up a large freethought library (comparable with the one at Conway Hall, but, amazingly, said to be worth millions of dollars), and she reprinted some of the out-of-print books under her own imprint (not always bothering about copyright!). She had read and absorbed many of the books – though obviously not all, as she boasted – and she was able to draw on their anti-religious arguments instantaneously.

She once told me that one of her members had bequeathed his unique library of rare antiquarian freethought titles to her organisation, and when he died, his pious widow – in

true Christian tradition – burned all the books, while fulfilling the terms of her husband's will by packing the ashes in a box and mailing it to the AA Center.

Madalyn's two sons – Bill (as Madalyn called him) and his younger half-brother Jon – had always been acrimonious rivals, but they were both active in the family firm. Bill was the clever, handsome one, and his gift for oratory made him Madalyn's heir-apparent in the movement. But he rebelled; and, the unkindest cut of all, on Mothers' Day 1980 he announced his conversion to Christianity. He became a skilful born-again revivalist preacher, and each year he found out where the American Atheists were planning to hold their Easter national convention and organised a big Christian revivalist convention simultaneously in the same locality.

While a student, Bill had fathered a daughter, Robin, whom Madalyn adopted as a baby, and who, after her father's defection, remained in Madalyn's retinue, becoming editor of the AA magazine while Jon trained to be Madalyn's organisational and media successor. Robin became known as "the jailbird editor" when imprisoned for refusing to say "So help me God" on a Texan jury.

I first got to know Madalyn in the summer of 1983, when we met at the international Atheist Meet in Helsinki. She invited me to speak at the American Atheists' national convention to be held in Kentucky the following Easter; and she could not have been more generous to me. Not only did her organisation pay my fare to the States, but I was her guest for five days in Austin, Texas, where a big reception was held in my honour.

Our journey from Austin to the Kentucky convention venue (in a luxury Cadillac driven by Jon) took four days, on a zigzag route, so as to take in tourist sites for my benefit as well as several television and radio opportunities – including a three-hour radio phone-in and a TV talk show, which featured an attempted exorcism of Madalyn by telephone!

Outside our convention hotel, two young men spent virtually the whole weekend on their knees in prayer against our evil influence, and another protester spent Good Friday carrying a heavy cross through the town, his photograph illustrating a lengthy report of our convention in the local paper.

To follow the convention, Madalyn had arranged a month's nationwide speaking and media tour for me as a British spokesperson for atheism, to dove-tail with my own tourist plans, facilitated by her gift of a month's

Greyhound Bus pass. And at the end of all that I returned to Austin as her house-guest and was loaded with leaving presents.

The American media generally referred to me as "the British Madalyn Murray O'Hair"; and, though well aware that this was calculated to arouse hostility, I was happy enough with it, as the quickest way to explain my position to the American public.

## Barbara Smoker writes of Madalyn Murray O'Hair's grand-daughter Robin, real-life horror story of torture and mu

So much for my memories of spring 1984. Later, ironically enough, Madalyn wrote and told me that a non-religious presenter whom she knew and who had interviewed me on radio in Denver had been shot dead – because of the sort of people he interviewed on his programme.

**F**or the next 11 years, Madalyn continued campaigning for freedom and atheism, though her increasing physical disabilities forced her to delegate most of the organisational and media work to Jon, Robin, and other AA members. Then, on August 27, 1995, she, Jon, and Robin suddenly disappeared from their home, without warning, apparently in the middle of breakfast – leaving behind their personal possessions, their pet dogs, and even Madalyn's life-saving insulin and other medication.

Criminal duress was the only feasible explanation, yet the police would not take the family's disappearance seriously, and allowed the clues to go cold. Even some fellow atheists suspected that the trio had left Austin of their own free will, perhaps to escape tax problems, while others surmised that there had been foul play and that Madalyn's estranged son Bill or the religious right or the CIA or the Vatican or even disaffected associates were responsible.

Alternative theories were that Madalyn had slipped away to die in peace without attracting Christian prayers – but then what of the other two? Or that the three had run off with corporation funds to start a new comfortable life abroad – but hardly, surely, just as Madalyn was completing production of the August 1995 issue of *American Atheist* and was awaiting



# ged its feet over the leading atheist family

real life

delivery of new state-of-the-art printing equipment, not to mention her plans to picket the Pope's visit to New York.

In fact, it eventually transpired that they had been forcibly abducted and taken to San Antonio by four common criminals: the master-mind, David Roland Waters, who had cheated Madalyn when employed by her as an office manager and had vowed vengeance

es of her friendship with  
Hair, her son Jon, and  
n, and summarises the  
of their Texas abduction,  
murder in 1995

("I'll pull her toes off with pliers") when she exposed his misdeeds in an AA newsletter; a fellow conspirator, Gary Paul Karr, who had become acquainted with Waters in prison; another recidivist, Gerald Lee "Chico" Osborne; and a hired con-man, Danny Fry.

Cash withdrawals were made on the family's personal credit cards to the maximum availability, and Jon's Mercedes was sold on September 5th, 1995 (at \$5,000 below its value), by a man whose description did not fit Jon. Some months later, Robin's Porsche was found abandoned at Austin airport –but still the police took no action.

A day or two after the disappearance, a stalling telephone call from Robin was made to the AA Center. The staff member who took the call said Robin sounded frightened, and one imagines a gun being held to her head.

Then Jon transferred AA investments in a New Zealand bank to a San Antonio jeweller in exchange for \$600,000 in gold coins, of which he (if indeed it was he) collected \$500,000 on September 29th, 1995, the remaining \$100,000 being seized later by the Internal Revenue Service. Though there was no literal gun being held to Jon's head, it seems likely that the kidnapers were holding his mother and adopted sister hostage under threat of torture and rape if he did not do as he was ordered.

Though they handed over AA funds as well as private property to save their lives, Waters was never going to let them go, with all the evidence they had against him. In the end, it has been revealed, they were subjected to torture and rape before being murdered.

The likelihood of this scenario was apparent within days of their abduction, but the state police and FBI dilly-dallied, presumably because Madalyn's abrasive manner and unrelenting anti-religious campaigns over more than three decades had made her unpopular with the great American public.

Even when Madalyn's estranged son Bill put pressure on politicians, including the then governor of Texas, George W Bush, to have the disappearance of his family investigated, the authorities still took no interest; and it was only an investigation into the mystery carried out by a private eye, in collaboration with a San Antonio newspaper, that finally galvanised the FBI into action.

In January 1999 a corpse minus head and hands (the most easily identifiable parts of a body) which had been dumped in Dallas in October 1995 was finally identified as that of Danny Fry, whose family had reported him missing since accepting a temporary job with David Waters. It seems likely that Fry, while willing to take part in the kidnapping and extortion plot, jibbed at murder, and had to die himself to prevent him from talking.

**N**ext, Gary Karr, who had been flashing a lot of money about, together with identifiable Rolex watches and other O'Hair possessions, was arrested and tried for involvement in the kidnapping, as well as the robbery and extortion conspiracy relating to it, and was found guilty on all charges except for the actual kidnapping. In the absence of corpses, no homicide charges were brought, though Karr is said to have confided to prison inmates his implication in the murders.

Madalyn's disappearance was actually ascribed by Karr's attorney in court to direct divine vengeance, without any human agency: "When someone spends 30 years cursing and deploring God, it wouldn't surprise me if one day He grew weary of it. Mr Karr has maintained that he did not kill her or her staff. If they are gone, and who knows if they are, perhaps no human was responsible for their disappearance from the earth." (A literal Act of God?)

The law finally caught up with David Waters, who had been collaborating with a ghost-writer on a book to be entitled *Good Gawd, Madalyn or Code Name Satan*, in which he apparently claimed that during his time at the AA Center she was milking the organisation's funds in preparation for absconding to New Zealand. He was convicted of various crimes, including firearms offences

and breaching a probation order, and under the punitive "three strikes" law he earned 60 years' imprisonment.

The rented storehouse where the murders had been carried out and the bodies dismembered and burnt was searched by the police, and, though the place had been thoroughly cleaned, minute traces of blood were found. Now, at long last, the FBI began assiduously searching for the dismembered bodies – which, they were informed, had been packed in 55-gallon blue plastic oil-drums and buried on a certain West Texas ranch; but the ranch comprised 5,000 acres, and the burial site eluded them.

Despite the absence of corpses, however, the authorities prepared to go to trial against Waters with homicide charges. Then, in January 2001, a week before the date set for the trial, the prisoner offered to show them the spot where the bodies were buried – in return, presumably, for their dropping any charge carrying the death penalty; and news reporters saw him do so.

Oil-drums containing parts of charred human skeletons and pieces of fabric were exhumed there, one significant find being a titanium hip-joint replacement, such as Madalyn had had surgically embedded and the three skulls have now been positively identified from the family's dental records.

Murder having now been established, perhaps there will be no more of the persistent allegations that the family had absconded (in the middle of breakfast? leaving behind their valuable house, their possessions, their publishing enterprise, current projects, their pet dogs, and Madalyn's medication?) and were living it up abroad with money belonging to their organisations. These speculations were backed by Elvis-style sightings in various places, including Romania (to tie in with Madalyn's notorious Communist sympathies?) and a Mexican restaurant in New Zealand.

For almost five years the Texas police and the FBI had dragged their feet over the family's unexplained disappearance and had allowed the clues to go cold. It is a similar story to the tardy investigation by police in this country into the murder of Stephen Lawrence: he was only a black man, they were only atheists.

As we go to press, there is a tug-of-war over the funeral arrangements. American Atheists want to bury the remains with a simple secular ceremony, while William Murray O'Hair wants to give his murdered family a "decent" Christian burial. But in one of her last interviews, Madalyn said: "I just want three words on my tombstone: WOMAN – ATHEIST – ANARCHIST. That's me."

# down to earth: colin mccall

## Islamic double-talk

WE don't have to leave these shores to find a precedent for the Taliban fighters' destruction of the monuments of a previous faith. Cromwell's Roundheads denuded English churches of their icons, in conformity with the second commandment. But in the Afghan case India and Sri Lanka had both offered to take the Buddhist statues, which would have satisfied the Taliban desire to see the back of them.

It is a great shame; but a far greater shame attaches to the allegedly Islamic law in operation in Afghanistan, examples of which were revealed by Sean Langan in *Kabul View* (BBC2) on February 26. Islam was a "very moderate" religion (sic), he was told by a spokesman in the Office for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. There was no violence or extremism in Islam. "If we capture adulterers or homosexuals they are punished ... according to the law of *sharia*", the officer continued.

When Langan asked what these punishments were, the officer replied: "If they are caught in the act of fornication, they are stoned to death. If a man and a woman are caught together and they are not married then they are given 100 lashes. If a Muslim becomes an unbeliever, then we kill him."

All non-violently, of course.

## Biblical case study

YOU would think American psychologists would have enough on their plates working out why their countrymen and women elected George W Bush president, or some other study of benighted behaviour. Instead, a team at the University of California in San Diego turned its back on reality and made a case study of Samson. Mind you, they came up with quite an impressive finding. The strong man, they said, exhibited traits of ASPD, Anti-Social Personality Disorder, including impulsiveness, recklessness and "an inability to conform to social norms". He was deceitful and, "like many people with ASPD, he behaved badly as a child, causing fires and bullying other children". In short, a fine example of a bible hero.

## Marching orders

"IN the name of Jesus Christ get out, you have no business here," commanded Pastor Hugo Alvarez, as he sat astride 25-year old salesman Arturo Sanchez, who was wrestling with the devil. Helpers held down the writhing man, while others moved around the church hall shooing away the evil spirits

they saw massing in the corners.

The venue is a working-class area of Mexico City, and Pastor Alvarez, one of Mexico's foremost exorcists, claims to have chased the devil from more than 5,000 people since taking charge of the Divine Saviour Ministry of Liberation 18 years ago (*Guardian*, February 15), but he admitted that Arturo Sanchez was a tough case, lasting over three hours. "I'm going to lose a lot of weight with you," he said to his patient.

Throughout the struggle, we were told, Mr Sanchez's distressed wife "looked on in horror". And who can blame her?

## Devilish doubts

DOES he exist, though? The devil, that is. The Roman Catholic Church can't make up its mind, judging by a dispute between a leading Italian cardinal close to the Pope, and the Theological Studies Centre in Milan.

In his Lenten letter, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, Archbishop of Genoa, a moral theologian who has helped John Paul II write encyclicals, laid down 10 rules on how to resist temptation (*Guardian*, March 5). The devil certainly exists, he warned: he is a tempter, "very intelligent and astute". So Catholics should be "vigilant in the eyes and the heart" and "strong in spirit and virtue". A further five rules advocate tireless prayer, adoring God and remembering Christ's victory over temptation.

The Theological Studies Centre attacked the letter for bringing Satan back into the realm of human responsibility. By raising the spectre of diabolical machinations, the Cardinal was reaching back into the Middle Ages and ignoring the scientific advances in psychology.

But the Cardinal's views are in line with those of the Italian Bishops' Conference whose main problem on exorcism seemed to be how to address the fallen angel – in the familiar "tu" or the formal "lei". It probably depends on how close the exorcist feels to his quarry.

## No old bones

FORTY years ago, when he was a young curate, the Rev David Bryant called on the parents of a dead 10-year-old girl, and asked himself how do we begin to cope with such grief? It is a question he has struggled with ever since.

One way, he wrote in the *Guardian* (March 3), was "to throw the pain forward out of the unbearable present", in the hope of an idyllic future life. This may give a modicum of comfort to the religiously convinced but, he said,

"it is falsely flawed". It was "based on the slippery bedfellow of supposition. Death may be no more than extinction, and the pastures green a wish fulfilment, a last ditch response to what is intolerable and unbearable."

Mr Bryant, who has now retired, sought a "re-formulated Christian doctrine of resurrection", not the resuscitation of dead bones, but "re-birth in the shape of the indomitability of the human spirit". Later, he spoke of "the spiritual power to transform, transfigure and transcend even the most painful truths"; and "the principle of love woven into the universe". All of which is moonshine, of course, but it is clearly an attempt by an Anglican clergyman to come to terms with loss of faith in immortality.

## Australian divide

NOT all Australians liked the late Don Bradman – not even those cricketers who played with him and basked in his glory. Envy may have been a factor, but cricket historian David Frith has revealed a letter never before published, in which Bradman accused his team-mate Jack Fingleton of indulging in "a lifelong vendetta against me". His bias, Bradman wrote, "was based primarily on religion. He was a staunch Catholic, whereas I was C of E. There was a Catholic element in the Australian team and Fingleton wanted them to be in charge."

Four Catholic members of the Australian side of 1936-37 were, in fact, hauled up before the country's cricket board, after losing the first two tests, and given what Frith calls "a clumsy and not very specific warning about insubordination" (*Observer*, March 4). I don't imagine religion was mentioned.

## A bishop on trial

CATHOLICS in France are said to be very concerned over the coming trial of Pierre Pican, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Bayeux, who has been charged with failing to report sexual abuse of children by a priest.

Father Rene Biwas told the the bishop of his wrong-doing in the confessional, and was merely temporarily relieved of his duties. But the French authorities decided that the need to report a serious crime took precedent over the bishop's duty to keep the secrecy of the confessional. In remaining silent to avoid a scandal, the bishop, they insist, became an accessory to the crime.

The trial, expected to start in June, raises basic legal questions about the secrecy of the confessional. But more than that, it leaves one wondering just how many child molesters use the Church as a cover for their crimes.

I WAS at boarding school in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) where my father worked for the Colonial Civil Service. Church attendance was compulsory at school. I joined the confirmation classes, even though I had never been christened (an odd oversight by my mother, who was a good Christian). The priest who took the confirmation classes wrestled with his conscience over this, but finally allowed the confirmation to go ahead. One of my main reasons for doing this, if truth be told, was not to miss out on the wine-tasting; but I did swallow most of it, and not just the wine!

A few years later I was still a defender of the faith, of sorts, and even remember scolding my brother for using the name of the Lord in vain. But doubts were creeping in. A down-to-earth friend asked if my faith was strong enough to bet 1,000 to 1 against the existence of God. "Of course," I said, without hesitation, but later realised this was a porky. The same friend, who was obviously Satan in disguise, asked me if I really believed that God became so angry ("was so wroth") with his own creation that he could only be appeased by having his beloved son tortured to death? (Having known in advance that he was going to make a complete pudding of the whole thing).

Many early or pre-scientific societies have believed in the efficacy of sacrifice, whether animal or human, in appeasing the gods, especially if they wanted to be saved from pestilence, famine, or, in the case of Palestine, from the oppressive rule of the Romans; and the anthropologist in me can understand how Christian mythology took root 2,000 years ago, given the prevalence of such beliefs. But today? Chapter 2 of John Stuart Mill's autobiography contains a lucid exposure of some of these contradictions.

The philosophies of the East, although a little less cruel (I don't think any of their gods struck down the first-born of an entire country!) and without the terrifying and eternal hell-fire punishments, struck me as equally facile. A teacher friend with Hindu/mystical leanings explained how he was on a great journey, the main purpose of which was to shed the "self" or "ego" and in this way draw closer to God until, in a few reincarnations time he and his creator would become "one". We are all egoistic, he explained, and it is only by becoming less so that we "realise" ourselves. The paradox had clearly not occurred to him that the very belief that we are so important that we have to live on after death, and finally join hands with the creator of the entire universe, was itself egoistical in no small measure.

This point about egoism sank in when I came across Albert Einstein's frank contribution in the book *I Believe* (Unwin Books,

## Dave Simmonds of Essex is the 16th contributor in our *My Atheism* series



1964): "Neither can I believe that the individual survives the death of his body, although feeble souls harbour such thoughts through fear or ridiculous egotism." This was a revelation because I had always had the impression that Einstein was a believer of sorts, having referred somewhere to an "intelligence" in nature.

A few years ago I heard on the news that Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria had massacred almost an entire village. On this occasion, however, they spared the young women, whom they then raped. As I was fulminating over the horrors of Muslim fundamentalism, it dawned on me that I had come across this story somewhere before. Sure enough, there it was in Numbers 31, 9-18.

## TV "God List" shows how deep religion is rooted in public life

THE overbearing influence of religion on public life was highlighted in a programme called *The God List* broadcast on Channel 4 on March 11.

It purported to list the "fifty most influential people in the country who are driven by their religious beliefs". Chancellor Gordon Brown was second only to the Prime Minister and was followed by Prince Charles and Mrs Blair. Amusingly, Archbishop Carey came 6th after Rabbi Lionel Blue. The British heads of the Orthodox Jews and RCs came 32nd and 34th respectively, just ahead of the Queen at 37th. She was pipped by three of the Hinduja brothers who came 36th.

• The full list can be seen on <http://www.channel4.com/nextstep/godlist/>

The Lord had commanded Moses to "avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites" by killing them *all*. So when he heard that only the men had been killed and the women and children had been brought back alive, he was very angry. "Moses was wroth ... Have ye saved all the women alive? ... Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves." In other words do what you like with the virgins but kill everyone else. I am not sure whether this particular bible story is also in the Koran, but I do know that a good many of the stories are common to both.

The more I read the Bible, the more convinced I am that my good and decent Christian friends cannot have read more than a small fraction of it. I found the *Bible Handbook*, originally edited by GW Foot and W P Ball, quite an eye-opener for biblical absurdities, contradictions, atrocities, prophecies which have not come true, etc. Can anyone be unmoved, for example, by the bizarre psalm 136: "Oh give thanks .... to him that smote the first born in Egypt: for his mercy endureth for ever." (verse 10)

Atheism sometimes has a negative image. We're not only arrogant and egotistical (for not submitting ourselves to a power greater than ourselves!) but also lonely and sad - for not having a god to love and confide in. I suppose it *would* be nice to have a personal god, or a guardian angel, or a magic fairy at the bottom of the garden.

But for goodness sake, I'm a grown-up now! In a sense the opposite is true: shedding religion brought a release from doctrine and dogma. I could at last try to understand our world scientifically, and to follow roads wherever they might lead, no matter which doctrine or "ism" they might conflict with. I no longer needed to try to make the evidence fit the theory.

But where does all this leave altruism? The question is sometimes put to me: where is my motivation to be anything other than a purely selfish hedonist, if not answerable to a higher power?

Certainly, religion over the centuries has been a source of inspiration for selfless devotion, and for innumerable great works of art and music.

But this little philosophical conundrum, though interesting, need not detain us too long. One only has to examine the long list of infidels who have also devoted their lives to improving the world, and the long list of believers who have done the opposite.

**M**y old friend and colleague on the *Freethinker* way back in the 1960s, Herbert Cutner, would have loved this book. And that is a tribute. This was his special subject and he argued the case for a mythical Jesus, not only against Christians but against rationalists and humanists who felt "there must have been a man". Cutner's own book, *Jesus, God, Man or Myth* is cited on several occasions by Larry Wright, who acknowledges in the preface that his material is not original except in format. That may be so, but it is extremely well assembled. He presents the mythicist case clearly in A4 spiral bound form with correspondingly large type. As a schoolteacher and further education lecturer, he knows the value of readability as well as argument.

He summarises that argument at the outset, "that not so much as one single passage purporting to be written as history, within the first seventy years of the Christian era, can be produced to show the existence at, or before that time, of such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ, or such a body of men as could be reasonably deemed to be his disciples or followers". It is an assertion that still surprises and shakes people today, so often do they see and hear references to the life of Jesus in books and other media. Like Cutner's rationalist opponents, they take it for granted that there must at least have been a person, a "teacher", if not a god.

Yet, following the Rev Robert Taylor (1784-1844), Wright lists 13 philosophers, geographers and historians of the first and second centuries of the Christian era, who might have been expected to refer to Jesus and his disciples in their writings, but make no mention of him. True, we have the gospels but, although Nicky Gumbel of the Alpha group and other fundamentalists may believe these to be historic, they would not have the support of any responsible Christian scholar. They are replete with contradictions anyway, some 72 being given in Foote and Ball's *Bible Handbook*, from which Wright selects 20. Moreover, the gospels are as mythical as their "biographies". The chosen four are a more or less arbitrary selection from a much greater number of writings that were in use among various early Christian communities, and they were not given definitive status until the Council of Carthage in 397CE.

In an attempt to justify the validity of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the "higher critics" invented the so-called Q document (from *Quelle*, the German word for source), but it must be emphasised that no such document exists outside the heads of the critics themselves; it is a purely hypothetical concept with no foundation in fact.

So whence Jesus Christ? The answer is from the heavens. The Son was the personification of the sun; he is the last of the solar saviours, his legend having been drawn from the "common wellspring of tradition". His is a heavenly, not an earthly story. There were indeed many such gods in the ancient world. They were, as Wright puts it, "of ancient derivation and general circulation throughout Egypt, Syria, Palestine and the Middle East". All of them were tied to astronomical and astrological events.

Within Christianity, for instance, Easter (lunar) is tied to the vernal equinox, while Christmas (solar) is tied to the winter solstice. And, says Wright, similar correlations can be shown for the festivals of Islam, Judaism and Hinduism. Sir Isaac Newton, he notes, made this observation in 1730, but was apparently afraid of its effects on religious opinions and did not push his discovery to its logical conclusion. The date here is wrong because Newton died in

Colin McCall  
reviews  
*Christianity,  
Astrology and  
Myth* by Larry  
Wright

1727 (and was not resurrected!) but he does seem to have had Unitarian notions that he kept to himself. As Isaac Asimov points out in his *Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*, Newton could not have remained at Cambridge had he openly denied the divinity of Christ.

Human beings have worshipped the sun from time immemorial, directly or in human guise: Osiris, Mithra, Apollo, Hercules and Adonis, to name but a few of the thirty or so saviour gods known. Christians and other historicists have no trouble treating them as myths; they don't argue that there must have been a (strong) man behind the tales of Hercules. Yet there is no essential difference between them and Jesus. The difference lies in our historical and geographical situation, living as we do, in the Christian era in a land with an established church.

Things might well have been otherwise. Mithraism was the dominant religion of the Roman Empire; it was particularly favoured by the military and became the official state religion under Aurelian (c215-275CE). It

remained powerful until the fourth century, when Christianity replaced it as the state religion under the patronage of the murderous tyrant Constantine. Even then paganism made a brief come-back under Julian the Apostate.

Mithra was born of a virgin, like the other saviour gods; his great festivals were the winter solstice and the vernal equinox; he had twelve disciples (the 12 months of the year or the 12 signs of the zodiac); he was crucified and entombed, but rose again on the third day, and so on. Larry Wright cites *The Paganism in Our Christianity* (1930), where the Egyptologist and committed Anglican A Weigall says that, "as a solar festival, Sunday was the sacred day of Mithra; and it is interesting to note that since Mithra was addressed as Dominus (Lord), Sunday must have been the Lord's Day long before Christian times. The head of the Church was the Papa or Father, now known as the Pope [still Papa in Italy] who was seated in Rome. The Pope's crown is called a tiara, but tiara is Persian, and perhaps a Mithraic head-dress."

**S**o, there was no novelty in the idea of the divine son, symbolised by the sun, the "Light of the World", dying and rising again, and the Christian fathers knew it. St Jerome tells us that "The very grotto where the infant Christ uttered his first cries formerly resounded with the lamentations of the lover of Aphrodite [ie Adonis]." St Augustine was another who recognised the similarity between Christian and pagan myths. In fact, as J M Robertson remarks in his *Pagan Christs*, "There is not a conception associated with Christ that is not common to some or all of the saviour cults of antiquity...In fundamentals...Christism is but paganism re-shaped. It is only the economic and doctrinal evolution of the system – the first determined by Jewish practice and Roman environment, the second by Greek thought – that constitute new phenomena in religious history."

Still today, at the winter solstice, the time when all the sun gods were born, we preserve many reminders of our pagan past, with our trees, our wreaths, the mistletoe, the Yule log, candles to encourage the sun in its weakest hour, our feasting and our present-giving. And, as we approach the vernal equinox, which retains its pagan name, we can all enjoy our symbolic Easter eggs.

.....  
**THE A4 format, spiral-bound edition of *Christianity, Astrology and Myth* is available directly from Fairview Books, 12 Kent Road, Swindon SN1, 3NJ. £11.95 including postage and packing. Please make cheques payable to L M Wright.**

EARLIER this year, *The Pink Paper's* cover story was a piece eulogising the recent Kumbh Mela in India. A week later, the paper's Letter of the Week (anonymous) congratulated the *The Pink Paper* on its coverage of the shenanigans in India, and emphasised how important "spirituality" was for gay people.

This proved too much for Dr Moreton, who blasted off the following response:-

"I am surprised that the anonymous letter on spirituality, God and Gays, should be elevated to Letter of the Week status. After all, the whole thing is based on a dubious premise – that God exists. As thousands of years of searching have failed to produce one scrap of evidence for any deity, I would suggest that he, she or it is nothing more than a delusion concocted to comfort the emotionally insecure, satisfy the ignorant and manipulate the masses.

"As for 'spirituality', this is just an ambiguous term invented to cover a range of emotions that most of us experience but which we do not all attribute to supernatural sources. One does not have to search for it in a filthy river or in a

If there's one thing religionists are good at it's getting their views published in both the local and national press. These opinions, often quite silly and irrational, are frequently and effectively countered by atheists and humanists, many of them subscribers to the *Freethinker*. In a new series, the *FT* aims to publish the best of these challenges. We kick off with a letter written by Dr Stephen Moreton of Warrington to the gay weekly, *The Pink Paper*.

big daddy in the sky.

"Your correspondent need not be concerned about those of us who have dumped God altogether. For many of us discarding this burden has been an exhilarating and life-enhancing experience. It sets us free to marvel at the universe without the blinkers of superstition, to value this life as precious because it is the only one we'll ever have, and to love (and shag!) our partners without needless feelings of guilt

and shame. That beats any 'spirituality' the God-believers can offer."

.....  
**IF YOU** have had a letter published challenging a religious viewpoint, or embarked on any form of secular campaign at a local or national level, please let us have the details. Please send the details to **Atheism in Action**, the *Freethinker*, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.

## the centurion's story: an easter poem

### Massada AD 73

GAIUS Lepidus stood at the foot of the rock.  
 Before him were the tumbled, twisted bodies;  
 Israelites, lying where they'd fallen  
 From that last desperate leap, or driven  
 O'er the edge by thrusting Roman swords.

Lying near his foot, a skinny grey-haired  
 corpse;  
 Older than most with weathered, wasted limbs.  
 He turned it over with his foot and looked,  
 Then called across to one of his companions:  
 "Julius, look at this man's wrists and feet –

"This one has once been crucified, I'm sure.  
 And now I look, I think I know the man.  
 His name was Jesus, a wand'ring Nazarene  
 who preached and maddened the Sanhedrin  
 by threatening their pomp and dignity.

Forty years ago it was, the year the moon  
 obscured the sun in Passover.  
 They brought the man to trial, whipped up the  
 mob;  
 Asked the Governor, Pilatus, for his death.  
 And Pontius reluctantly agreed.

My job it was to oversee his death.  
 Pilatus sent for me, "Go easy on him, Gaius;  
 He's done no wrong that you or I can see;  
 – The thing's political – that slimy Caiaphas!"  
 I chose my squad and set out for the place.

### By Denys Drower

A man I knew was standing at the scene.  
 A well dressed Arimathean with a band  
 Of half a dozen servants dressed in white.  
 We had a chat and came to an agreement;  
 A tomb nearby was his and could be used.

I said the men were not to smash his legs.  
 But one young idiot took a spear  
 And jabbed him in the side, the thrust  
 Puncturing his bladder. I had the  
 Fellow flogged for disobeying orders.

By nightfall, it seemed the man was dead.  
 They took him down and laid him in the vault.  
 The guards had settled down to watch  
 With three wine skins presented by my friend.  
 I left, returning to the palace.

In later years I learned the truth from Joseph;  
 By midnight all the guards were snoring  
 drunk.  
 He looked inside the tomb and saw some signs  
 of life.  
 So took him home to hide him in his house.  
 He rolled the stone back, left two servants  
 there.

For days the preacher hovered near to death.  
 Hidden in the rich man's summer house.

His wounds began to heal with Joseph's care.  
 Meanwhile the wildest stories flew,  
 Some claimed he'd risen from the dead.

The priests demanded that the governor  
 Should institute a search throughout Judea.  
 Pilatus, though, conceded no such thing.  
 "Waste the Legion's time to look for him?  
 If he's survived, then justice has been  
 served."

Joseph summoned Jesus, sat him down.  
 "Good fortune, bribes, your constitution,  
 have this time saved you; but it cannot happen  
 twice.  
 Go to ground, change your looks, your name,  
 Cut short your hair; pretend that you are  
 Greek.

"Your disciples, convinced that you were  
 God  
 Believe you risen from the bed of death.  
 Let's leave it so; leave them to preach your  
 word.  
 I've work that you can do to earn your bread,  
 Your brains more help to me than any  
 sword."

That's what Joseph told me. Many years ago.  
 Posted then to Egypt, I lost touch.  
 I later heard he'd died in Antioch.  
 And Jesus? I wonder why on earth he joined  
 This futile plot to throw off Roman rule.

## The historicity of Jesus

SCHNEIR Levin takes up a point I made in my *Freethinker* article last November on the question of the historicity of Jesus, in which I said if there was an historic personage of that name the evidence was likely to come from accounts of messianic agitation, to which Levin adds the word, "political".

I made the point specifically, though not, it seems, with the clarity I should have, in order to differentiate between the Jesus of the Christian cult, who is unquestionably mythical, and individuals associated with Jewish groups fighting for independence from Roman domination. The messiah, if there was one, would be a political leader as the office he aspired to was essentially political, even if there were some religious undertones.

It is quite possible the anonymous compilers of the gospels incorporated incidents associated with one or more would-be messiahs into their writings, suitably modified of course, but Christianity was essentially the creation of Saul, who was in all probability born and brought up a gentile, and lied when he claimed, or was claimed for him by the author of Luke, that he had studied as a boy under Gamaliel, for that scholar is known only to have taken advanced students. Paul, as Saul became, may even have served in the Roman Army, or its intelligence service, or both, and would have been quite capable of adapting pagan mythology to slot into Judaic beliefs, which themselves had been influenced at an earlier date by pagan concepts.

The idea of Christianity having had its roots in political activity is not new, having been advanced by a number of scholars, one such being F A Ridley, a former editor of the *Freethinker*, who rejected the myth theory based upon astrological concepts, highlighting some of the New Testament evidence for the political case in his book, *Julian the Apostate and the Rise of Christianity* (Watts, 1937), a work I suspect Mr Levin might well find worth reading, if he has not already done so.

ROBERT MORRELL  
Nottingham

## More church schools on the rates?

CLERICAL forces are mobilising to get more state-funded schools in under religious control. Keith Porteous Wood's article (*Freethinker*, February, shows that the answer from the National Secular Society will be very clear and very forceful. But will it be sufficient to stop the clerical advance and reverse it?

In the coming years we must expect the government of this country to remain in the hands of Tony Blair, a confirmed supporter

of church-controlled education, and his team of Sunday-school graduates. It is clear, therefore, that there will be no governmental support for an appeal from us, however well-documented and however well-argued.

The only hope lies in building up pressure from below in the wider educational community; from students, from parents, from teachers and from unions. A comprehensive and accurate presentation of facts is, of course, essential, and so are clear and convincing arguments. But to reach as far and as wide as we have to reach, we also need a message which is short enough and simple enough to have an immediate appeal and gain a wide support. It must be easily remembered and readily repeated. In other words: we need a good and effective slogan. Until a better one is found, I would suggest the following: *No Religious Discrimination in State-Funded Schools*, specified, when appropriate, as follows: *No Religious Discrimination in Selection of Pupils, appointment of teachers or Composition of Governing Bodies*.

Not until these demands have been met can we expect to reach the final goal: *No Religious Indoctrination in State-Funded Schools*.

YNGVE BAUTZ  
Newcastle-on-Tyne

## Art or Bollocks?

IT MIGHT usefully be added to Tony Akkermans' article (February 2001) that the fashion for bollocks masquerading as art grew out of the craze for attribution among art collectors.

Marcel Duchamp, an artist who first made his name as a painter, discovered that punters would pay high prices for anything which could be attributed incontrovertibly to himself, and so made a lot of money dashing off quick doodles. Pablo Picasso and David Hockney have similarly exploited the attributions market, giving themselves the time and resources to produce real art.

Congratulations to them. Congratulations too, to those who have no talent for painting, but succeed in exploiting the gullibility of art buyers. Tony admits that art is not just representation, or just painting, or just visual. Surely he must agree that Tracey Emin is a brilliant con-artist.

DONALD ROOM  
London

IN TONY Akkermans' refreshing exposé of modern art he doesn't mention music, which is odd, given that Thomas Hardy, Steve Bell and even Pete Sampras get a mention.

In my opinion the extent of the fraudulence and humbug in contemporary music is even

greater, and the parallels with religious dogmatism equally valid.

Any rational framework, any skilful execution of workmanship, any counterpoint, even an interesting rhythm or, worst of all, anything faintly resembling a memorable tune, must be discarded – or else face the ridicule of the *cognoscenti*. In other words, the perfect refuge for the talentless.

The liberal in me says "What's the harm in it all? What goes on between consenting adults... etc, etc." But this sentiment turns to anger when I switch on Radio 3 fairly late on most nights (purely for research purposes of course!) to be affronted very often by a series of squeaks, sawing sounds, near random sequences of notes and other noises. I'm paying for it, after all, along with the invasive religious broadcasts, just as I have to pay for the teacher's salaries in the church school near me which strictly selects only from Christian families.

Of course beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I defy any honest music lover to tell me they find this "music" beautiful. The phoney-ness of it all was brought home to me when I read of an experiment in which a group of connoisseurs were unable to distinguish between the forward and backward versions of the same compositions.

Change, experiment, rule-breaking are all important. Beethoven broke a few rules. But to break them you need to understand them; and discarding too many rules soon leads to "noise". Funny and unusual sounds may be interesting to some, but let's not call it music.

DAVE SIMMONDS  
Essex

"WHAT exactly is art?" asks Tony Akkermans, and appears to answer, to his own satisfaction at least, that art consists in embodied skill, where skill apparently relates to the artist's success in creating a more or less photographic facsimile of what he is endeavouring to depict. He implies that to simply enjoy a work of art that does not embody skill so defined is analogous to harbouring religious belief. In particular he denounces what he refers to as "Modern Art" – though in point of fact it is clear that what he is denouncing is, rather, abstract or more generally non-literal art, much of which is, of course, not particularly modern. It appears that he is particularly annoyed by the work of Jackson Pollock, Rothko, Picasso and even Lowry (or so I understand his reference to "matchstick" figures) and comes up with several improving anecdotes to "prove" that "Modern Art" is no more than the work of confidence tricksters. Not just history, it appears, but "Modern Art" is bunk! He apparently yearns for the good old



days of the 17th century, when, according to his article, "artists were today's photographers". He does, however, find some grounds for hope in today's cartoonists – who I am sure would raise their hands in horror at being so held up as examples of high (as against hard-hitting) art.

Of course by the time that we reach the end of the article we may well suspect, if we have not already done so, that the whole thing is no more than an elaborate leg-pull and that Akkerman is probably rejoicing to think of how easily his readers have been taken in. An example perhaps of Modern Journalism?

However, just in case we are meant to take this article seriously I will conclude by offering the remedy provided by the following definitions of art.

The first is by Harry Eyres, till recently the poetry editor of the *Daily Express*: "Art is the touchstone of emotional and spiritual truth and reality". In other words the artist endeavours to embody in his work and transmit to others the insight into his own or the human condition afforded to him (or her) by his experience – and provided he remains true to this endeavour then, despite all the outrage that Akkermans may feel, the artist is entitled to use any means at all that he judges to be appropriate and necessary to this end; just as we, for our part, are entitled to arrive at our own judgment of the works that are thus produced and offered for our appreciation. But we should be prepared in the first place to actually inspect the work in question, to give it a fair viewing as it were, and then to justify our opinions by rational argument rather than mere denunciation, as also to listen to the rationally expressed views of those who may disagree with us. After all, nobody forces us to look at, let alone buy, such art or its reproductions! It may well not appeal to us – but others may not share our feelings about it, however strongly held.

My second definition of art I take from Tolstol's "What is art?" It is as follows: "Art is that human activity which consists in one man's consciously conveying to others, by certain external signs, the feelings he has experienced, and in those others being infected by those feelings and (thus) also experiencing them." Nothing here, you will observe, about narrowly defined skills! And I would argue that "consciously conveying" relates only to the artist's judgment that the means he has employed are adequate to his intentions.

ALBERT ADLER  
London

TONY Akkermans suggested that showing children the paintings of Mark Rothko is a form of child abuse. His remark might have been more insulting to real victims of abuse if it was not part of a wholly ill-considered

stream of consciousness. His attack on modern art was irrational and preposterously indiscriminate in its target. He chose a few unrelated artists as though they were representative of modern art. The fact that in the same breath he attacked such diverse artists (whom no one would collectively champion) revealed the shallowness of his interest. His presumptions about what constitutes skill were narrow-minded.

If skill (as perceived by Akkermans) were the criteria for judging art, our cultural heroes would all be like jugglers and conjurers, doing what, through practice, they find easy. Virtuosity has always played a part in art but is rarely its central purpose. Every art form has been enriched by experiment and iconoclasm, which has often been a reaction against glib virtuosity.

Modern art is not like religion. It claims no privileged access to truth, or to political power. Although artworks are "totems" for society they are not necessarily superstitious ones. Akkermans failed to note that Modernism has been triumphantly secular. Western modern art may be unique in that it is virtually free from supernaturalism.

Western liberal democracies are unusual for their diversity of creative expression (there are even magazines for people who don't believe in god, customised coffins and a myriad of bizarre hairstyles). It is natural that we require art objects that express freedom and individuality as well sheer capability (ill-defined though these concepts are). There is room for Captain Beefheart as well as Pavarotti. In art, abstraction and hyperrealism coexist without contradiction.

Unsurprisingly, religions and oppressive political regimes have found the whole idea of an *avant-garde* very threatening. Historically they have attempted to restrict modes of art to those that lend themselves to their propaganda. They require conformity and have frequently imposed heavy penalties for digressions. What is Mr Akkermans proposing?

Had he spent more time looking at art, he might find something more interesting to say about it. If he showed a less literal, and more practical sensibility he might find more evidence of skill. There is plenty of highly skilled and highly representational art that is frankly boring, and plenty that isn't.

STEPHEN PARK  
Devon

## Race and religion

I READ Terry Sanderson's March letter, in reply to mine of February, with some interest. Especially when he stated that the race and religion of secular Jews "are utterly inseparable". But if they are secular, then how can they

belong to a religion? Later, Mr Sanderson points out that many Muslims feel that they are Muslims first, and Arabs or Africans etc second. But that does not alter the truth that the very fact that Islam considers apostasy a capital offence means that it occurs; but I don't know of anyone who can change their genes.

I am glad that Mr Sanderson mentions that the Race Relations Act can accept religions as racial groups. In fact, a couple of years ago I wrote to the CRE, pointing out that in that case, what happens when a Christian discriminates against a Muslim – and it turns out that both of them are white? All that does is make a monkey out of the Race Relations Act – and its administrators. (I didn't get a reply.)

Finally, I am not sure what Mr Sanderson means by his final sentence: "Mr Clarke's opinions may make sense logically, but what has logic got to do with religion?". I thought that that was adequately dealt with in my letter: Effectively, nothing. And as an example, I offer for your readers' delectation the situation I found in South Africa, under apartheid, when I arrived there in the 1950s. Their established religion was itself racist.

The main Christian churches fully supported apartheid to such an extent that it was an offence for blacks to enter a "white church" except to clean it. So I made myself somewhat unpopular by gently pointing out that Christ – the very core of their Christian religion – didn't happen to be white. Christ was a slightly dusky Semite who would never have passed a Race Classification Test as "racially pure white". So, in a Second Coming, their own deity would have been barred from their white churches, schools, theatres, and just about everything else.

I confess I'm not sure whether such insanities would be classed as race discrimination, or religious discrimination, or what.

Perhaps, when the odious Dr Verwoerd snarled in 1936 that "Any further admission of Jews into South Africa will lead to the defiling of our white race", he had Jesus in mind?

JOHN CLARKE  
Uxbridge

Please address your letters (preferably typed) to Barry Duke, *Freethinker* editor, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH. E-mail: editor@freethinker.co.uk or fteditor@aol.com Phone/Fax: 020 8305 9603.

# atheist & humanist contacts & events

**Bath & Beyond Humanists:** Meets at 7.30 pm on the first Monday of every month in Bath. Details from Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

**Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group:** Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. 01772 686816.

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Group:** Information: 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove (buses 5 & 5a). Sunday, May 6, 4pm. Peter Heales: *The Darwin Family*.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnley on 0117 904 9490.

**Bromley Humanists:** Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 020 8777 1680.

**Cornwall Humanists:** Information: B Mercer, "Amber", Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Tel. 01209 890690.

**Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743. Worcester House, Pittville Circus Road, Cheltenham. Friday, February 23, 8pm. John Sutton: *Immigration and Tolerance*.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, 21 Southdowns Road, Dawlish, EX7 0LB. Tel: 01626 864046.

**Ealing Humanists:** Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

**East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel, 41 Horsefair Avenue, Chapel-en-le-Frith, SK23 9SQ. Tel: 01298 815575.

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

**Essex Humanists:** Information: Brian Whitelaw, 66 Linnet Drive, Chelmsford CM2 8AF. Tel: 01245 265664. Monthly meetings, second Sunday, 7.30 pm.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Monthly meetings at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, April 20, 7.30pm. Barry Duke: *120 Years of the Freethinker*.

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

**Harrow Humanist Society:** Information: 020 8863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925.

**Humanist Society of Scotland:** Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Tel. 01324 485152.

**Edinburgh Group:** Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

**Greater Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: Niall Power on 0161 2865349. Public meetings second Wednesday of the Month, 7.30pm. Friends' Meeting House, Mount Street, opposite Manchester Town Hall.

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information Robert Tee on

0113 2577009.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 2622250/0116 241 4060. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, April 26, 8pm. Discussion on Gambling and Other Addictions.

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

**Musical Heathens:** Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 02476 673306.

**North East Humanists (Teesside Group):** Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

**North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):** Information: Christine Wood on 0191 2763123. Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, April 19, 7.30pm. Members forum: Speaking as a Humanist.

**North London Humanist Group:** Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 020 8360 1828.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

**Oxford Humanists:** Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, May 2, 8pm. Bill McIlroy: *Written Words of Wisdom – 120 Years of the Freethinker*.

**South Hampshire Humanists:** Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120

**South Place Ethical Society:** Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 020 8642 4577. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, April 11, 7.30pm. Keith Gimson: *Are There Rules for Humanists?*

**Ulster Humanist Association:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. Meetings second Thursday evening of the month 8pm at Queen's Senior Common Room, 1 College Crescent, Belfast.

**Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282. Alice Munn's House (WRVS), 4 Gravel Hill, Ludlow. Tuesday, April 10, 7.30pm. Marilyn Mason: *Humanism and State Education*.

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

**West Kent Secular Humanist Group:** Information: Ian Peters on 01892 890485 or Chris Ponsford on 01892 862855. E-mail address: C862855@hotmail.com.

Please send your listings and events notices to Bill McIlroy, 115 South View Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield S7 1DE. Tel: 0114 2509127.