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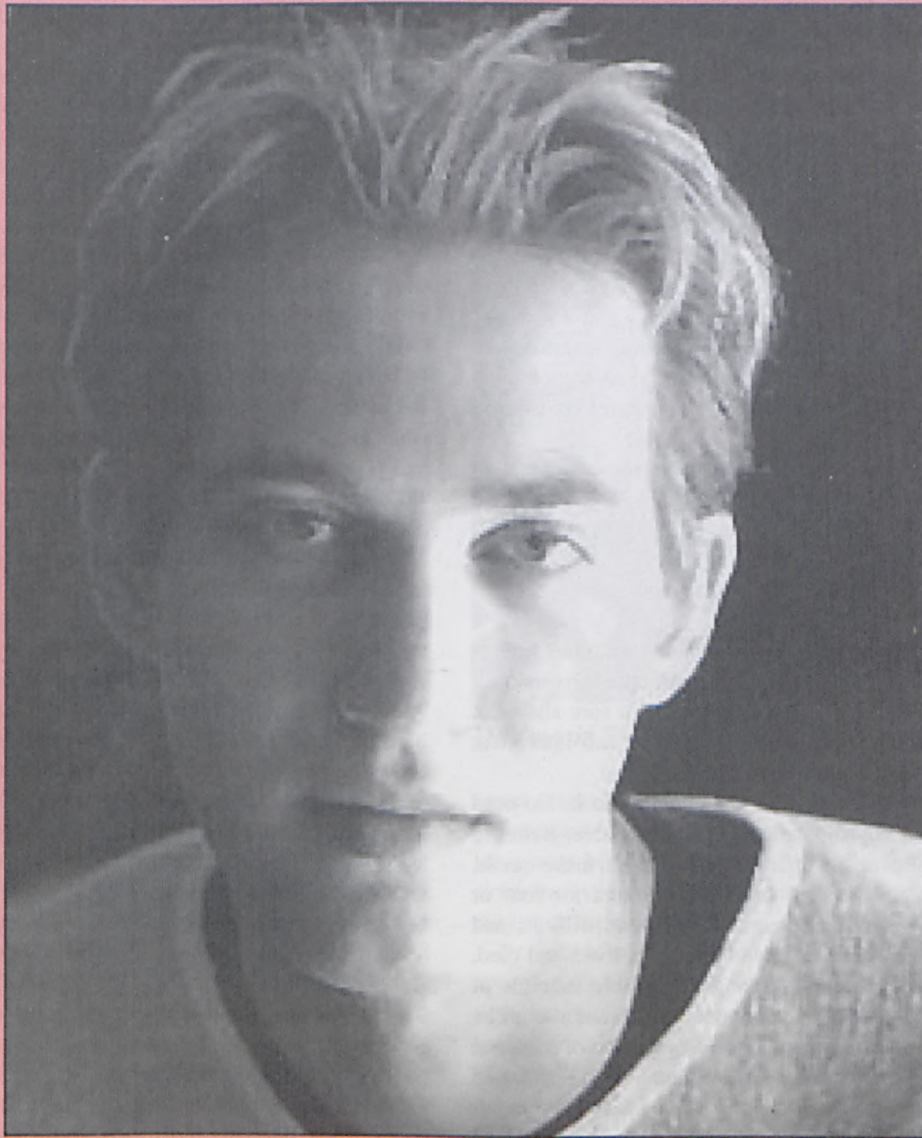
The

Vol 121 No 9  
September 2001

# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



## Young gifted and godless

Daniel Harbour  
is the author of  
*An Intelligent  
Person's Guide  
to Atheism*,  
reviewed  
on p13 by  
Colin McCall

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Dallying with the Departed – *centrepages*

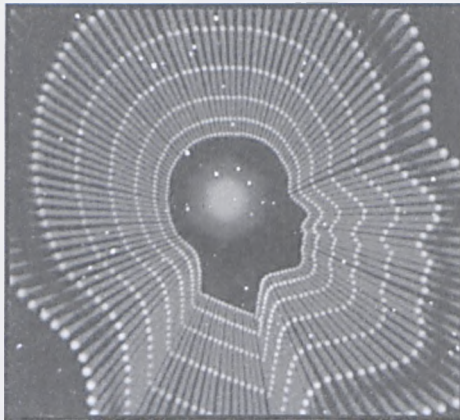
# freethinking out loud: brian edwards

HAD an e-mail from my old friend Ivan Strahan in Belfast. Ivan's a bit worried about his mortality. People of his own age, and younger, are dropping like flies. "We are," he wrote, including me in this dire prognosis, "in the death-zone."

Death is a no-win situation for atheists. If you're right, you don't get to tell anyone; if you're wrong, everyone, including God, gets to tell you. That's the scary bit.

There is, of course, an upside to being right – you don't have to worry about being tormented for eternity by some divine psychopath. The downside is that you are inevitably going to find yourself, like Monty Python's Norwegian Blue, "stone dead, demised, passed on, no more, ceased to be, a stiff, bereft of life, snuffed it, up the creek and kicked the bucket, extinct in its entirety, an ex-parrot."

Death is first and foremost an affront to the ego. It's not the fear of eternal damnation that bothers me about dying, not even the ter-



ror of the unknown; it's the "no more, ceased to be, extinct in its entirety, ex-parrot" bit that gets up my nose. How dare things go on as usual with me not there! How dare the Earth presume to turn, the sun to rise, the moon to shine, flowers to grow, birds to sing! How dare people continue to conduct conversations without seeking my opinion! How dare there be newspapers and magazines and books and radio and television and the internet and yet-to-be-invented forms of mass communication without my being in on them! How dare I not exist!

"Vanity of vanities," saith the preacher, "all is vanity." And mark that fellow down for the sin of pride.

## Conversion

There is a view among my religious friends that I will undergo a last-minute conversion. I doubt it. If there is a god, I'm sure she's not going to be fooled by a piece of self-interested, panic-induced hypocrisy like that.

And anyway, I just couldn't do it. No need for any sophisticated dialectics here. Belief in god or an afterlife just doesn't make sense. *Homo sapiens* have been around for four or five million years. Billions and trillions and zillions of us have been born, lived and died, and there isn't a single verifiable example of survival after death, not a shred, not a scintilla, not a scrap, not an iota, jot or tittle of evidence of the existence of a divine being. Thank god for that! The versions we've made so far in our own image haven't been too attractive.

Still, there could be an argument for hedging your bets, just in case. Trouble is, it's not just a simple choice between believing and not-believing, between theism and atheism. It's the Everlasting Cup and there are a stack of runners. Put your money on the wrong nag - Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity – and you're a gonner.

"You know the odds," says the celestial bookie, "now beat them!"

I prefer to put my money on the nose. Win/Lose. No great dividend either way. But

whichever horse romps home, I'll still have kept my dignity and self-respect.

Imagine for a moment that I'm right, that there is no god. Imagine that every time you get down on your knees to pray, you're actually talking to yourself. Imagine that each time you call on god for help in time of trouble, only the wind hears your entreaties. Imagine that for years you've prostrated yourself before, glorified, worshipped, no one. Imagine that the guilt, the self-denial, the adherence to a set of arbitrary, illogical and often punitive tenets have been totally without point or profit.

Imagine the centuries of ecclesiastical ritual, the pomp and circumstance were all mere dressing-up and play-acting. Imagine that the churches, cathedrals, synagogues, temples, mosques are nothing more than monuments to man's despair and delusion. Imagine that all the martyrs to religious belief, all the victims of religious persecution, died in their hundreds of millions for ... nothing.

Imagine that everything you were taught, believed, clung to for meaning and comfort is wrong. Imagine that it's all been the most terrible joke, the most cruel hoax conceivable, and you are the butt of it.

Doesn't bear thinking about, does it? Which is why so many people don't.

On the other hand, I could be wrong. God may not be non-existent, he may merely be painfully shy. And if he does exist, there's just the possibility that he may be assisted by a devil with all the wit and style of Rowan Atkinson's "Toby," as he welcomes the latest batch of newcomers to Hell – murderers, looters, pillagers, thieves, bank-managers, adulterers, Americans, sodomites, Christians ("I'm afraid the Jews were right."), everyone who saw Monty Python's *Life of Brian* ("He can't take a joke after all") and atheists ("You must be feeling a right lot of charlies!").

Well, that would be embarrassing, I admit. But I'm betting it's never going to happen. I'm betting that god doesn't exist. And have you never had a moment of doubt, Brian?

Oh yes – as a 20-year-old student of Germanic languages, standing under a tree during a thunderstorm in Gottingen with lightning strafing the rain-sodden pavement less than a metre from my feet. I did have a moment of doubt then. We atheists hate lightning.

• **Brian Edwards is an Honorary Associate of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists.. This article appeared originally in the New Zealand Listener and the winter issue of the NZ Rationalist and Humanist, and is reproduced with their permission.**

## The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687  
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote Ltd  
PO Box 26428  
London SE10 9WH

Editorial office 020 8305 9603  
E-mail: [editor@freethinker.co.uk](mailto:editor@freethinker.co.uk)  
Website:  
<http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

UK: 12 months £15 or £10 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to the Freethinker, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son  
Sheffield

# World-wide outrage over Pakistani peace campaigner's death sentence for 'blasphemy'

WORLD-WIDE protests are being mounted against a death sentence imposed last month on a peace activist in Pakistan.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), which described the sentence as "an affront to civilised society", together with Amnesty International and the Sea of Faith, is protesting against the "blasphemy" conviction and the death penalty handed down to Dr Younis Shaikh on August 18.

Peace activist and founder of the progressive humanist group Enlightenment, Dr Shaikh has also been fined an equivalent of US\$1,500 by the Additional Sessions Judge of Islamabad, Safdar Hussain Malik.

An intimidating group of fundamentalist clergy made their presence felt to both the judge and the defence throughout the trial. The final two sittings of the court were held *in camera*, and conducted in the premises of the Adiala jail itself where Dr Shaikh has been held since his arrest in October 2000.

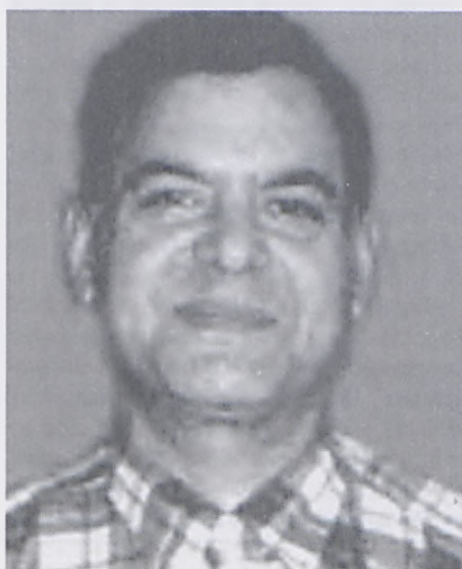
"Civilised people will shudder at the news that in this century a human being can be tried and sentenced to die by the state merely for saying that neither Prophet Mohammed nor his parents could logically have been Muslims before Islam was revealed to the Prophet," said Levi Fragell, President of IHEU. The other charges of blasphemy against Dr. Shaikh's remarks – supposedly made in the course of a routine class-room lecture he gave in a medical college where he was a lecturer in Physiology – are described by the IHEU as equally ridiculous and malicious.

None of those who complained to the police were eye-witnesses to the alleged offence: the complaint was lodged by leaders of the Majlis Tahaffuz Khatm-i-Nabuwat (Committee for the Protection of the Finality of the Prophethood), a organisation that is known to have harassed and attacked non-orthodox Muslims in the past.

## Judges under threat from zealots

Human Rights activists closely monitoring the trial point out that one of the witnesses for the prosecution was completely discredited, as it was shown that he was not present in class

on the day Dr Shaikh supposedly made his "blasphemous remarks". Unfortunately, even this made no difference to the judge. A Pakistani human rights activist said that "the



**Dr Younis Shaikh**

lower courts are always very scared of letting off accused blasphemers. Many of the judges have been bumped off when they gave decisions in favour of such persons. Why should they stick their necks out?"

Dr Shaikh has been given only one week to appeal in the High Court, as opposed to the 30 days that is usual. While so far no one has been hanged for blasphemy in Pakistan, hundreds of Pakistanis languish in jail after being accused or convicted of blasphemy. Convicts are locked up in extremely small "death cells", where prisoners can barely stand.

Babu Gogineni, Executive Director of IHEU, and International Advisor to the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, has expressed concern over developments in the Pakistani state since independence, when it had a modern, secular constitution that safeguarded the rights of all citizens, to its present state, where fundamentalist agitation and *Shari'a* law conspire to deny basic human rights and freedom of thought and speech.

"Pakistan, the birth place of the Taliban

which infests Afghanistan today, is itself sliding down the slope and is on the way to becoming an international pariah. The blasphemy law in Pakistan is an affront to civilisation," said Mr Gogineni.

## Campaign for Dr Shaikh

The international campaign for Dr. Shaikh will be coordinated by the IHEU, in close cooperation with Amnesty International and the Sea of Faith Network.

World-wide demonstrations in front of the Pakistani Missions and Consulates are being planned.

IHEU is calling on Western democratic governments to put pressure on the Pakistani government to get the death sentence commuted, and to provide a safe haven and refuge for Dr Shaikh.

IHEU advocates abolishing of blasphemy laws all over the world and the separation of religion and state in every country, which alone can guarantee democratic and civilised freedoms to citizens of all religious faiths and none.

Among the first to register his "abhorrence" of the sentence was former *Freethinker* editor Nigel Sinnott, who now lives in Australia. In a letter to Pakistani President Musharraf, Mr Sinnott said: "I wish to add my voice to those of many others who are appealing for clemency in the case of Dr Younis Shaikh, who has been sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy.

"Even if I were not opposed to the death penalty in general, I would find it abhorrent that a man could be sentenced to death for a crime not involving murder or serious physical assault. The alleged words for which Dr. Shaikh has been sentenced to death would not even constitute a criminal offence or misdemeanour in most civilised countries.

"Laws against blasphemy should be abolished: they invariably lead to abuse, bullying and corrupt tactics by small minorities with axes to grind or malicious grievances to settle. They almost invariably cause injustice, even if employed sparingly. Please pardon Dr Shaikh."

# the alpha experience

THE National Secular Society has lodged a complaint with the Independent Television Commission over the ITV series *Alpha: will it change their lives?* The complaint alleges that the series amounts to evangelising for a particular faith, which is forbidden in the ITC's code of practice.

The series, consisting of ten hour-long programmes broadcast on Sunday evenings and presented by Sir David Frost, follows the progress of ten people who enrolled on an Alpha course. It is filmed at Alpha's headquarters, Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican church in Knightsbridge, one of London's wealthiest districts.

The first episode brought a barrage of criticism from TV reviewers and commentators, even those in the religious press. It was variously described as "an advertisement" and "a promotional video", and several have wondered how it was ever approved for broadcasting on a mainstream channel. Only the mildest of doubts was voiced during the programme itself, however, even though Alpha has some very severe critics both inside and outside the churches.

**Alpha's religious critics claim it ludicrously over-simplifies Christianity. Even to me, Alpha seems to bear the same relationship to Christianity as McDonald's does to haute cuisine**

So are we right to be concerned about the Alpha course?

In essence, it consists of ten evening sessions, held weekly, plus a weekend away in a remote location. Each session starts convivially with a meal and glass of wine. This is followed by a talk/sermon from a charismatic preacher – in the case of HTB, and the TV series, it is soft-spoken, photogenic Nicky Gumbel, the moving force behind Alpha. The evening concludes with discussions in small groups.

As one critical website points out ([www.deceptioninthechurch.com/alpha.html](http://www.deceptioninthechurch.com/alpha.html)): "It is designed to appeal to non-believers, with every detail – the food, flow-

ers, hospitality and questions – aimed at disarming the unchurched".

The silver-tongued preacher repeatedly claims he wants his audience to feel relaxed and pressure-free, another subtle component of the appeal, especially to the lonely and vulnerable.

But participants should be wary of the sweetness and light; the iron fist of biblical literalism is soon to make its appearance. However, even this is clothed in a velvet glove, with hard-line demands being prefaced with such phrases as "I wish it weren't the case, but the Bible is quite clear on this point". So this course is not for any of you living out of holy wedlock, for example – unless you're prepared to repent the error of your ways.

About eight weeks into the course there is a weekend away. To some, this is clearly the highlight of the course, but to others the weekend encapsulates the most sinister aspects of Alpha. Organised mass-hysteria with talking in tongues is *de rigueur*, as are participants falling about having been "touched by the Holy Spirit".

Nikolai Segura, chair and founder of Imperial College Secular Society, has taken the course solely to analyse it from a secular perspective. He considers the weekend away employs techniques similar to those used by cults – although admittedly there is no pressure to attend.

"We were in some isolated Christian centre

I PROPOSE to develop and promote a course. This is an appeal, at a very early stage, for attendees. My inspiration is the very wonderful Alpha course, as seen on TV and featuring large doses of Sir (or is it Lord – it's so hard to keep up) David Frost. I am seeking a celebrity of my own. Perhaps Gordon the Gopher is available – one might as well try to get the best, after all.

*Apropos* nothing in particular I should mention here that on my bookshelves sits a volume called *Four Arguments for the Abolition of Television*. It is a bracing and revolutionary tract, of American origin. The televising of Alpha, with its disturbingly bipolar combination of "Doctrine" and "Personality" adds a further argument to the already formidable battery contained therein. Now with five arguments, the case is becoming unassailable. Unfortunately in the realm of profit and power that TV inhabits, the unassailable inevitably becomes the invisible and inaudible. (Who says that capitalism lacks magic? Such transformations are wrought almost daily by its mystic and invisible hand. Were it not a blasphemous thought, I should liken them to transubstantiation).

in the middle of nowhere, isolated from our normal surroundings and out of contact with our family and friends and sane base."he said. "They, and there were plenty of them, were on their territory arguing on their terms, bombarding us with propaganda about the 'Holy Spirit'. So it is no surprise that this is the occa-

**Is the controversial Alpha Christianity in the UK, as m does the whole exercise b but futile attempt to breath religion? Keith Porteous W the NSS, r**

sion when the Holy Spirit allegedly manifests itself. Strange that it/he/she only comes when believers outnumber the sceptical by more than 2 to 1. On the weekend I went on, it was 7 or 8 to 1." The *Guardian* describes the courses as being "intended to turn agnostics into true, speaking-in-tongues believers".

Despite the biblical literalism, or in some cases because of it, Alpha's religious critics claim it ludicrously over-simplifies Christianity. Even to me, Alpha seems to bear the same relationship to Christianity as McDonald's does to *haute cuisine*.

## Recruits wanted

In the *Observer* of Sunday July 22 there was a piece by Nick Cohen about the Alpha course. "Savage indignation" describes its tone very well. There was not a word in it that was not ripe with reason. It was the journalistic equivalent of a very large and efficient threshing machine – energetic, frightening and very, very effective. Anyone who has not read it would be well advised to do so, not just for the case it makes, but also for the way in which it makes it. The very existence of Nick Cohen almost makes up for vacant drivel that passes for sense and wisdom in the *Barefoot Doctor* column in the same paper – almost, but not completely.

I was telling you about my proposed course. It is not very likely that the naming of the Alpha course was inspired by Aldous Huxley's ideas in *Brave New World* (though one can never tell: there may be secret ironists amongst the Christians). My course will, however, be so inspired.

For those who have forgotten, Huxley imag-

Alpha's principal claim, and to some, its main appeal, is that it purports to provide answers to what it considers to be the Big Questions. In theory, Alpha teachers are prepared to answer any questions, but these are steered towards those for which pat answers are already prepared. The following such ques-

Alpha Course resuscitating many supporters claim, or boil down to an expensive the new life into a dying Wood, Executive Director of S. reports.

tions are also the titles of some of the sessions: How can I resist evil? How does God guide us? and Does God heal today? I can't imagine *Freethinker* readers being interested in such loaded and irrelevant questions.

Another key aspect of the course (and of the programmes) is the emphasis, bordering on obsession, with personal testimonies of the "I was a miserable sinner until I found Alpha" type. They are clearly an essential psychological element of the course, an emotional tool to reassure participants that what they are doing is normal and rewarding, and to allay any doubts

they may have about the weirdness of it all.

I have to put on record at this point that I admire Nikolai Segura's stamina – I'm not sure I could have endured ten weeks of this nonsense, even for the Society.

There is much doubt, however, as to just how successful Alpha is in its ambition to create "converts"; it pointedly avoids providing figures about how many atheists have found Jesus through Alpha. Yet it is delighted to boast about the impressive number of churches and countries in which the course is being promoted. It is keen, too, to repeatedly tell viewers that "over a million people" have taken the course in this country, ignoring the fact that, according to research, as many as 75 per cent of them were already committed Christians. No mention is made, either, of the fact that some take the course repeatedly. An example is *Rt Hon Jonathan Aitken* who claims to have taken it three times, and a correspondent to the *Tablet* who says he's done it 15 times!

But there is no doubt that Alpha does one thing well – slick marketing. Even some of its religious critics, such as Personal Freedom Outreach, think "Alpha is packaged impressively for maximum sales". According to Alpha's website, they will be launching a national advertising campaign this month in underground stations and on posters, billboards and buses. This is "expected to be further boosted" by the series of programmes. In other words, ITV is providing them with ten hours of recruit-

ing time on Channel 3, the format of which is strikingly similar in its construction and presentation to Alpha's other marketing material. This series of programmes is clearly Alpha's greatest promotional coup yet.

Our complaint about this programme garnered a great deal of publicity sympathetic to our point of view. A theme common to much of the press coverage was concern about the programmes' lack of objectivity. Even so, ITV told me: "This is a programme about religious instruction. It is part of our religious programming, so there is therefore no need for objectivity."

Would viewers have known this when they tuned in?

Alpha is a controversial subject that generates grave doubts in its critics. Rather than being given a ten-hour platform for uncritical proselytisation, this phenomenon should be the subject of a searching documentary that asks the questions that Alpha so studiously avoids. Yet the position now is that sceptics have no opportunity to criticise it on air.

In the meantime, while the first programme was broadcast at 10.45pm, the second was relegated to midnight. The third episode failed to appear at all on the day appointed in the provisional timetable, without any explanation.

Perhaps this erratic scheduling suggests that ITV is unhappy with the series' contents or the ratings – or both.

## ited for the Epsilon Course

By Norman Pridmore

ined that in the future humans would be created by design, to be fitted very precisely for particular roles in their society. He imagined that there would be very bright people, and very dim people, and a full range of in-betweens. The brightest were to be called Alphas, and the dimmest were to be called Epsilons. Further distinctions were to be made through the awarding of pluses and minuses. A convocation of Epsilon minuses would probably look something like the visitors to a Festival of Mind, Body and Spirit; though, to be fair, their conversations might be more interesting.

I have problems imagining the Alphas. Troubling pictures come to me of a software engineer in some private gymnasium, or of a golf-playing consultant neurologist driving an open-topped Mercedes with Kompressor glinting on its side. (This is the equivalent of the thugs' GTI, without the possibility of its being

anagrammatized to Git. Such are the modern signs of intelligence).

My course will be called the Epsilon Course. It will appeal widely. I expect a good deal of interest from members of "Densa", that organisation which attracts the intelligent person who also has a sense of humour. Members of its inferior sister organisation Mensa will keep well away, almost certainly afraid that their fragile and absurdly hypertrophied puzzle-solving skills will be vitiated by foul contagions, leaving them pointless, flaccid and inexplicable.

The content of my course can be very easily outlined. It will delineate and examine ways of detecting hokum, balony, numbskullery and codswallop. Each meeting will begin with a light meal of something fishy, and attendees will be required to consume the minimum amount of alcohol consistent with full rationality (Socrates will be our exemplar in this matter, as in so much else).

Texts will be examined, ranging from the

sweetly eccentric through the frankly barking, ending with minute examinations of the most utterly howling beserkery. Given the vast number of possible texts, a final selection has yet to be made. Nothing will be excluded, *a priori*, from consideration.

At some point during the course, attendees will be invited to consider committing themselves to thinking rationally, not just for the limited period of the sessions themselves but as a way of life, for the whole of life. I would need to make it clear that those who do so commit may experience the strange, sudden, rushing descent upon them of analytic facility, coherence, rigour and philosophical depth.

This experience may be so profound and overwhelming that they begin to converse in syllogisms and subtle nuances. This is not to be fought, but rather enjoyed, as a sign of synaptic beatitude. Still, it could be alarming.

Anyone interested in my course should look out for what I hope will be extensive and stylish publicity. All will be welcome. It will not (as the first Christians so reliably said of Jesus' return) be long in coming.

# real life: islamic marriage annulment case fails

An attempt by an Islamic lawyer to forcibly divorce outspoken Egyptian feminist Dr Nawal Al-Saadawi from her Muslim husband on the grounds that she had abandoned her Islamic faith has failed.

At the end of July a Cairo court ruled that no individual could petition a court to forcibly divorce another person. It said such cases must be raised by a state prosecutor.

"My husband and I are very happy. But we feel the case should have been rejected by the court from the very outset," Dr Al-Saadawi said.

Lawyer Nabih Al Wahsh claimed that the 70-year-old doctor had shown she was "no longer a Muslim" when she gave a newspaper interview earlier this year. This rejection of her faith, he argued, meant she should not be allowed to remain married to her Muslim husband.

In the interview, Dr Al-Saadawi said the rituals in the Muslim *hajj* pilgrimage had pre-Islamic origins. She also called for sexual equality in Muslim inheritance laws.

The court verdict, which cannot be appealed, rejected Wahsh's request for the constitutional court to review the procedures, known as *hisba*, for raising such cases. The Islamic concept of *hisba* allows any Muslim to sue another for beliefs which are thought to harm society.

Dr Al-Saadawi, who did not attend the court session, said afterwards she would campaign for *hisba* to be removed entirely

from the statute books in religiously conservative Egypt. The government restricted its use to state prosecutors after a court forcibly divorced academic Nasr Abu Zeid from his

When controversial Egyptian writer and feminist Dr Nawal Al-Saadawi was accused of apostasy earlier this year, an attempt was made to force the 70-year-old to divorce her husband, to whom she has been married for 37 years. LYNETTE VAN DAM reports on this extraordinary case.

wife in 1996 in a case raised by Islamist lawyers. The couple fled to the Netherlands so they could stay together.

"We will continue to argue for abolishing the *hisba* law. There may be people who are less powerful than us who can't fight back," Dr Al-Saadawi said. She said she was lucky because state prosecutors advised the court to reject the case. Local and international human

rights groups, who feared the court might order a trial, campaigned in support of the colourful and controversial doctor.

Dr Al-Saadawi's writings against the oppression of Arab women by ancient traditions, including a very personal account of the pain of female circumcision, have touched many women around the world. But in Egypt she is often depicted as an insensitive troublemaker who gained fame by confirming to Westerners their prejudices about Arab and Islamic culture.

The court's verdict was particularly welcomed by an organisation called Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) which had mounted an international campaign in support of her right to remain married.

WLUML said it was "deeply concerned about politically-motivated court action brought against Dr Al-Saadawi and the possibility of threats to her personal security and that of her husband. The prominent Egyptian feminist writer, doctor and active defender of the rights of women has become the latest intellectual to face the possibility of apostasy charges".

Dr Al-Saadawi's problems began following an interview with an independent weekly, *Al-Midan*, in early March 2001.

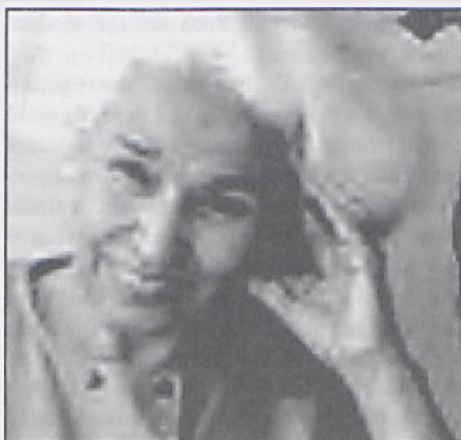
She reiterated some of her views, claiming that wearing the veil by women was not obligatory, contrary to the insistence of a number of Muslim scholars. She was also quoted as say-

## A voice of reason over the din of Islamic fundamentalism

Nawal Al-Saadawi was born the first girl in a family of nine children in the Delta village of Kafr Tahla. She trained as a medical doctor, then was appointed in 1972 Director General of Health Education in the Ministry of Health, but was later forced out.

A consistent critic of patriarchal concepts of family honour and abuse of political power, Al-Saadawi was imprisoned without charge by Sadat for three months in 1981. In 1982, she established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. With 3,000 members in the region and consultative status with the UN, AWSA was the largest organisation of women in the Arab world until its dissolution by the government of Egypt in 1991, following the group's criticism of the Gulf War.

Dr Al-Saadawi is a frequent commentator on the Arab world for the West and the



**Nawal Al-Saadawi**  
Photo: Veronique Audergon

recipient of three honorary doctorates, the most recent one awarded week from St Andrews University in Scotland. Despite her fame in the West, Al-Saadawi is somewhat marginalised in

the Arab world – not only because the governments of the region censor her and ban her books, but also because her extreme views and uncompromising behaviour have alienated her from the mainstream and even from many intellectuals.

But Dr Al-Saadawi maintains that "the bulk of the people are with me. There are copies of my books in almost every home in Egypt and the Arab world." She has published 32 books in Arabic, many of them available in other languages. Her most popular fictional work, *Woman at Point Zero*, has been published in 28 languages. Her best-selling non-fiction work, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, detailing the situation of Arab women, is still banned in Egypt.

What keeps her going, she says, is the regular flow of mail from young people around the world. "There are copies of my books in almost every home in Egypt and the Arab world," she says.

ing that carrying out the Islamic pilgrimage – one of the five pillars of Islam – “is a vestige of pagan practices.” The interview also quoted her as saying that Islamic inheritance law, which gives males twice the share of females, should be abolished due to the fact that up to 35 per cent of families in Egypt are currently dependent on the income of a woman.

Two weeks after the interview was published, the Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Nassr Farid Wassel, called on the writer to renounce her statements. Dr Al-Saadawi responded that the journalist had distorted the whole interview, and that she had merely been stating historical facts. Sheikh Wassel also sent a long letter to *Al-Midan* saying her remarks amounting to heresy and that she should be “ousted from Islam”.

In April 2001 Egypt’s prosecutor-general ruled that the case brought against her by Nabih El-Wahsh on charges of apostasy, would be heard in court. El-Wahsh also called for Sherif Hetata, the novelist and medical doctor to whom she has been married for 37 years, to

divorce her on the grounds that she has deserted Islam.

WLUML points out that, in recent years, a number of “extremist lawyers” have specialised in filing lawsuits against secular intellectuals and artists, either asking that their work be banned or that they are treated as apostates.

“This is an extremely dangerous trend whereby politico-religious forces make repeated attempts to silence those who dare speak against the imposition of their politically motivated agenda. “Indeed, the repression that Dr Al-Saadawi’s work has encountered has been a result of her outspoken criticism of Islamic fundamentalists. In 1981 she was imprisoned for three months by the late President Anwar Sadat for political activities. In 1991, the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, an organisation founded by Dr Al-Saadawi and the first legal, independent feminist organisation in Egypt, was banned. More recently, the Egyptian government banned several of Dr Al-

Saadawi’s books from the 2001 Cairo Book Fair.”

WLUML says the case brought against Dr Al-Saadawi had raised fears both in terms of its legal outcome and the potential risk of individuals taking the law into their own hands. For example when extremist lawyers initially won a similar case against university professor, Nasser Abu Zeid, ordering him to divorce his wife on the grounds of apostasy, Zeid and his wife had to flee Egypt, fearing attacks by Muslim fundamentalists.

This case was, incidentally, overturned on appeal.

Sherif Hetata, Dr Al-Saadawi’s husband, said he was worried by the Mufti’s statement that his wife’s remarks “ousted her from Islam.” He added that after *Al-Midan* published the interview with his wife, readers wrote to the newspaper demanding that “Dr Al-Saadawi’s head be chopped off with a sword” as punishment for her views on Islam and women’s emancipation.

## Woman fights for the right to die

A WOMAN terminally ill with motor neurone disease began a High Court battle last month to win the right to die.

Diane Pretty, 42, lodged papers at the court in a landmark case which challenges the Director of Public Prosecutions’ refusal to rule out prosecuting her husband if he helps her commit suicide.

Backed by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society and civil rights group Liberty, mother-of-two Mrs Pretty, from Luton, Beds, says her condition has impaired the quality of her life so badly she wants to be able to choose when to die.

The Director of Public Prosecutions, David Calvert-Smith, had told her he could not guarantee her husband of 25 years, Brian, would not face criminal prosecution if he helped her take her own life.

Mrs Pretty argues that the Government is subjecting her to inhuman and degrading treatment, breaching the Human Rights Act.

She was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 1999 and her condition has since deteriorated rapidly.

The disease is untreatable and she is now able to do virtually nothing for herself.

Supporters said Mrs Pretty was “entirely clear about her decision” but is “physically unable to take her own life without assistance”.

The couple’s children, Clara, 24, and Brian, 22, also support their mother’s decision.

In June, she wrote to Prime Minister Tony Blair begging him to change the law on voluntary euthanasia.

Last month, Liberty asked the DPP to guarantee her husband would not be prosecuted for aiding and abetting a suicide under Section 2 of the 1961 Suicide Act if he tried to help her.

Although Mr Calvert-Smith conceded Mrs Pretty and her family were having to endure “terrible suffering”, he refused to offer such a guarantee.

Brian Pretty, in an interview with the BBC, said it was “degrading” to allow her to continue living. Describing the law as “barbaric”, he said: “Diane wants it to be over now. She can’t fight any more. She wants the right to die at home surrounded by her friends and family.”

Liberty is challenging the way the DPP has applied the Suicide Act to the case. It is also arguing that it is inhuman and degrading treatment, breaching Article 3 of the Human Rights Act, and goes against Article 8 of the Act, which guarantees respect for one’s private and family life.

Mr Pretty said that if the case succeeded, it would not necessarily damage the rights of other terminally ill people, because rights could be protected by law.

But Dr David Oliver, consultant in palliative care at Wisdom Hospice in Kent, said the case could lead to other people feeling a “duty” to end their lives.

He said: “People who have motor neurone disease or other terminal diseases may be feeling they are a burden. There’s a fear that in the future people may feel they should be asking for suicide.”

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## Dallying with

Death, I discovered in my late teens, does not make people wiser, nor give them greater insight into the affairs of the living. I deduced this from a message received from someone purporting to be a late great-aunt who declared that I would become a "famous surgeon" and thus be very rich, and that I would "settle down" at 28 and have three children: a daughter and two sons.

Death, it was clear, had not alerted great-aunt Annie to the possibility of my either venturing on a career in journalism (oh, the shame!) nor (greater ignominy, still) the fact that nature had programmed me never to marry or procreate. However – the thought now occurs – some metaphysical lines may have become crossed at the clairvoyancy session I was attending; that the aunt in question was not, in fact, my great-aunt Annie, and the message was meant for someone else.

Despite this possible cock-up in ethereal communications at this, my first seance, I still found myself intrigued by spiritualism, and voraciously consumed virtually every book ever published on the subject. Among the many tomes I devoured on the supernatural and paranormal was one by Tuesday Lopsang Rampa, *The Third Eye*. Being the gullible little berk that I was, I swallowed, hook line and sinker, all his tales of superhuman Tibetan monks who could levitate, fly, run at 400 miles an hour, and travel astrally to any point on the globe, if not the universe. Then came the bombshell. Tuesday Lopsang Rampa was exposed as an utter phoney. Far from being a Tibetan lama he was an Irish plumber called Hoskins living in England who had never travelled, physically or astrally, beyond the shores of Old Blighty.

Although Rampa's books had little to do with spiritualism *per se*, his exposure as a fraud got me thinking hard and deep about all aspects of the occult. Skepticism about the Spirit World quickly set in, much to the concern of members of my local spiritualist circle, who believed I would one day become a very accomplished medium.

They became increasingly irritated by the doubts I expressed, and I, in turn, became more and more impatient with the vacuous replies I received to my questions – both from those who had "passed on" and those still wedded firmly to their flesh.

I wanted drama; all I got was drivel.

Why, for example, did the dead continue to concern themselves with the boring *minutiae* of the lives of the living ("Aunt Florence says not to worry about the stain on the living-room carpet; a little bit of vinegar or white wine should bring it out") but were wholly

reluctant to describe – in anything other than the vaguest of brushstrokes – what life was like beyond the grave or crematorium?

Another question to which I could get no sensible answer was why dead native Americans so often felt obliged to attach themselves to living western Europeans as "spirit guides". At virtually every seance I ever attended, someone called Little Flower or Running Elk or Sitting Duck would identify themselves as someone's "guide" and impart such earth-shattering revelations as: "Don't worry about that ache in your right knee, it's nothing that a bag of frozen peas – held on the spot for 20 minutes – won't cure."

And then there was the confusing question of reincarnation. The general consensus among my circle of spook-chasers was that our souls, like printer cartridges, were designed to be recycled. Our sojourn in the hereafter was but a brief prelude to a return to the earthly plane where we would be given the chance of putting right all the wrongs we did in a previously corporeal state.

"Ah, but why then cannot we remember our previous existences?" I asked.

The answer I got was that – were we to delve deep enough (usually with the help of an accomplished medium or hypnotist) – we *could* discover who we were in a previous life. I then learned that several members of the circle had, in fact, uncovered who they were before their latest recycling: with one exception they had all been historical characters of some note. One nerdy little fellow who couldn't say boo to a goose was "amazed" to discover that he had once been Alexander the Great. But not, I guess, as gobsmailed as I was.

I didn't believe a word of it then, and I certainly don't now, especially since I recently learned that there are no fewer than *four* women in Britain alone who claim to be the living incarnations of Mary Queen of Scots. Poor dears, what a dreadful pain in the neck *that* must be!

The central tenet of spiritualism is that no one need fear death because you'll emerge alive and well on another plane, and that, by all accounts, life will go on pretty much as if nothing untoward had ever happened.

"So, assuming I lost all my hair – or maybe a limb – would I be reunited with it in the spirit world?" I asked. I put the question out of genuine concern because in those days I had an obsessive interest in my hair, which had been styled in a magnificent auburn quiff *a la* Fonzie in *Happy Days* (oh come on, it was the sixties, after all!)

I just knew I was doomed to early slap-head-edness (or Hagueness as it is now known)

because every male on my mother's side of the family was afflicted with the billiard-ball gene. And, as a maniacal motorcyclist, the thought did sometimes cross my mind that, were I ever to prang the bike, I might do more than just break a fingernail.

"Certainly," came the reply, "you will be made whole in the spirit world." This answer immediately conjured up visions of enormous celestial lost property depots, crammed to the rafters with lost teeth, eyeballs, arms, legs, fingers, foreskins, toes, gall bladders, tonsils, colons etc, where, upon "passing over", one would line up to reclaim one's lost bits and bobs.

Freethinker editor  
recalls with some  
his brief teen  
with the

It was not a pretty picture, especially as I had once witnessed, to my utter disgust, an elderly gentleman poking about in a large cardboard box filled to the brim with grubby dentures. I had gone to London Transport's lost property office in Baker Street in the hope of recovering a set of keys lost on the Underground, while he was hoping to be reunited with his false teeth, which he'd lost on the No 15 bus. Realising that there was only one way of identifying his lost gnashers, he began popping various pairs into his mouth. I am told he was still at it hours after my keys had been returned. Urrgh!

Incidentally, lost dentures are by no means the most bizarre items to be lost on London Transport. Each year hundreds of crutches – and now and again a wheelchair or a prosthetic arm or leg – find their way into the Lost Property Office. This once prompted a wag at LT to declare that more miracle cures took place on the buses and tubes than were ever recorded at Lourdes.

That people are just as obsessed now as they ever were with the idea of life after death is demonstrated almost daily in virtually all of the British media. In the London *Evening Standard* last month, my favourite TV critic, Victor Lewis-Smith, reported on an American programme called *Crossing Over with John Edward*, which has



# the Departed

feature

just crossed over to our TV screens. Edward is a psychic whose performance clearly did not impress Lewis-Smith ("So is Mr Edward supernatural? No, just telepathetic.") Edward's performance – apparently a half-hour demonstration of how to make complete plonkers of a studio audience – prompted Lewis-Smith to explode: "I see enough of the living dead on my television nowadays without having to endure fake dead people too, so why isn't the ITC exercising its powers to protect the gullible? We all know that the death of a loved one can turn otherwise rational people into credulous beings, such is their grief and sense of loss, but making money by

itor Barry Duke  
e embarrassment  
nage flirtation  
ne occult

offering empty hope is a despicable thing to do, and Mr Edward shouldn't be allowed to do it here."

Another pertinent Lewis-Smith observation in the same article concerned newspaper astrologers: "During my 147 years as a journalist, I have noticed one consistent no-go area at every newspaper I have worked for: *never* insult the resident astrologer. It's crazy, I know, but the astrologer's readership is usually as vast as their ego, so although we hacks are specifically employed to expose scams and charades wherever we find them, we keep our traps shut as tight as Trappist monks on the subject of bogus and absurd star signs."

He could well have had in mind the *Best* magazine columnist called Ruth, who specialises in putting readers in touch with "a loved one" (deceased). Recently someone called Gill from Cyprus wrote to Ruth: "I live abroad and when my father became ill with cancer last year I came back to Britain to look eafter him. Then, when my ticket was about to expire I had to return home. Dad died a couple of months after this and I felt so guilty about not being with him. Do you have any messages for me from him?"

To which Ruth replied: "Your dad tells me that he is pleased you looked after him ... He feels you did the right thing by going back home, as he wouldn't have liked you to have seen him at the end. He says he still likes a pint

and watching football where he is now."

*Where he is now ...* hmmm. So there you have it. Football and beer – and skittles too, I shouldn't wonder. But what if you're into more sinister pastimes? Does the afterlife have the facilities to accommodate, for example, Hitler's passion for vegetarian cuisine and genocide? Is the Boston strangler taking turns with Jehovah's Witnesses in knocking on doors? Is Robert Maxwell indulging his passion for plundering pension funds and for deep-sea diving?

Spiritualists are maddeningly short on answers when it comes to this sort of query. Even the man regarded as the father of modern spiritualism – Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) – threw up a damn sight more questions than answers when he made the following [paraphrased] claims about the hereafter:

- The Spirit World is in a number of concentric spheres, each with its own density and inhabitants.
- Life in Spirit is similar to that on the Earth plane, with houses, churches, schools, etc.
- The process of death is aided by Angels (good spirits); everyone rests for a few days after death and then regains full consciousness.
- The process of death changes nothing of an internal nature.
- There is no such thing as eternal punishment. Those who find themselves in Hell after death can work their way towards something higher.
- Marriage is a form of spiritual union which is continued in the Spirit world.
- It takes the union of a man and a woman to make a complete human unit.
- Those who die old or diseased regain their youth and health in the Spirit World.

His first real "illumination and intercourse" with denizens of the Spirit World took place in April 1744. Later, in the preface to his *Arcana Celestia*, Swedenborg, an ardent Christian, wrote: "Of the Lord's Divine mercy it has been granted me now for several years, to be constantly and uninterruptedly in company with spirits and angels, hearing them converse with each other, and conversing with them. Hence, it has been permitted me to hear and see stupendous things in the other life which have never before come to the knowledge of any man, nor entered into his imagination. I have been instructed concerning different kinds of spirits and the state of souls after death; concerning Hell, or the lamentable state of the unfaithful; concerning Heaven, or the most happy state of the faithful, and particularly concerning the doctrines or faith which is throughout Heaven."

However, in his *Miscellaneous Works*, he

wrote: "Spirits narrate things wholly false, and lie. When spirits begin to speak to man, care should be taken not to believe them, for most everything they say is made up by them, and they lie; so if we permitted them to relate what Heaven is, and how things are in Heaven, they would tell so many falsehoods, and with such strong assertion that man would be astonished; wherefore it was not permitted me when spirits were speaking to have any belief in what they stated. They love to feign. Whatever may be the topic spoken of, they think they know it, and if man listens and believes, they insist, and in various ways deceive and seduce."

So, there you have it: an afterlife buzzing with battallions of Jeffrey Archers.

(Continued on p12)



**The author of this booklet, published in the USA, is adamant that "there is life after death, and that it is possible to make contact with the 'spirit world'". Ray Buckland asserts that "there are societies in the United States, England and around the world which have gathered evidence over many years proving beyond doubt that contact has been made with spirits who have left this earthly life".**

# down to earth: colin mccall

## Clerical therapy

MANY strange acts have been performed "in the name of our Lord", but "sex-games" with a priest sounds something of a novelty. Unless this is a regular line of approach for randy men in cassocks. Novelty or no, it was the one adopted by Father Terance Fitzpatrick towards Pamela Brown, a divorcee who had been traumatised by 30 years of severe abuse when she turned to him for spiritual help. The priest accompanied her to counselling sessions, then coaxed her into a series of "terrifying sexual encounters" over two years, telling her they would be therapeutic (*Guardian*, July 26).

When the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to press charges against Father Fitzpatrick, Mrs Brown brought a civil action for assault and battery. At Birmingham County Court the priest first said he had been "led on" by Mrs Brown but later admitted responsibility. The judge ordered him to pay £64,000 damages and to cover the cost of psychiatric treatment.

Next day in a public statement, Director David Calvert-Smith acknowledged that the Crown Prosecution Service was racist, a fact that was patent to all. But that doesn't seem to be its only failing. Should we add a reluctance to prosecute a priest for sexual abuse?

## Technical hitch

RELUCTANCE, this time on behalf of the Vatican, has delayed the final report by a panel of Catholic and Jewish historians investigating the Church's role in the Holocaust. They were denied access to documents on the activities of the wartime pope Pius XII, for "technical reasons". "Some scholars", the *Guardian* said vaguely (July 25) defended the action because there were only two archivists to catalogue an estimated 3 million documents relating to Pius XII (died 1958); but others suspected that access had been blocked by the Vatican Secretary of State. One church historian, Alberto Melloni, thought that Pius had been "oversimplified and made the monster of the Shoah [Holocaust]".

No one, so far as I know, has gone quite that far, but Pacelli's anti-Jewishness and Nazi complicity are well documented, most recently by John Cornwell (Viking 1999). Cornwell went to Rome with the aim of vindicating Pacelli and was therefore given access to all the relevant records. He ended up in a state of "moral shock" at what he found.

Even when the SS was rounding up the Jews of Rome for deportation, and the open army trucks containing children as well as

adults were passing St Peter's Square, Pius XII, as he was by then, uttered no word of protest, a failure that, Cornwell says, "astonished the German leadership in the city". In the sidings at the Tiburtina station the Jews were crowded into cattle trucks in the most appalling conditions, and the Vatican was kept informed of the train's progress at various points along the way.

Five days after leaving Rome an estimated 1,060 deportees were gassed at Auschwitz and Bikenau; 149 men and 47 women were detained for slave labour; only 15 survived the war. Cornwell concludes that Eugenio Pacelli had "no spiritual feeling for the Jews of Rome who had been his neighbours from childhood". To the indisputable charge of anti-Jewishness must be added that of racism. Pius' Secretary of State told the British Ambassador that "the Pope hoped that no Allied coloured troops would be among the small number that might be garrisoned at Rome after the occupation".

Come to think of it: how do you define a monster?

## Catholic genocide

RUPERT Shortt, religion editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, has drawn attention to an inexcusable example of the Vatican's interference in the course of justice. In June a Belgian court convicted two nuns of abetting one of the foulest atrocities of the Rwandan genocide: providing the petrol used to incinerate many hundreds of Tutsis sheltering in a barn at the Sovu monastery on April 22, 1994. Witnesses said that, having encouraged the slaughter, the nuns moved to Belgium in an attempt to evade justice.

An even deeper scandal, according to Shortt, is why the Roman Catholic Church defended the nuns for so long and why it was still thwarting efforts to investigate other genocide suspects who served its mission. One of these, a priest allegedly responsible for the killing of 2,000 refugees whom he lured into his church, was until recently working as a curate in San Mauro a Signa, a village outside Florence, but was taken into hiding by his superiors, a familiar Church stratagem to pervert justice.

## Priority for the unborn

IT would be laughable if it weren't so serious. The Bush administration plans to offer publicly funded medical coverage to fetuses (*Guardian*, July 7).

The plan, which has been drawn up by Health Secretary Tommy Thompson, relies on a new definition of the fetus as "a targeted low-income child", a move to get round a 1973 Supreme Court decision guaranteeing abortion on the grounds that "the unborn have never been recog-

nised as persons in the whole sense".

Thompson's spokesman, Bill Pierce, denied that the proposed policy concealed an anti-abortion programme, but admitted that it would be a step forward for those who believe that the fetus is a person with individual rights. "If the question is, is the Secretary pro-life? The answer is yes", said Mr Pierce. "So is the administration".

Not surprisingly, then, it is putting fetuses before people. Forty-three million Americans are without any form of health insurance, 10 million of them children under the age of 18.

## An Israeli humanist

ISRAEL Shahak, who died on July 2, aged 68, was Professor of Organic Chemistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for 25 years. He was also chairman of the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights, for which he was accused of being an "Israel hater", was spat at in the streets and received constant death threats.

In her obituary in the *Guardian* (July 6) Elfi Pallis described how Shahak underwent two major conversions in his life. The first occurred at 13, when he scientifically examined the evidence for the existence of God and found it wanting. The second was after the 1967 six-day war, when he realised that Israel was "treating the newly-occupied Palestinians with shocking brutality".

He wrote two books published by Pluto Press, *Jewish History: Jewish Religion* and *Jewish Fundamentalism* (with Norton Mezvisky), drawing attention to Israel's religious interpretation of Jewish life which led it to ignore centuries of Arab life in the neighbourhood. Confiscation, every schoolchild was told, was "the redemption of the land" from those who did not belong there. He also emphasised that the fate decreed for Jewish heretics was death. Elfi Pallis added that, shortly after *Jewish History: Jewish Religion* appeared, Premier Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an Orthodox student.

## Bill Turner Memorial Meeting

A MEMORIAL meeting will take place at 3pm on Saturday, September 8 in the Exmouth Arms, Coburg Street, London, NW1, for Bill Turner, who died on June 29.

A non-religious funeral was addressed by Bill's friend and National Secular Society member Terry Liddle.

Bill was a veteran of the Independent Labour Party. He served on its National Administrative Council.

He was also a member of the Socialist Secular Association.

## Angela Lansbury pens her thoughts on burials and tombstones

ON MY census form under "Other" I wrote Humanist. But in case that was deemed not a religion I added a footnote that this was for marriage and funeral purposes.

However, I am not aware of any humanist or freethinkers' graveyard. Having recently buried my mother, enduring lots of annoyance over restrictions on the height and the wording of the gravestone, I have given much thought to burial and gravestones. For some of us who have no belief in an afterlife the gravestone is all we have left. Gravestones are enormously useful to genealogists and historians.

We could follow Japan and make cremation the norm. But this would upset many grieving relatives. It would also offer greater opportunity to doctors such as Shipman, serial killers, and perpetrators of collective medical or food poisoning mishaps.

Cremation is an option which is chosen by many atheists as well as people of all religions, although it is opposed by traditionalists. However, I think freethinkers and religious people who object to the restrictions imposed by religious burial grounds still need cemeteries.

My view is that gravestones should record cause of death. This would be of enormous help to future historians.

If you go to a graveyard in Chamonix you can easily see how many people died in avalanches or other mishaps because the facts are recorded. The ski boots or climbing gear are often laid on the grave. Photos of the deceased in their sports clothes are on the wall if no body is found.

However, if present trends continue, we will have wonderful records of the Pharaohs and medieval plague victims but no records of our own century.

Future generations may want to know about our health, lifestyle, descent and intermarriage.

Some cemeteries (orthodox Christian and Jewish) will not allow the burial of a suicide in the family plot. They move the gravesite to an area beyond or beside the outside wall of "consecrated" land.

The unwelcome results include falsification of death certificates by a sympathetic family doctor. Silence about the cause of death is imposed on the funeral speeches and a long-term conspiracy of silence is imposed on the family.

This also interferes in any investigation of the cause of the suicide. The cause could be bullying or blackmail. Another possibility is a side-effect of financial loss for which companies or individuals are to blame. The upset of the balance of the mind could be due to drugs which should have better labelling, and doctors who prescribe or over-prescribe might remain in ignorance of the drug's potential side-effects.

Another difficulty is that a supposed suicide might be a murder. Facts might be falsified by the family – eg hiding a suicide note, which could be in forged handwriting.

Today's headstones often give little more information than birth and death dates. Stonemasons suggest bland depressing wording such as Deeply mourned by .....

Biblical quotations are popular but often totally irrelevant and unoriginal.

In Victorian times it was popular to write original verse. They placed on the grave a carved symbol of how the person spent their life, such as a ship, piano or a cricket bat. Yet nowadays many British graveyards frown on originality.

The cemetery where members of my family were buried asks the stonemasons to submit wording. Mention of the deceased person's profession is not common, although I have seen doctor and doctor's wife. I am sure you could not put prostitute. You might think that the authorities would like to say Prostitute Murdered by ... as a warning or cautionary tale. But no.

You definitely cannot mention a pet in this cemetery. As for a prostitute with a pet ... But if you were writing an obituary or a biography, surely such information would be vital.

Why not pets? Surely a blind man's guide dog should get a mention. What of the famous dogs which sit for years on the grave? A safari park owner? A jockey? General Lee's horse which led him into battle for the southern states of the USA was given a military style funeral.

What message does a modern cemetery convey? The result is that future generations will think that we had no pets and no sense of humour.

Am I being unreasonable? The Kennedy Memorial does not give details of his assassination. War graves don't say: "Pilot died keeping damaged plane flying while colleagues jumped to safety." Yet an American memorial museum to soldiers who died with the sponsor's son gives photos and complete details of how they lived and died.

If I wanted, I could bury my mother and pets in my own back garden and say what I liked on the tombstone. Doggerel. Humour.

Whatever. However, there is a snag. In my area you need to bury over 80 foot from the nearest dwelling. Your garden must be over 80 foot. So must the one you back on to.

Some cemeteries charge you for insurance and upkeep. The government charges VAT on gravestones which it deems a luxury. That's before they rob the dead by taking 40 per cent of any money the wise ones – some would say the unwise ones – saved for their old age and to leave to their children. If I'd invested that burial money, I could buy a freehold property in an area which would be safe from the threat of development.

Many burial schemes take money from you for years. A religious organisation's annual membership may include a burial fee which entails burial at a particular cemetery. This discourages people from moving to another area when they retire. The elderly widow or widower who could be handicapped as well as depressed may be forced to travel a long distance to the funeral and to visit the grave.

Some organisations which have more than one cemetery cannot guarantee where you will be buried. They say it's because you get allocated the plot the day after your relatives tell them you've died. So your family can be scattered all over London.

Generations later you can go back and find DNA to prove who was descended from whom, whether Nelson's adopted daughter was really his illegitimate daughter.

The ultimate insult to those who have died for their country and relatives who have paid large sums to cemetery owners, is to have cemeteries dug up to make way for roads and shopping centres, the DNA lost, the headstones broken and dispersed.

I have seen threats to a cemetery in Harrow, Middlesex, containing war graves. A Jewish cemetery in Singapore disappeared under new development. An Australian cemetery in Singapore is currently going, along with the headstones of wartime soldiers. In Malaysia similar threats were made to a huge centuries-old Chinese graveyard but protests were able to change the minds of the town planners.

I suggest a new kind of plaque with one of these mottos:

*Here lies Fred. Bits of Fred.  
When you park, mind his head.*

*Here lies Mum. Loved by one and all.  
Her grave made way for this shopping mall.*

My late mother Netta's last words to me were: "You don't want them to forget you."

LAPLACE (1749-1827) had no need of the God hypothesis in compiling his monumental five-volume work on *Celestial Mechanics*; and there is much less reason to invoke the Almighty today. Science is thoroughly atheistic. Yet Daniel Harbour finds that, particularly among scholars, "accommodation" between atheists and theists is the norm. It was a norm he once subscribed to, but he has now decided to break the truce, arguing for an atheism "rooted in the paradigm of rational enquiry, the paradigm in which we conduct our philosophy, mathematics and natural science, and, ever increasingly, our social and cognitive science, our ethics and aesthetics ... essentially a philosophy of the Enlightenment".

He posits two opposing world views which he calls the Spartan meritocracy and the Baroque monarchy, epitomising science and religion respectively. The one starts with minimal assumptions and recognises that these may be wrong and need revision; the other starts with intricate assumptions that are immune from revision in the light of later data. Clearly the Spartan meritocracy affords a more satisfactory basis on which to build an explanation and understanding of the world; it is better able to meet our need to explain phenomena because of "the way the world is". Every successful theory eschews God. Laplace had the right idea.

But, as I discovered recently at a philosophical symposium at Exeter University, the atheist is still asked how something as complex as, say, the human eye, could be "the result of mere chance". Like me, Harbour is surprised that anyone should put a question like this, when Darwin expressly disowned the idea of "chance" in the introduction to *The Origin of Species* (1859). Indeed, the whole point of the book was to explain how

Colin McCall reviews *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Atheism* by Daniel Harbour. Duckworth, £14.95.

species had evolved through natural selection. However, on the principle that "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em", elaborate attempts have been made to show that various religions like Judaism and Hinduism had "anticipated" modern science, a waste of energy if ever there was one, involving the search for abstruse verbal "coincidences" that are, as Harbour says "all but inevitable".

The young author has also spent "a good few days" asking scientist and philosopher friends about the Argument from a First Cause. Naturally, he says, none of the atheists believe it; but neither do the theists; and "only a few have acquaintances who would give it a second thought". The montheistic case assumes that there is only one chain of causes, but the most that that would provide would be a unique, uncaused event and, in religious circles, God is not an event but an entity. "Positing God as our uncaused entity answers no questions about the world and raises the additional question of how God caused the world". Alternatively, the uncaused entity could be the world. To summarise, introducing God complicates the questions, solves no problems and provides no answers. We have no need of that hypothesis.

Why, then, do so many people feel that need? It is, of course, attributable to their early indoctrination when, as Harbour says, "both immune system and intellect are weak and the human organism is prone to interference, with lifelong im- and complications." The question-

ing of received beliefs is the activity of any responsible, curious individual, and Descartes regarded the failure to do so as a moral error, but not all people are sufficiently responsible and curious to reconsider their theistic upbringing, despite the obvious success of rational enquiry in understanding the world.

Harbour, who read mathematics and philosophy at Balliol, is currently writing his doctoral thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where the internationalism of science is particularly exemplified. In his department there are several people from each of the inhabited continents. And following this train of thought, he notes how scientific researchers frequently converge on a conclusion despite coming at it from different angles and places. Perhaps the best known example of this occurred in his own field of mathematics, when Newton and Leibniz simultaneously discovered the famous calculus of infinitesimals, for which, as Harbour remarks, a good proportion of adolescents has never quite forgiven them. What is less well known is that "seven or so thousand miles and a few infinitesimals away, the great Japanese mathematician Kowa Seki, was using slightly different methods to reach the same conclusion". This was all the more remarkable as Japan was cut off from the world under "the isolationist, xenophobic Tokugawa Shogunate". The discovery of the calculus also "put flesh onto the bones" of an insight of Archimedes, which had enabled him to calculate the volumes of different shapes, including the sphere.

Harbour's Jewish background fits him to criticise both Judaism and Christianity and especially the latter's "sadistic" treatment of the Jews. "No major brand of Christianity fares well in its relationship to Jews", but Roman Catholicism's recent record is particularly shocking; most notably Pope Pius XII's inaction as Italy's Jews were exported to the Nazi concentration camps. Nor can any other religion escape censure. "The internal politics of Iran and Afghanistan say all that is necessary for Islam. The behaviour of the religious right wing in Israel likewise smears Judaism. Hinduism, too, has fundamentalist threads. Even Buddhism, the darling of Western spiritualists, has had its share of religious wars ... The general point pursued with respect to Christianity, that religion spawns ill, can be translated to other religions, provided they have had power and time enough to incriminate themselves".

There are, it is true, scientists who profess theistic views of various kinds, but there can be no such thing as a religious science; and in this connection Harbour cites Pervey Hoodbhoy's *Islam and Science* to telling effect. "Science's success comes from its free-

## Dallying with the Departed (continued from centrepages)

If, as Swedenborg claims, the dearly departed occupy a world in which there are "houses, churches, schools, etc" we can only assume that things have moved on a bit since Swedenborg's day, and that the spooks now have all the mod cons – and suffer precisely the same frustrations, annoyances and grievances as we do in our modern material world: crap privatised train services, computer viruses, spam e-mail, cars that won't start on frosty mornings, cash dispensers that won't work, mobile phones that work when they shouldn't and dont when the should, central heating systems that go on the fritz in the depth of winter, dripping shower-heads, dog poo and chewing gum on the pavements ... and an incessant series of TV commercials which ask: "Have you had an accident in the last three years? If so, you could be in line for thousands of pounds in compensation..."

In short – and this notion *really* scares me – there is *no difference* between being alive or being dead, except that being dead will ensure that you are in far better physical shape to deal with death's daily grind. Me? I'm going to have the words "PLEASE DO NOT WAKE AFTER DEATH!" inked across my chest – and I swear I will throttle any Good Angel who disregards that instruction and turn his wings into a feather duster.

dom of enquiry. No question is out of bounds, no answer is in principle unthinkable". This same argument can be used against Stephen Jay Gould's attempt to resolve "the supposed conflict between science and religion" in *Rocks of Ages* (1999). It is hard to see how Gould's pact with religion will be maintained, Harbour comments, "as science begins ... to consider the evolutionary basis of dogmatic conviction and the neurobiology of what we now nebulously name 'religious belief'".

Spurious claims are often made for religion's dominant role in the abolition of slavery but, following Hugh Thomas, Harbour gives deserved credit to the 17th-century poet, playwright and novelist Aphra Behn as "more influential than popes and missionaries", and

to Louis de Jaucourt, who wrote in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* that slavery "violates religion, morality, natural laws and all human rights". When religion really rallied against slavery, "much of the ideological battle had already been fought by rationalist, non-religious forces".

What relevance has this today? Harbour examines emancipation of the Jews and women's suffrage, as well as abolition, for evidence of religion's anti-democratic record, and shows the "inappropriateness" of allowing it a role in government. Reason and reasonableness are the only ways likely to bring us closer to ideals of justice, equality and freedom. Yet unreason remains rife in society and government. Exactly the arguments that were deployed

against women's suffrage are being used by religionists against homosexuality today. Reason, atheism and the pursuit of democracy are natural allies, Daniel Harbour concludes. Opposed to them are unreason and theism. "Whereas religious belief remains the prerogative of the individual the state must remain committed to atheism".

Tony Blair should read this latest book in Duckworth's admirable "Intelligent Person's Guide" series. In a blurb on the cover, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, a previous contributor to the series, acknowledges that it cannot fail to stimulate, challenge and engage even devout believers like himself. And that applies to agnostics who practise "the studied art of fence sitting".

## points of view

### History distorted

I HAVE seldom read a more blatant distortion of history than that penned by secular Zionist Derek Wilkes (*Points of View*, August).

To take his arguments one by one:-

1 The Arabs never had an independent state in Palestine, but for more than 400 years Palestine was part of an Arab empire governed first from Damascus and later from Baghdad or Cairo. Subsequently they came under Turkish rule, but Arabs were in continuous occupation of the country for more than 1,200 years before the first intrusions of Ashkenazi (ie central European) Jews, whose ancestors had been living in central and eastern Europe for a similar length of time.

2 The British did not have a mandate to create a Jewish State. The government had declared itself in favour of a Jewish national home (not a state) but the mandate was to govern in accordance with the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants, who, in 1918 were overwhelmingly Arab and emphatically opposed to having a Jewish state imposed upon them.

3 The reasons many Arabs left their homes in 1948 are no doubt best known to themselves, but they deserve a wider publicity. Massacres of Arabs by Jews at places like Deir Yassin and Kafer Kassem might just have had something to do with it.

4 The Jews were not "driven out" by the Romans. Jews had been settling outside Palestine for 300 years before the Roman conquest and there was a significant Jewish presence there hundreds of years after the failure of the Jewish rebellions. Most of those who remained eventually became, successively, Hellenised, Christianised and Arabised. The

presence of significant Christian Arab populations in Galilee and around Bethlehem proves the continuity of these communities with those who were living there in the first century – and weren't they Jews?

5 What the Palestinians still want is the restoration to them of the Walled City of Jerusalem and the evacuation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank which have only been established since the Israeli military conquest in 1967.

JACK HASTIE  
Scotland

DEREK Wilkes regards me as ill-informed and prejudiced against Israel; so I will quote a source in support of my views that he, as a dedicated Zionist, can hardly accuse on either score. David Ben-Gurion, speaking in 1938, said that "in our political argument abroad, we minimise Arab opposition to us" but "let us not ignore the truth among ourselves ... politically we are the aggressors and they defend themselves ... The country is theirs, because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down, and in their view we want to take away from them their country, while we are still outside". (Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle* citing Simha Flapan, *Zionism and the Palestinians* pp141/2.

COLIN MCCALL  
Rickmansworth

I SHOULD like to take issue with Derek Wilkes' "ill-informed and prejudiced" contribution. I, in my turn, was "shocked".

I, too, had read Colin McCall's article (*Down to Earth*, July), very much agreed with it and felt like congratulating him!

That the Palestinians did not greet the new

state of Israel over 50 years ago with hurras and joyful flagwaving, I find very easy to understand; even if it had not been their own state, they had been living there for hundreds of years. Today parts of Britain do not greet people who move here, needing a safe home, with too much kindness and enthusiasm either.

Yes, the Palestinians have been "given" their state on the West Bank and the Gaza area – with settlements of radical Jews in their midst, and restrictions left, right and centre. For example, as soon as one hothead attacks Jews, all are stopped from going to work.

Does that improve the atmosphere? Palestinians in their part of Gaza live in poor conditions, they see Jews across the border in swimming pools, while they do not have enough water for essentials.

The only way to ever have peace is to make sure Palestinians can live satisfying lives and are no longer treated as underdogs. They should have help to build up their own industries etc.

I see plenty of Israeli fruit on supermarket shelves – which I refuse to buy – but where are goods from Palestine?

Derek Wilkes wants to turn back the clock 2,000 years. Well, the non-natives of America, Australia and New Zealand among others better start packing their bags and perhaps descendants of Vikings and Anglo-Saxons better start leaving Britain as well as the "English" in Northern Ireland!

Incidentally, I am no Palestinian.

A LINTON  
Canterbury

(Continued on p14)

## “True” science a true confusion

AS ANY philosopher of science will tell you, coming up with a definition of “true” science is not easy. We have a good idea as to what science definitely isn’t (astrology, etc) and we have a good idea of what science definitely is (physics, biology, chemistry, etc) but drawing the line is tricky.

Imagine my surprise then that Jean Fawcett has discovered the essence of science and that is its utility to the planet and its inhabitants (*Points of View*, May and August). Have the philosophers got it wrong? Well possibly, but Fawcett *definitely* has it wrong.

I think that she is confused over a couple of issues.

First, in order to define a word we look at its use and what characterises all instances of that word. By her own admission, Ms Fawcett’s definition rules out all science that isn’t ethics driven but rules in pseudo-scientific do-gooders (such as the homoeopaths who started this whole debate). Intuitively then, whatever it is Ms Fawcett is on about when she talks about “true science”, it ain’t science.

Second, while I personally have no problem with animal vivisection I realise that some people do, whether it is for non-green activities or refuting Christian cosmology. However, while “science” might not live up to those ethical principles, it does not follow that “science” fails or is somehow false. It simply follows that “science” is immoral. Ms Fawcett can coherently argue that many scientists are immoral but she cannot denounce science as false for failing to live up to her ethical principles. Do non-Fawcett-approved films fail to be films? No. Do non-Fawcett-approved works of art fail to be art? No. Then non-Fawcett-approved science does not fail to be science.

Ms Fawcett might have a point that scientists *should* be more ethically-minded (whatever that involves) but she cannot argue that scientists who fail to be so-minded do not produce science. To do this is to confuse an ethical argument with a semantic one and to confuse a debate over what is the case with a debate as to how things ought to be.

J V M McCALMONT  
London

I MUST thank Jean Fawcett for giving me a good laugh (*Points of View*, August 2001). She resents Stephen Park saying her memory is faulty. Sadly for her it was I, not Mr Park, who questioned the reliability of her memory. Perhaps she forgot.

I never said that profit-motivated science was all good, but without it we’d be living in the Middle Ages. Her notions of “true” and “false” science make little sense. The science that was used to develop atom bombs is just as “true” as that used to make penicillin. Science is morally neutral and the blame for misusing it lies not with science, and often not with individual scientists, but with those who direct them. Besides, those who developed atomic weapons thought that the Nazis were doing the same. What if they had been right, and the Nazis got there first? Life is rarely simple.

Finally, when Rutherford split the atom how was he to know that it would lead to atom bombs? And radiotherapy for cancer, radioisotopes for research, medical scanning techniques and even smoke detectors?

STEPHEN MORETON  
Warrington

OH DEAR! Jean Fawcett’s letter is so long-winded, muddled and incoherent, it’s hard to know where to start a reply. But, as she both mentions and abuses me, I feel bound to try.

Ms Fawcett’s main problem is that she simply refuses to try to distinguish between science, technology, business and politics. Her proposition that the scientists who discovered nuclear fission (or “split the atom”, as she puts it) are responsible for the nuclear weapons industry is as barmy as saying that James Clerk Maxwell is responsible for Virgin Radio.

If Jean Fawcett would like an example of “false science” (her expression), she need look no further than her own amazing claim that a doctor could tell she had taken homoeopathic treatment, simply by looking in her eye.

As I suggested in my last letter, extraordinary claims have to be supported by extraordinary evidence, or they are of little value. I assume that Ms Fawcett’s memory and senses are little better than most, so she could easily be mistaken (or the kind doctor was just humouring her). If her doctor’s claim were true, then this might represent a remarkable scientific breakthrough and she should urge him to publish his findings in a reputable medical journal and so submit them to peer review and replication. That is how science works, not by the gullible belief in every half-baked anecdote that tickles your fancy.

I am pleased that she agrees that the definition of science that I gave in my last letter is “all very well”, but then (after gratuitously insulting me) she meanders into the ethical question of the use of animals in testing pharmaceutical products within large multi-national companies. It’s a shame that her views on science display such a profound lack of understanding, as there are plenty of people, includ-

ing myself (a vegetarian, for this very reason), who are just as keen as she is to condemn cruelty to animals in food production, field sports and pharmaceutical testing.

Happily, there are some glimmerings of sense in her final few sentences. She agrees about the value of knowledge and she says that we should not seek it by the “wrong means”, by which I assume she is in favour of scientific method conducted ethically, and I could not agree more. But then she adds “. . . or use it for the wrong ends.” Again I agree, but that’s not a problem for science: it is business people, investors, politicians and others who make those decisions, not scientists.

Ms Fawcett suggests that some people feel about science the same way that others feel about religion. This might be true, but, unlike religion, science has no need for their belief or faith – it demonstrably works whether you believe in it or not! Science gives us knowledge and understanding that can impart great power; that power can then be used in many different ways, good and bad. How this knowledge is used is a reflection of the people who use it and not of the scientific knowledge itself nor of the scientists who discovered it.

IAN QUAYLE  
Burwell

## Defining “freethought”

DENIS Watkins seems to have incomplete and incoherent notions of freethought when he asks for this magazine to be “prejudiced against religious superstition”.

What about secular superstitions? And what about the very meaning of “freethought”? The word has the obvious connotation of thought being free from anything except probability as to fact and defensibility as to logic.

Specifically, freethought is inexorably unfree if it is prejudiced; the questioning of assumptions – including one’s own – is a *sine qua non* of genuinely free thinking.

That is not to advocate being anodyne. There is a balance to be struck between being so abrasive that people switch off and so bland that people nod off. The test is not whether a writer makes himself, and his supporters, feel good but whether he makes his opponents think again.

One weapon, that serves a cause well, is humour – gentle or scornful as the case may require. Archbishop Carey’s idea that one should pray to avoid sudden death in a rail crash is a piece of theological nonsense in that it rests upon a highly dubious assumption that our world is presided over by a god who stands in need of our advice as to how to run it. A “hate” article, on this pious gaffe is easy to



imagine but Alfred Challoner-Chadwick's send-up (Petitioning God) is much to be preferred as propaganda. Let us have more from A C-C.

ERIC STOCKTON  
Orkney

IN REPLY to Denis Watkins (*Points of View*, July) I would say there is nothing pompous about making valid criticisms, which, incidentally, Denis failed to address in his response.

However, for the record I would like to point out that my original letter was misquoted. I most definitely did not accuse the *Freethinker* of being a hate-mag. I actually wrote, "Please do not let the *Freethinker* turn into a hate-mag..."

I also do not want an anodyne *Freethinker*, I want to read critical and sceptical views about religion. But what I would also like is a *Freethinker* that goes about it in an intelligent, responsible manner, without the risk of further sectarianism and intolerance. The article I criticised did not, in my opinion, achieve this.

What are the thoughts of other readers?

MIKE RUSH  
Chesterfield

I CANNOT understand Harold Dowell's concern for the "agnostics" whose progress towards true belief might, as he supposes, be impeded by encountering "bigoted material" in the *Freethinker*. A person who is not yet ready to sever all contact with religion for fear of alienating friends or sacrificing an agreeable social framework will in all probability never reach that point of decision, and is unlikely to be swayed one way or another by anything he may read in our journal. Conversion, it is true, is a gradual process; not as he says "very often" but always: even in the "road to Damascus" story the vision was preceded by the painful experience of "kicking against the pricks". But nobody just drifts into it. There has to be a real awareness of what is involved in the choice to be made, whether to go on believing that our lives are ruled by an omnipotent deity or to break free from the intellectual, emotional, and moral bonds imposed by that belief. It is never a simple decision, and it can do any serious enquirer nothing but good to be exposed to a wide-ranging presentation of its many implications such as he would find in the *Freethinker*.

Mr Dowell puts in a plea for the 'many thoughtful church people who would like to be rid of mythology'. Well, that may be what some want, though not I suspect all that many. It is not what I want, either: quite the contrary! What has to go is not the myths of Christianity or any other religious tradition, but the debase-

ment of myth into dogma, with the accompanying priesthoods or other systems of authority. Myth-making has always had a central role in mankind's struggle to understand our own nature and our relations with the world in which we find ourselves.

Alongside the spirit of scientific enquiry and the inventiveness spurred by practical necessity, it has marked our rise over the other animals. Without its legacy we should be without most of the world's greatest literature, most of our visual art, and a great deal of our best music. Being an atheist does not stop me listening with pleasure to the Dream of Gerontius, or looking forward to an opportunity to gaze once again at the Annunciations of Fra Angelico and Donatello.

But the moment I am told that any of these is the expression of a transcendent Truth, and I must believe it or else (or that believing it will give me a privileged position within the social framework) – that is when I am entitled to join with my fellow secularists in resisting such impositions by whatever means are open to us.

DEREK FANE  
Bognor Regis

### Races under apartheid

THE letter headed "Verwoerd and the Jews" (*Points of View*, August) omits to mention that under apartheid there were three defined races – viz "White", "Coloured" and "Bantu". Jews were (correctly) defined as White.

In addition, John Clarke incorrectly defines "Semite" as a race, instead of a language group. The populations of Sudan and Syria are both Arab (ie Semitic), but the former are Negroid, whereas the latter are Caucasoid. They cannot be defined as members of the same physical race.

Yours for accuracy (even about race).

CLLR E GOODMAN  
Surrey

### An admirable woman

I AM so glad there existed a Madalyn Murray O'Hair in the United States in the second half of the 20th century – in the USA and for all of us over here (and on other continents) who were lucky enough to discover her some time during those four decades of her brave and most inspiring atheist battles.

So I was extremely shocked to come upon a letter that disparaged her and her achievements (*Freethinker*, June) – very nasty and unjust it was indeed.

The writer, Fred Woodworth, disliked "the bully" that she allegedly also was. Dear me!

Nobody's perfect, for one thing, and secondly, to carry out her enormous task (telling Americans *the truth* about atheism and religion – a herculean undertaking!) she probably had to bully people around somewhat.

No pussyfooting for this outspoken woman (who rightly despised the coward's pretext for not speaking out, namely "political correctness").

How I delighted in her refreshing bluntness, her calling a spade a spade, a bigot a bigot and a religious fool exactly that. She was so right also in challenging those who dare not come out of the closet and identify themselves as atheists, hiding behind the socially palatable "humanist" and "agnostic".

Living in a conservative country that has since time immemorial been buttering up the Catholic Church (scandalously financed willy-nilly by all of us taxpayers), I relished the publications from American Atheists in my mail, just as I love to see the *Freethinker* in my mailbox once a month, or the French satirical weekly *Charlie-Hebdo* which is as ferociously mocking as Madalyn used to be – more so, in fact.

Life be thanked for giving us people such as Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Cavanna, Barbara Smoker (whom I admire and sympathise with wholeheartedly) and to hell (if one may say so) with petty, envious mud-slingers.

NELLIE MOIA  
Luxembourg

Address your letters  
(preferably typed) to  
Barry Duke,  
*Freethinker* editor,  
PO Box 26428,  
London SE10 9WH.  
Phone/Fax:  
020 8305 9603  
E-mail:  
editor@freethinker.co.uk  
or fteditor@aol.com  
Please include full postal  
address in all letters for  
publication sent via  
e-mail.

# atheist & humanist contacts & events

**Abolition of Divine Sadism (ADS).** Contact Charles Sayer on 0207 683 0615.

**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:** Monthly meetings resumed in September. Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble on 01273 733215. Sunday, September 2, 4pm Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Public Meeting. Christine Butterworth: *The Future of Humanism*.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnaley 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, September 28, 7.30 pm. Public meeting.

**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 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.

**Essex Humanists:** Humanism Today Conference, Essex Records Office, Wharf Road, Chelmsford, Saturday, September 8, 9.45 am till 4.30 pm. Tickets and programme from Diane Whitelaw, telephone 01245 265664.

**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, October 12, 7.30 pm. Mansell Stimpson: *The Legendary Marlene Dietrich*.

**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 Rita Manton 01708 762575. Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, October 4, 8 pm. Giles Hart: *The Children's Fiction of C S Lewis*.

**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.

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. The Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, October 9, 7.30 pm. Dan Bye: Against Religious Privilege: *The Work of the National Secular Society*.

**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, September 27, 8 pm. Morag Wood and Malcolm Rees: *Perspectives on Drug Misuse*.

**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.

**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. September 5, 8pm. Dan Bye: Against Religious Privilege: *The Work of the National Secular Society*. Wednesday, October 3, 8 pm. Michael Granville: *Why Do People Believe Weird Things?*

**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, September 12, 7.30pm. Discussion: *A Good Life Without Religion*. Wednesday, October 10, 7.30 pm. Babu Gogineni: *Humanists Under Threat*.

**Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282.

**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.