

£1.25

The

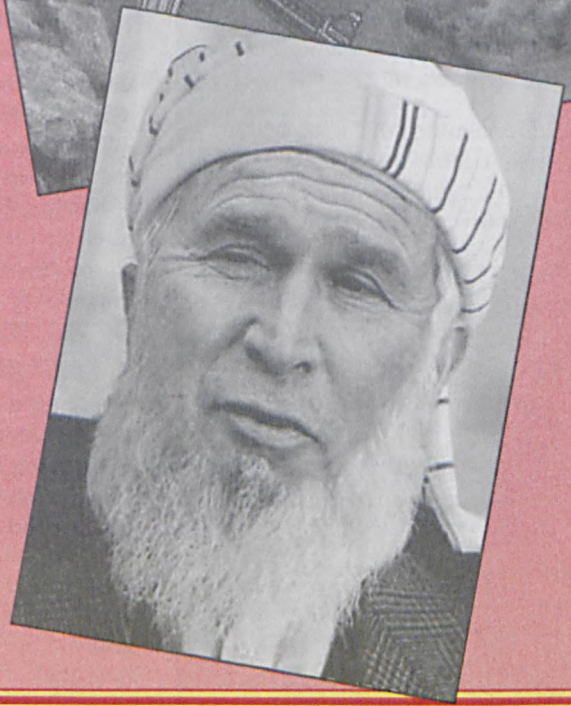
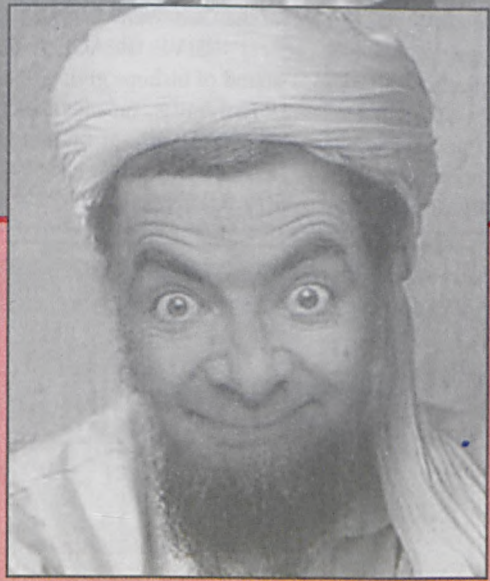
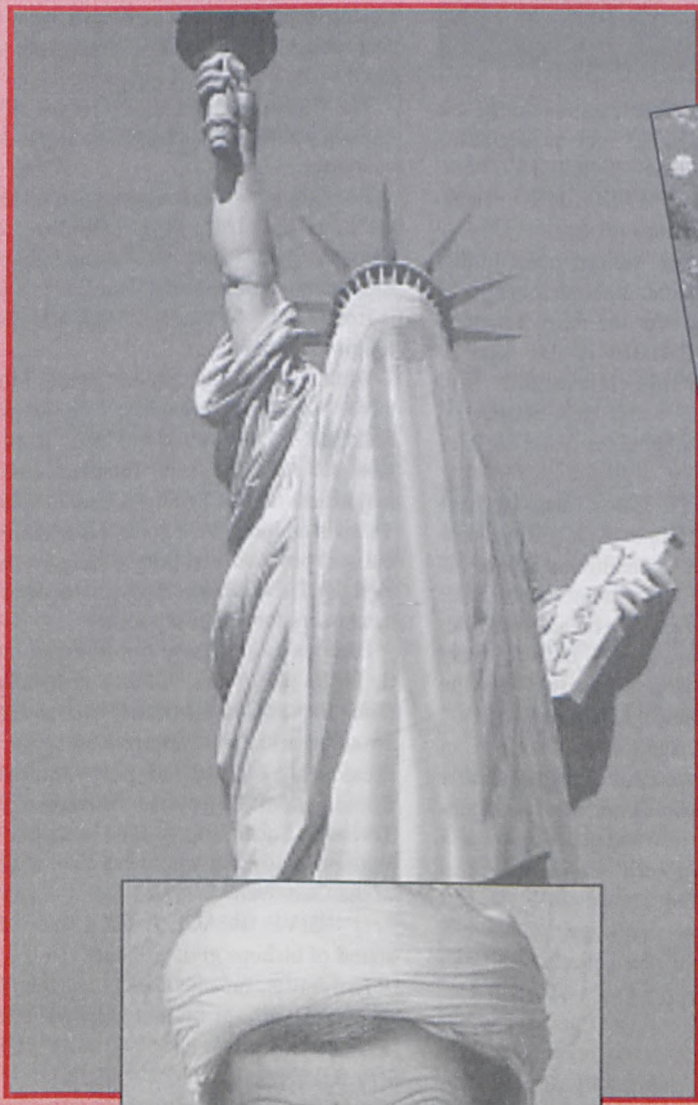
Vol 121 No 11
November 2001

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

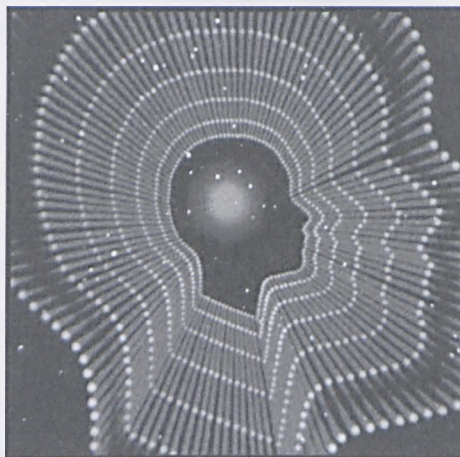
If Islam ruled the world ...



freethinking out loud: denis cobell

THE Archbishop of Canterbury recently led a National Day of Prayer for Peace: three days later Blair and Bush, standing shoulder to shoulder with allies from other rich countries, unleashed a hail of bombs on a poor nation. Whatever criticism of the Taliban we have as secularists, I hope we don't think that by bombing and making them martyrs we will remove them.

Carey's naive belief in the power of prayer is akin to the country parson praying for rain in a drought: a yokel tells him he is wasting his breath unless the wind changes direction! But there's a difference; one would expect a person in Carey's position to have a little more insight, even knowledge of, Blair's war intentions. Doubtless Carey, in common with many other clerics, will be at our annual pangeyric, Remembrance Sunday on November 11; there will be religious-military parades around the country. These started after the "war to end wars" – World War One. When will they ever learn?



There was a large demonstration for peace in London on October 13: one poster read: NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY FOR PEACE. RELIGION = CONFLICT. There were many Muslim groups present.

But where were they, various other faiths, and the rest of the media, on September 10 at the humanist protest over the death sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan of Dr Shaikh, reported in the *Freethinker* last month? And let us not forget that we still have blasphemy laws here – and possibly even worse legislation in the pipeline.

The Archbishop, Dr Carey, and Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor have, in the past year, both joined in bemoaning the demise of faith in this country. Unfortunately faith is all too alive and well in fostering hatred. Who can forget the disgusting scenes outside Holy Cross School in Belfast in September – and the attacks on Moslems since September 11.

There are reports, against the trend, of an increase in church attendance since September 11; works by the Nostradamus, the 16th century-astrologer, have also shown an upsurge in sales. The corrosive forces of irrationality in religion continue in this 21st century.

There are, of course, many Jews, Christians and Moslems who work for peace through co-operation. But these believers have all tempered their faith with a dose of practical secularism. G W Foote, founder of this journal, asserted that secularism is neither atheistic nor

theistic. Unfortunately, at the heart of the three "religions of the book", there are the contradictory and ambiguous "texts"; for as many quotations proclaiming peace as an aim, there are an equal number declaring death and war on sinners, non-believers and infidels. The BBC permits religious broadcasters to attack atheists and those who have a different version on "faith".

The Bishop of Bath & Wells, Jim Thompson, in his Radio Four contribution to "Thought for the Day", condemned those who stated September 11 was a "gift from God". Just seems they believe in the wrong sort of God!

The US has an unparalleled record of bombing and murder on foreign soil, and this trend continues.

Blair supports Bush against Bin Laden; but the three Bs have a despicable disregard for humanity. They each have an ideology more important than humanity. Bin Laden's cruelty is from Allah; "crusaders" Blair and Bush are religious Christians.

Britain's three most recent Prime Ministers have been warmongers: Thatcher, the Falklands; Major, the Gulf; Blair over Kosovo. All have been returned with good majorities at succeeding General Elections. There is nothing like a good war to enthuse the masses, provided the bombs fall in some foreign land. Do servicemen see themselves as canvassers for political parties?

Bishops have blessed troops going into battle in the past; what will stop army chaplains doing the same in the future? War and religion are inextricably intertwined. As NSS President, I read at the International Conscientious Objectors' Memorial Day in Tavistock Square this summer a ballad by Vic Williams, a soldier who went awol at the time of the Gulf War. One line read "you couldn't hear 'GIVE PEACE A CHANCE' for the sound of bishops giving thanks".

Extremists, fanatics and fundamentalists of whatever cause or faith are always a menace. The secular appeal is: JUST SAY "NO" TO RELIGION.

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
Website:
http://www.freethinker.co.uk

Annual postal subscription rates

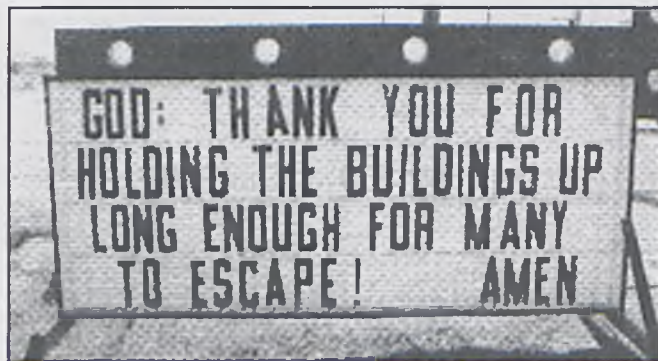
UK: 12 months £15 or £10 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent 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

Way to go, God!

This sign was spotted outside a restaurant in a small town in America. The person who took the picture and submitted it to the US atheist paper, *Freethought Today* said "I suppose we should be grateful for small favours!"



Briefly...

■ DIANE Pretty, 42, has lost her High Court battle over the right to commit suicide with the help of her husband.

The mother-of-two, from Luton, Bedfordshire, challenged the refusal by the Director of Public Prosecutions, David Calvert-Smith, to rule out taking action against her husband if he helps her take her own life. She was diagnosed with motor neurone disease – which is untreatable – in 1999, and is now confined to a wheelchair barely able to speak.

Mrs Pretty's case was the first where the courts were asked to rule on the principle of the legality of a proposed assisted suicide, according to legal experts. She is now to appeal to the House of Lords.

■ RUSSIA has a special role to protect Christianity, according to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Speaking after visiting a monastery in the Solovki islands this summer, the former head of the KGB said "Russia would have difficulty in becoming a viable state" were it not for the Orthodox religion. "It is thus very important to return to this source," he added.

■ A 49-year-old Catholic priest who served at St Joseph's Church in Gateshead has been sentenced to five years' imprisonment for a series of sexual offences against a boy aged 12. Father William Jacks was convicted of one charge of indecency and three of indecent assault. Jacks, a former secretary to the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, has been indefinitely placed on the sex offenders' register.

■ The Oregon, USA, branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons, is to pay £3-million in damages to a 22-year-old man who suffered repeated sexual abuse at the hands of a Mormon high-priest.

Jeremiah Scott brought a lawsuit against the Church, accusing its leaders of failing to protect members from paedophiles, four years after high-priest Franklin Richard Curtis was convicted of abusing Mr Scott in 1991.

The lawsuit said that the then Mormon bishop Gregory Lee Foster knew Curtis had a history of sexually abusing children, dating back to the 1970s, but did not warn the Scott family.

Free speech under threat from new law to protect religion

FREEDOM of speech is at grave risk if Home Secretary, David Blunkett, rushes through new laws to protect religion, says the National Secular Society. Such hastily-considered legislation could result in a new weapon being handed to religious extremists that could enable them to silence critics.

Commenting on the reported plans to introduce legislation outlawing incitement to religious hatred, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS said: "We are alarmed that these proposals are going to be rushed through without sufficient consideration being given to the implications for free speech and before appropriate consultation can take place with all concerned parties. We, like the Home Secretary, are horrified by the upsurge in attacks against Muslims in this country. We also want very much to ensure that individuals are safe and free from intimidation, but existing laws, if they are properly used, are sufficient to achieve this.

"Experience shows that rushed 'knee-jerk' legislation is generally bad legislation.

"If the Home Secretary makes it illegal to freely criticise religion, religious extremists could use the law to deflect examination of their activities. The Home Secretary must tread very carefully before acting on these proposals – they could result in our hard-won right to free expres-

sion in this country being profoundly damaged. He should concentrate on protecting individuals rather than religions."

The National Secular Society has been fighting throughout its 130-year history for abolition of the blasphemy laws. Although these apply only to certain aspects of Christianity, there has been pressure to extend them to cover other religions.

Keith Porteous Wood added: "We do not want to see the blasphemy laws extended through the back door. In an open and democratic society, we must be free to question and criticise ideas. We want to be able to contest belief, while at the same time ensuring that every believer is free from threat. The Law Commission has twice recommended the abolition of the blasphemy laws, but this not been acted upon. If there are calls for equality with Christianity in blasphemy laws, the equality should be achieved by effecting the recommended abolition."

• The *Freethinker* could be under direct threat from Blunkett's proposed law to protect the religious. Readers can voice their opposition to this planned legislation by signing the petition below, and sending it to the Home Secretary. **The Rt Hon David Blunkett, MP, The Home Office, 50 Queen Anne Gate, London SW1H 9AT.**

Don't rush to legislate, Mr Blunkett

I/we the undersigned sympathise with those who have been hurt or upset by expressions of hatred since the events of September 11, but have a number of concerns about the proposed measures against incitement to religious hatred. The measures to prevent terrorism are clearly urgent, yet the incitement measures do not have any bearing on the prevention of terrorism, nor are they as urgent. Legislation that could impinge on freedom of speech needs more thorough deliberation than will be possible with the timetable currently envisaged. We therefore urge that the incitement provisions are not rushed through as part of the same package.

Name/s:.....
Address:.....



we must learn to say no to islamic demands: b

We have been plunged – according to one senior American defence chief – into “a new Cold War”. The enemy, this time round, he said, was not communism but international Islamic terrorism, and the states that sponsor or support it. Most Muslims do not see it that way. Despite Bush and Blair repeating the phrase “This is not a war against Islam” to the point where it has become a tiresome mantra, millions of Muslims disagree – and indeed relish the idea of a *jihad* (Holy War) against what they regard as a corrupt and decadent West and its *Kaffir* (infidel) inhabitants.

It is hard to gauge to what extent British Muslims support the idea of *jihad*, but it has become depressingly clear to me over the last few weeks that there is a deep and very dangerous divide between UK Muslims and the rest of the country – and the gulf seems to be widening by the day.

At the root of all this hostility is the determination by many Muslims not to be assimilated, as other immigrant groups have been, into mainstream British culture. This self-imposed apartheid has been aided and abetted by craven local authorities and government departments who, in fear of being labelled “racist” – and in keeping with their belief in promoting “multi-culturalism” – have gone to extraordinary lengths to accommodate the separatist demands of Islamic activists.

This was recently made clear in the appendix to Lord Ouseley’s report on race relations in Bradford. In it the author, Graham Mahoney, Bradford Council’s former chief race-relations advisor, accused some Muslims of “behaving like colonists” and welcoming Islamic ghettos. Furthermore, the city authority was said to have had an “ostrich approach” to increasing segregation over 20 years.

The 10-page document pulls few punches, particularly in criticising successive council leaderships – Labour, Conservative and hung – for refusing to criticise ethnic minority leaders, even when their actions were not in Bradford’s overall interests. He castigates the council for failing to “reach the stage where it can say to any member of the black or Asian community: ‘Sorry, I think you are wrong’ or ‘It is your responsibility to do something’.”

The report goes on to charge some Muslim elders with welcoming self-segregation and turning a blind eye to criminal activities by a minority of their community’s youth, out of concern to preserve Islam and their traditional way of life.

“This simply reflects their priorities – the

commitment to Islam, the prohibition on drink, and the arranged marriage are more important. There is a parental fear that if they exert pressure in other areas, they will lose their sons’ commitment in those three vital areas.”

The appendix adds: “Immigrants ... can and often do maintain key elements of their culture for generations, but in many other ways they accept the dominant, host culture.

“Colonists do not. They come into a country to displace the existing culture and establish their own. From colonist to immigrant is the dominant pattern historically. However, this process seems to have been thrown into reverse in Bradford.”

Although Bradford, with its Muslim population of around 78,000, was the focus of the Ouseley report, its observations must be true of other centres which have sizeable numbers of Muslim,

This determination to segregate, rather than integrate, has understandably produced a great deal of irritation, frustration, suspicion and anger in mainstream British society. A clear manifestation of this anger was Margaret Thatcher’s lashing out at British Muslim leaders for what she perceived as a weak response to the terrorist atrocity in America. As usual, she got it completely wrong, but a sizeable section of the population did, in fact, agree with her.

Never one to toe the politically-correct line, she has also, on occasions, rubbished the idea of “multi-culturalism”. As much as it irks me to agree with the woman, I believe she has a point. Britain is a *multi-racial* country, and is all the richer for it. But the country’s *culture and values* are British, and that’s the way they must remain.

To a great many British Muslims our culture, and by extension *all* Western cultures are, and will always remain, at odds with their Islamic beliefs, and they are vociferous in their condemnation of our lifestyles. Organisations like the London-based Al-Muhajiroun pump out huge quantities of leaflets and publications, all of which denigrate Western values.

At Al-Muhajiroun pavement bookstalls, which I have seen in various parts of the capital, you will find leaflets condemning homosexuality, feminism, nudity, abortion and premarital sex – testimony to the fact that Muslims have precisely the same terrible hangups as their fundamentalist Christian counterparts.

A few Saturdays ago I came across an Al-Muhajiroun bookstall a few hundred metres from Oxford Circus, and paused to listen to some of the rhetoric of the young Muslim men manning the stall. The messages were of uncompromising opposition towards the hard-

fought liberties I hold dear, and would defend to my dying day. Yet, these same people are clamouring for their religion to be protected by law.

Writing in the October 5 issue of the *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee, said “The only good religion is a moribund religion: only when the faithful are weak are they tolerant and peaceful. The horrible history of Christianity shows that whenever religion grabs temporal power it turns lethal. Those who believe theirs is the only way, truth and light will kill to create their heavens on earth if they get the chance. Tolerance only thrives when religion is banished to the private sphere, but bizarrely this government is marching backwards, with more faith schools, more use of ‘faith communities’ and now Blunkett’s new laws against ‘religious hatred’ to save religion from vulgar abuse.

“Religions never accept universal human

‘The only good religion is a moribund religion: only when the faithful are weak are they tolerant and peaceful’

rights because their notion of rights derives from a higher revealed truth. Hundreds of emails from Muslims around the world flooded in this week claiming that UN human rights are a western construct, alien to their culture. A moderate one wrote: ‘Islam has its own understanding on human rights and the social order and the relationship between men and women established 1,400 years ago.’

“Islam does have as wide a spectrum of interpretation as Christianity’s long stretch from Ian Paisley to the Pope to the Quakers – but their Paisley element is alarmingly powerful.

“This may be the last chance to say so

before emergency measures ban 'incitement to religious hatred'. To say that religion is dangerous nonsense is indeed intended to incite people against irrational superstition in favour of reason. But this law will insulate religious ideas in a sanctuary beyond scrutiny, refutation or ridicule. Why does religion deserve a realm beyond questioning?

"This proposed law will never work. It is a Dangerous Dogs Act in the making: it is as difficult to define 'religion' as it was to define a pit-bull. The charity commission regularly wrestles with ineffable nonsense so that Odin worshippers qualified but some pagans did not.

"Religious lobbies have wanted this [law] for years. The danger is that they intend to use it as a proxy blasphemy law: it is indeed disgraceful that our archaic blasphemy law covers only Christianity – but it should be abolished altogether. This will muddy the waters between race and religion, tarring all religious critics with the smear of racism, something that has already intimidated the rational into silence on Islam – leaving it to feminists, gays and the doughty National Secular Society.

"Ibn Warraq, director of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society, is an apostate scion of a Koranic school and author of *Why I Am Not A Muslim*. He strongly opposes the proposed law: 'Already there is an intellectual omerta on any criticism of Islam, great intellectual cowardice in facing up to the Koran and what it actually says. Politicians mouth platitudes about Islam as a peaceful, tolerant religion. The left dare not criticise it, tongue-tied with post-colonial guilt. New laws risk stifling the golden thread of rationalism that western civilisation is built on.' He considers that Blair and Bush have their own *raison d'etat* for wooing Islam, pretending it is a tolerant faith while needing allies.

"Warraq warns people not to be intimidated out of challenging Islamic ideas, but he fears new laws would do just that."

And Nick Cohen, writing in the *Observer* (October 7) said our "perverse" Government's "proposed law against inciting religious hatred is superfluous: a neo-Nazi who advocates burning a mosque can already be prosecuted. All the legislation can do is raise the hopes of the censorious that the next Salman Rushdie will be arrested ...

"Concessions to sectarianism are easy to make for reasons this column has mentioned before. There is an enormous gap between Britain, which has lost its religions faster than any other country, and the British political class, which has become more ostentatiously godly with each new recruit to the Christian Socialist Movement and Conservative

Christian Fellowship. Add the politically-correct imperative not to cause offence to the piety of the powerful, and a toxic package is ready for the approval of Parliament."

Cohen concluded his column with a quote from Benjamin Franklin; "When a Religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and, when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it so that its Professors are obliged to call for help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."

Under *The Times* headline "Damnation to this religious hatred law," Matthew Parris, on October 13, pointed out that V S Naipaul, the Trinidadian-born author who has just won the Nobel Prize for Literature, had called Islam a hateful religion on television.

"The Government, we are told, is now to 'outlaw religious hatred'. So is David Blunkett

'The new law will lead to trouble and confusion. Leave it alone, Mr Blunkett'

ready to send V S Naipaul to prison? He had better be ... This new law is a rotten idea. It is born of New Labour's instinct to promise action whenever any apparent ill makes it to the front page of a newspaper. At least the Dangerous Dogs Act, like Section 28, is virtually inoperable. A law against incitement to religious hatred would be perfectly operable and its most likely result would be a gag on British journalism and publishing.

"When you realise you have made a bad law there is sometimes the longstop of failing to prosecute it. Much that breaks our ancient laws on blasphemy against Christianity has been printed and broadcast, but few have bothered to urge prosecution. Most Christians have privately concluded that this would cause a silly fuss.

"That may not be the case with Islam, however. Popular and vociferous organisations abound whose spokesmen will monitor the media. The Director of Public Prosecutions will be under pressure not to let this legislation become a dead letter.

"If those who demean Islam are prosecuted,

it may soon occur to many Christians to demand similar protection. Race relations laws never became a dead letter, and a law against incitement to religious hatred would meet similar interest."

Parris goes on: "The principal cause of religious hatred is religion ... All three of our major religions in Britain — Christianity, Islam and Judaism — have a hateful idea at their very core. That idea is Exclusion: the 'othering', if you like, of the unredeemed.

"No man cometh to the Father, except by me.' The meaning to me is clear. Jesus, Christians believe, came to earth to save souls. Most Christians believe that not everyone is saved, and the closer to you get to the Church's front line — Ireland, South America, Africa, our own inner cities — the more you'll hear about damnation. I don't know about you, but I think telling your own crowd that the others are damned incites religious hatred.

"I shall not add to the war of quotes from the Koran in which Tony Blair and others more expert than me are engaged, beyond remarking that my own reading of this book, like my reading of the Bible, indicates deep ambiguity on the question of the hatefulness or otherwise of unbelief and unbelievers. You can find a quote to suit almost any point of view, but in the end you get a hunch about a religion and its tendencies. I am unconvinced that Islam (though it makes its accommodations where it must, and has become a many-stranded thing) feels permanently comfortable or warm about unbelievers. Kaffir is not a nice word.

"Because Judaism does not proselytise, the hateful implications of the faith that one's people are uniquely chosen by God may be overlooked, but if you know a way to say your lot are God's chosen without implying that the other lot are not, I should like to hear it.

"Jews do not, in fact, behave hatefully towards Gentiles, and Judaism too is many-stranded, but an important strand considers it unacceptable for a Jewish girl to marry a Gentile boy, and cuts her off from society if she does so. Such ostracism must amount to incitement to religious hatred, yet surely this cannot be a sorrow to be trailed through the courts?

"Glenn Hoddle's remark that the disabled may be being punished for sin in a former life was silly, but should it be criminal? It's a point of view. A few hundred million adherents to reincarnationist faiths hold it. May I not mock the fallacy of reincarnationism? The new law will lead to trouble and confusion. Leave it alone, Mr Blunkett."

is atheism a religion?

I RECENTLY took part in a radio discussion programme about the Alpha course.

The debate had been prompted by the National Secular Society's protests about the ten promotional videos for Alpha that ITV have been trying to pass off as an exploration of the barmy evangelical recruitment course.

In the debate I was up against the Rev Steve Chalke, the "charming" (translates as smarmy) vicar whose handsome features grace many a TV programme on matters pious.

When challenged about the veracity of his beliefs, the Rev Steve became mighty angry and insisted that "everyone believes something" – even atheists. Apparently, according to Steve, we believe that there is no God, therefore we are believers just like him. We have to take it on faith that there is no God, given that we can't prove the absence of a deity any more than he can prove its presence. Ergo, atheism is just another religion.

This is an argument that has arisen more and more frequently over recent months as religion has found itself on the back foot, needing to justify itself. Those people who support the concept of "faith schools" insist that it is their right to educate their children in their own religion if they want to. One correspondent to the *Guardian* wrote: "I am a Catholic and want my children to be educated within a Catholic ethos. I do not deny those of the secularist religion the right to have their children educated within a secularist ethos. Those who cannot see that the imposition of liberalism is a contradiction in terms are no better than ideologues of other extremes."

The writer of this letter did not seem to realise that secularism does not necessarily equate with liberalism (indeed, many religionists have come forward to support the NSS's stance on faith schools, seeing the inherent danger in them), and that secularism is not a religion or belief system in itself – it is merely the advocacy of the absence of religion from public life. Public life should, indeed, be neutral as far as religion is concerned, so that religion does not have the opportunity to become politicised. We have all seen in recent weeks what happens when religion and politics merge.

The other advantage of a secular state is that no religion can enjoy advantages that are denied to others.

Once religions get it into their heads that they are

- (a) superior to all the others or
 - (b) being treated as inferiors,
- the battles inevitably begin.

Secularism gives none an advantage, and

Some religionists would have us believe that it is, writes Terry Sanderson

therefore none can be disadvantaged.

In this age of multiculturalism and proliferation of faith groups, secularism has never been so important. Of course, it has also never been seen as so threatening before to those religionists with entrenched power bases within the state, such as the Church of England.

Atheism, too, is frequently cited by those who are afraid of it as a system of ethics. But theism – a belief in God – in itself does not inform peoples' behaviour. For rules and regulations they have to subscribe to some religious system. Likewise, for atheists, the mere absence of belief in God does not inform one's behaviour – for morals and ethics we have to look elsewhere, and atheists find their inspiration in a variety of ways. Some label their philosophy as humanist, others settle for situational ethics.

Nearly all rely on common sense tempered by the Golden Rule "do as you would be done by".

A long-running correspondence (we're talking three years, on and off) has been taking

place in the *Independent's* letters column on this very topic.

The most frequent riposte to atheists who accuse religion of being the motivating force for atrocities is that atheism is no better. Look at Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot etc, etc – all atheists who committed the most horrendous acts of genocide. But, of course, atheism is not an antonym for religion. Atheism was not the driving force of these people; it was their fanaticism in imposing the ideologies that they espoused – fascism, communism and others.

Likewise, Christian persecutors and Muslim fanatics are not driven by their belief in God, but by the interpretations of their particular books of rules. Theism and atheism are neutral. It is Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, fascism and so on that are the value-laden thought processes that create the justification for murder.

The NSS is about to launch a new website (www.secularism.org.uk) and on it will be a Frequently Asked Questions page, in which we will attempt to answer some of these charges that our opponents lay at our door.

I would be very pleased to hear *Freethinker* reader's responses. Hopefully we can incorporate the best of them into the answers on our site. They should be sent to:

kpw@secularism.org.uk or by post to:
NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Freethinker readers give the nation a laugh

TRUST a freethinker to inject some humour into a gloomy situation! While the world was debating how best to deal with Osama bin Laden, *Freethinker* subscriber Di Bishop, of London, came up with a brilliant idea, and shared it with the nation via the letters page of the *Guardian*.

"Killing Osama bin Laden will only create a martyr," she wrote. "Holding him prisoner will inspire his comrades to take hostages to demand his release.

"Therefore, I suggest we do neither.

"Let the Special Forces, Seals, SAS or whatever covertly capture him, fly him to an undisclosed hospital and have surgeons quickly perform a complete sex change operation.

"Then we return her to Afghanistan to live as a woman under the Taliban.

Another *Freethinker* Reader, Alistair McBay of Maidenhead, in Berkshire, turned his attention to another problem: the monstrous cock-up that passes for a privatised railway network in Britain.

In a letter also published in the *Guardian*, he wrote: "If we can entrust education to faith-based schools, then what about trying faith-based railways? They would have to be 'inclusive', although, naturally, Catholics might prefer to travel by Virgin Trains.

"Multi-faith services could be held on Sunday trains, thus allowing churches to claim higher attendance figures. And when all else fails to get the system moving, the power of prayer might be put to the test.

"Since it already requires a considerable act of faith these days to trust one's journey to the present rail system, it's surely worth a shot."

A WELSH council has promised to dump the term "Christian names" from one of its forms after a complaint from a non-believer.

Andrew Armitage, a member of the National Secular Society, was incensed when asked to fill in first his surname, then his "Christian" name on a form from Pembrokeshire County Council in West Wales.

Mr Armitage (52), who lives near Whitland, was sent a form for his household, which he shares with two others, to fill in for inclusion on the electoral register.

"When I got to the bit asking for my 'Christian name' I was amazed by the council's presumptuousness," Mr Armitage said. "None of us has a 'Christian' name."

Mr Armitage sent the form back, apologising that it was only partly filled in, and explaining: "No one in this household has such a name, and nor, I suspect, do Muslims, Hindus, Satanists, Sikhs, members of other religions and members of no religion who may receive your form."

He also asked for an assurance "that I shall



Andrew Armitage

not be similarly insulted on future forms".

The Council's electoral registration officer, Paul Wootton, wrote back to Mr Armitage saying: "I accept the comments expressed in your

letter and I apologise for my error.

"Find enclosed a correct electoral registration form, I would be grateful if you could complete and return. All future electoral registration forms issued will be of the same format as the one enclosed."

Mr Armitage, a former journalist, said: "I must say I didn't expect such a prompt response, and I'm pleased to see that the Council is seeing sense.

"I'm sick of the assumption that if you're white you're Christian. I'm even more annoyed by the assumption that you have any religion at all. Religion is illogical to me and any privileges it is afforded by councils, the state or anyone else is anathema to me."

He added: "I hope others will check the forms they get from statutory bodies such as local councils and make similar complaints if they feel they are being lumped with a group they are not a part of. I'm surprised it's still possible in the 21st century to receive a form with that on it."

NSS attacks plans for funding of Salvation Army schools

THE National Secular Society has come out strongly against plans being mooted to allow the Salvation Army to launch its own state funded secondary schools in Britain.

Salvation Army schools would be in line with government plans to expand the number of state schools run by religious groups in an attempt to promote "diversity".

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "More religious sects are muscling in on this opportunity to peddle their particular brand of faith.

"It is only a matter of time before truly undesirable groups put in their bids and it will be difficult in the name of religious equality to refuse them."

The Salvation Army is one of a number of religious groups that may bid for Government cash as part of a shake-up of secondary education. The Salvation Army, founded in the 19th century to "wage war on sin", already runs more than 1,000 primary and 150 secondary schools around the world.

The Salvation Army said that, at present, the issue was "purely at the evaluation stage". SA spokesman Bill Cochrane said: "It is something we are looking at." Plans are still at an early stage and the charity is awaiting further

developments from the DfES. But Mr Cochrane said the schools would model themselves on existing Church of England and Catholic schools, providing a broad education with a Christian ethos.

He said: "There would be no imposition of doctrine on pupils. We would accept people from all backgrounds, Christian or not."

Other bidders for the planned expansion include the Aire Christian Academic Development, a group of evangelical churches.

And the Church Schools Company, which runs eight private schools, wants to sponsor independent city academies to be run jointly by the Government and its backers.

News of the possibility of the UK gaining SA schools broke within days of press reports indicating that more and more politicians were backing away from "faith-based" education.

Liberal Democrat Education spokesman Phil Willis said: "I am concerned that if we have unbridled expansion of faith schools we will see the potential for segregation of youngsters. Bradford is a classic example, particularly after what we saw this summer with the awful race riots there and what we saw in Oldham and, more recently, in Northern Ireland.

John Dunford, General Secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, added: "I cannot think that this is the right time to be thinking about the expansion of the number of faith schools in this country. There are too many potential dangers in the current climate."

TV mogul, Lord Alli, who was part of Labour's election campaign team, is reported to have said that "anything which encourages isolation and segregation in communities through education is a recipe for disaster".

Death of Bill Brown

BILL Brown has died at age of 85. He was an early officiant at secular and humanist funerals in Kent and East Sussex, together with colleagues from the NSS. He was for a time caretaker at Conway Hall, and helped his wife Evelyn, who was a warden at several Humanist Housing Association properties in the Tunbridge Wells area.

Denis Cobell, President of the NSS, conducted his secular funeral at Tunbridge Wells on October 16.

It's bye-bye Ch what do we do

At first there were fears. Then there were gods. The numbers of these gods fluctuated wildly according to country and climate and tradition. Then certain bright people began to see that there were some contradictions in the idea of lots of gods. These philosophical paragons reduced the number to just one. *Voila*, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

This was a good start, and they were only one step away from getting it absolutely right. It took an awfully long time to make that last step, though, and for many people it still seems a step too far. It's almost as though they fear that they will be projected over a precipice, over a kind of mental Beachy Head. For some, the thought of no god, no soul, no eternal life, brings on a form of vertigo.

Of course there are many who don't give a flying f ... erret. Good for them, the lucky buggers. And it seems, from what an eminent cardinal has been saying, that there will be more people like this, due to the collapse of Christianity as a significant force in the United Kingdom.

Well hoop-la! About time, isn't it?

Now, of course, we can expect to see rolled out all the mouldy tripe about what a loss this is, and about how terrible the consequences will be for all of us. Somewhere near the top of the tripe list will be Chesterton's hoary old saw which tells us that people who believe in nothing will go on to believe in everything, in any old rubbish. What he really meant, of course, was that he wanted people to believe his brand of gibberish, rather than the gibberish they chose for themselves. Hardly Socrates, was he? But you can bet than even now some journalist is looking up the very quotation, as though it were the apogee of wisdom and insight.

What else will we see? Well, there will be a flurry of fundamentalists of all kinds twittering away about how they see a different picture, of people hungry for certainty, authority, and morality. They will tell us that the collapse of the church has come about because it's been too wishy-washy, and that if only it had been more blood and thunder and fire and brimstone, we would all still be good, humble, shivering servants of the lord, just like we were when er. Well, we were when things were different.

Asked to specify a precise (or even vague) historical period for this theological golden age, even the most vociferous become mute as Carthusians. They are cheerlessly aware that history overrules the wishful longings of their ghostly science, and denies them even the smallest crumb of sacerdotal comfort.

This is not an occasion for gloating on the part of atheists and freethinkers, of course, but a brief chortle is definitely permitted. We get precious little chance, usually, so we should enjoy it when we can ... So take five minutes, and relish it!

OK, on with the show. Religious schools (the image of the Hydra comes disturbingly to mind) seem to be bucking the trend, but it's all a bit of a farce. If the schools are well-disciplined and have good academic records,

is sad and tawdry, but also largely ineffectual. Kids reject it as part of their natural development precisely because it's associated with authority and obligation. As long as the brainwashing is not reinforced by what happens at home (and mostly it isn't) then the actual beliefs, the myths, get discarded along the way. This is something in which freethinkers should rejoice.

The real problem is psychological. And this is where I've observed that some freethinkers and rationalists tend to be rather naive and innocent.

Over many years
freethinkers have
equipped themselves
with knowledge to
fight Christianity on
its own ground. Now
we are faced with
something new and,
to most, something
unfamiliar

people would want their kids to go to them even if they were run by Satanists. That's the depth of conviction most people hold! And the kids? Well, chances are that religious schools are one of the best ways ever devised of inoculating kids against religion.

Before I'm accused of making light of a serious problem, though, let me discriminate between what does and does not matter in the schools debate.

The intellectual stuff, the teaching of beliefs,

Norman Pridmore p

Reason is not enough, sad to say. I spent years fighting with a sense of guilt and betrayal long after I had rejected the dogma that had been fed me as a kid. OK, so maybe I had more than most to deal with (fourth generation Baptist missionary stock, folks – I eat fundamentalists for breakfast these days, and snack lightly upon unwary bishops whenever I can), but believe me, the damage done was, and is, deep and extensive.

There have been some comments in various letters to the *Freethinker* about its tone, regretting that it is sometimes hectoring or mocking or abusive about religion. I wager that those who have been through and emerged from a seriously religious upbringing relish the tone, and, even more importantly, find it profoundly therapeutic.

It may be argued that therapy is not the purpose of the paper, and I sympathise with this view. For those who have never suffered the toxic effects of religion, it must seem an almost incomprehensible waste of time, energy and newsprint. But I suggest that for as long as religion continues to poison and distort minds, then this paper has a role to play in countering that poison.

I suggest that the bogeymen of guilt and fear and anxiety (the dross and detritus that are left behind after theology has been discarded) are best dealt with in mocking, Rabelasian confrontations, and through Swiftian laughter! Just as a starving person needs food before they can think clearly, so mental and emotional poison must be neutralised before full rationality is able to flower. If not the *Freethinker*

Christianity, but What about Islam?

feature

for this task, then what?

I began by talking about fears and about gods, and about the disintegration of that Christian background which society apparently once shared. I mocked Chesterton. I scorned the fundamentalists. I pleaded for psychological compassion and understanding. What's been the purpose of all my wind and blather? It's this: Islam is going to do – indeed, is doing now to men and women of all faiths and none – all that Christianity once did, and worse.

The *Freethinker* has already begun to address its growth and influence and to offer

It poses the question

insights and information. But we need more. Over many years freethinkers have equipped themselves with knowledge to fight Christianity on its own ground. Now we are faced with something new and, to most, something unfamiliar. We are faced too with the anxieties that we will possibly be accused of racism and Islamophobia.

Yet there is an obligation to confront the religion just as vigorously as we confronted and continue to confront Christianity and all other forms of superstition. We have an obligation – especially to young Muslims – to show them that there is a different way.

The more we do so, the more it will prove that our intentions are the very reverse of racist. Not to do so would be discriminatory and exclusionist. Not to do so would be to show disrespect. To do so, conversely, is the clearest possible demonstration of the freethinkers conviction that all are able to think, and that all deserve the chance to learn about and understand and free themselves from ancient darkness and superstition of whatever variety.

Are there readers with knowledge, with personal experience, who are able to replicate today what was done with Christian dogma in the past – to analyse and expose its idiocies and its cruelties and its inconsistencies? Are there ex-Muslims able to offer support to those considering breaking away? Are there ex-Muslims able to explain and interpret the religion to those of us unfamiliar with its tenets and requirements? Are there any who are able to separate the religion from the culture and artefacts that arose from it as we have now

done with Christianity, so that we can learn to respect and enjoy them for themselves, and to understand and appreciate the context within which they arose, without being obliged to sympathise with the metaphysics of their creators? These are not rhetorical questions.

Islam will grow and develop and change, and there will be those within it who will go through the process so familiar to ex-Christians, of rejecting it and leaving it. Their guilt and fear will be great. Others, the majority, will remain within it with very differing degrees of commitment, and for many different reasons.

Liberals and fundamentalists will generate their distinctive versions of Islam, each sanctified by tradition and teaching.

The effects of education will diminish naive literalism and the tendency to obedience and conformity. At the same time the pressure to preserve the uniqueness of Islamic cultural identity and historical continuity will impede any change in these directions.

The identification of race with religion will not diminish, but it will increasingly be subject to analysis and criticism. This may reinforce a sense of threat and isolation and vulnerability.

Name that song and win a prize

THIS rare picture of Osama Bin Laden, kindly supplied by *Freethinker* reader Jonathon Baker, shows the fuzzy-faced crackpot crooning soulfully to an enthusiastic audience participating at the Kabul International Karaoke Competition.

But what song could the godly geek have been performing?

Send your suggestions to **Name that Song, the *Freethinker*, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9 WH.**

Top prize for the winning entry will be a two-year free subscription to the *Freethinker*. The runner-up gets a T-shirt with any one of the four pictures featured on this month's cover, below the words "If Islam Ruled the World". The pictures are in full colour.

Closing date for entries is December 10. Results will be published in the January, 2002, issue of the magazine.

As the changes occur and as divisions multiply within Islam, intelligent non-Muslims will increasingly appreciate that the religion is not monolithic and homogeneous.

As freethinkers we must not exploit the tensions that will arise, but must understand them. It is a serious business for all of us. We must observe what is happening, and be aware of the changes. We must make contacts as and when we can with the Islamic community and with individual Muslims.

The most pressing need will be for us to appreciate and understand the psychological elements of what takes place when a person begins to question his or her faith, and not to underestimate the pain and guilt of the questioner.

This is not in order to inhibit ourselves from being robust and combative, necessarily, but in order to more effectively enable Muslims (or whoever) to examine their religion freely and openly, without a sense of being threatened or coerced. It is to also enable those who are so inclined to join a new community, that of freethought itself

If we succeed, the prize is great: nothing less than intellectual freedom itself. Perhaps in 50 or 100 years, post-Christians and post-Muslims will be able to laugh together at the madness of centuries past, and at what they once believed in, and will write in the *Freethinker* about whatever nonsense writhes and snuffles and coils through their day. They will find one, for sure. And conquer it.



Is this how they succeed?

YOU'RE not academic enough, 16-year-old Lauren McEvoy said she was told by a senior teacher at St Joan of Arc school in Rickmansworth, Herts, which she had attended since she was 11, and where she had obtained seven GCSEs. She was then handed a standard letter informing her parents that she could not, therefore, be accommodated in the school's sixth form. Another student, Claudia Evangelou, was told that she could study only two subjects, although she had 10 GCSEs. Several boys and girls were crying after similarly being turned down.

St Joan of Arc headmaster Tony Sumner admitted to the *Guardian* (September 13) that the letter, addressed to "Dear Parent or Guardian", with a dotted line for the unlucky pupil's name to be written in, had been "insensitive and inappropriate". He said that the school had been caught out by the large number of pupils who had achieved the required GCSE results. The school had to employ staff based on estimates of pupil numbers made in March. It was now trying to accommodate all pupils by, for example, working with sixth forms at other schools in the area, although this wasn't mentioned in the letter.

Mr Sumner denied that the school had acted as it did because it was concerned with league tables. "The school ethos is non-selective," he said. But that "not academic enough" sounds suspicious.

Men rather than pigeons

HAVE you noticed the latest tactic in clergymen's attempts to refute atheist arguments? They don't, of course, answer the arguments: they dismiss them as "fundamentalist atheism," as in the case of the Bishop of Leicester's letter in the *Guardian* on September 17, following Richard Dawkins' fascinating article three days earlier.

Dawkins had referred to the American psychologist B F Skinner's research on pigeon-guided missiles during the second world war, then speculated on how the bird, after a regimen of training with colour slides, might guide a missile to a distinctive landmark at the southern end of Manhattan. But although pigeons may be cheap and disposable, missiles are expensive and, moreover, interceptible. The solution, therefore, is to use humans prepared to sacrifice their lives in the process. "It's a long shot", wrote Dawkins, "but it might just work" if "we sucker them into believing that they are going to come to life again afterwards ...

Offer them a fast track to a Great Oasis in the Sky, cooled by everlasting fountains ... tell them there's a special martyr's reward of 72 virgin brides, guaranteed eager and exclusive".

Our leaders have described the atrocity as "mindless cowardice", Dawkins continued, but these people were not mindless and certainly not cowards. Their courage came from religion, "the underlying source of divisiveness in the Middle East". And, he concluded: "To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used."

There is certainly fundamentalism here, but it's not on Richard Dawkins' side.

What a hope!

THE same day in the *Guardian*, an old friend of mine, Reform Rabbi Tony Bayfield appealed to Jews, Christians and Muslims to rediscover "their shared core values", which he described as the sanctity of human life, justice and compassion, "by challenging the abuse of power, by eschewing violence, by teaching that we worship the one God; and through recognising our common humanity, and putting it at the service of sharing, compromise and peace."

Leave out the worshipping, which lies at the core of the trouble, and we can all subscribe to that. Humanists already do.

Bestselling soothsayer

WITHIN days of the atrocity in the United States, the online bookseller amazon.com, which runs an hourly updated bestseller list, informed us that three of the top five titles were by or about Nostradamus, the Complete Prophecies being at number one. The exceptions, less surprisingly, were a history of the Trade Centre by an architectural writer and a book on how to fight terrorism.

What could readers expect to glean from the abstruse rhymes of a 16th-century French astrologer, who knew nothing of aeroplanes and skyscrapers? It's a sorry state of affairs but, then, so is the religious situation over there, where the President is reported as praying on the telephone most days with his Bible advisers. No doubt Nostradamus will be as useful as they are in explaining why God didn't "bless America" on September 11.

Right for once

FOR once, in fact, Cristina Odone got it right: "Leave God out of it" (*Observer*, September 23). Usually she is all too ready to bring him in but, with the Taliban and bin Laden invoking

Allah for their *jihad* and George Bush talking of a "crusade", this time her advice was good. She pointed out that since 1954 the US pledge of allegiance includes the words "one nation under God"; in 1955 Congress decreed that "In God we trust" should appear on all currency and that those words are now the national motto. "God was turned into an instrument of national policy", said Odone. And, she added, "Bad religion hides dirty politics". The problem is finding a good religion.

In accord no longer

TEACHERS of religion in Spanish state schools are terrified of bishops, who have a veto over their jobs under a 1979 "accord" with the Vatican. "It's the Inquisition all over again," said Francesca Urbano, who had worked for 10 years in state schools in the province of Malaga before she lost her job this summer. "They told me I was not a good example of a Christian lifestyle for my students because I didn't go to Mass and there was a rumour that I'd gone for a drink with a male colleague." Other teachers' unforgivable sins were to have married a divorced man; and to be living with one's boyfriend (*Guardian*, September 12).

This was only the tip of the iceberg, said a teachers' trade union spokesman. There were many more cases which didn't come to light "because of the fear of telling the truth". He added that many of the teachers were expected to pay part of their state-paid salaries into church funds.

The sacked teachers have protested outside the Spanish parliament, but the right-wing government said there was nothing it could do because the accord placed all teachers of religion in the hands of the Catholic Church. But opposition parties, trade unions and parents' associations have all called for the accord to be scrapped. It is surely time for a change of government.

A simple alternative

"DOES anyone know a non-religious alternative phrase to 'I'll be praying for you'?" asked a reader in the *Guardian's* "Notes & Queries" column (based on the idea of the long-running magazine of that name which may sometimes be picked up on bookstalls). "May you be well and happy; may you be free from pain and suffering" was the long-winded recommendation of a Buddhist; "I'm sorry for your trouble" is apparently used at Irish funerals; but the best suggestion came from a woman priest, the Rev Elizabeth Mackey of Sandygate, Sheffield. "What's wrong with 'I'll be thinking of you'?" she asked. Nothing.

Intuition & the Primacy of Reason by Charles Ward

Immediate insight without reasoning. That is what intuition means to the majority. Of course it all depends on the meaning given to the word "insight". Minus reason, association with normal understanding has to be questioned.

Dictionary definitions reflect common usage. We need not supinely accept superficial opinions which lexicographical practice necessarily embraces. Nor, fiercely denying their validity, pretend that phenomena going by such misleading descriptions simply do not occur. Despite distaste for a term suggesting the irrational, we must continue to refer to intuition, to avoid circumlocution.

First we note that, contrary to general belief, which has focused on special aspects, it is by no means unusual. Bobbing momentarily to the surface in a constant ebb and flow of impressions and thoughts, not surprisingly it can be overlooked or, if not, be quickly forgotten. Always unbidden, and mostly undramatic, it sometimes arrests attention like the proverbial bolt from the blue.

This occasional feature is what gives credence in the minds of the gullible to the superstition that it is a mysterious form of communication. In such instances it is not so easy to ignore the phenomenon, and many worry instead over the presumed significance of the intuition.

Knowledge believed to be supernaturally obtained, without involvement of any reasoning process on the part of the percipient, is an idea eagerly fastened on by the religious. Hypocrisy is not far removed from this view, since, as history and contemporary cultures more than amply demonstrate, even a person first regarded as an ally will be censured as an enemy if found to be publicising a personal revelation not in line with approved doctrine.

Real-life anecdotes about scientists, artists, writers, industrialists and others deriving advantage from their intuitions (Arthur Koestler provided numerous examples in *The Act of Creation*, 1964) might appear to support the fancy that, while not revelatory in a spiritual sense, the phenomenon indicates a communication of some sort from a mysterious inner intelligence. But the neural/chemical operations of the brain are just doing, in total ignorance of purpose and effect, what they have evolved to do.

An individual's response, when shorn of imaginative colouring, is merely one of selection or rejection. When the selection appears inspired – something appears to have fallen into place, solution to a problem or a hopeful line of enquiry has been recognised – dud, unfruitful facets of thought that previously emerged (and will continue to do so) are swiftly forgotten. No discarnate spirit, creature

from outer space, Freudian subconscious, no hidden self, need be postulated.

Dramatisation of the experience, as if rare or privileged, reflects a self-deluding tendency. Feelings of certainty are self-generated, perhaps for the sake of peace of mind, confirmation of one's expectations or hopes, or as a ploy to impress others. How far rationality weighs in will depend on a person's character. A shrewd business man who plays his hunch has – you may be sure – weighed up other factors beforehand. Likewise the macho guy who relies on a gut feeling.

It is a fact of biology that intuition is related to the amount of testosterone we inherit, so it is not an exclusively feminine phenomenon. People of either gender have to learn when it is short-sighted to ignore it, as well as when it is foolish to exaggerate its importance.

Our non-rational mental operations which, like icebergs, remain largely out of sight, become evident to us in the form of evanescent images and dreams. They do not, and indeed cannot, in themselves make sense. Any logic they may be said to possess is that of dreams – namely, of an associative character.

The disproportionate amount of unreason in our make-up has often led to, or at any rate been made an excuse for, glorification of that aspect of human nature. Here, nevertheless, we have a way whereby the a-rational can be used on behalf of the rational, but only if we retain rational perception and do not fall prey to superstition.

Reasoning powers have been much misunderstood in the past, even by otherwise perceptive people. Thinkers, intoxicated with purely imaginary powers of intellect, produced philosophies with an illusory appearance of being rationally founded. Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras – among others – all made guesses (one might say, intuitively) concerning the nature of ultimate reality and then proceeded to rationalise about their conjectures. Later philosophers and scientists could show these to be ill-founded while failing to notice that they themselves were making unreliable extrapolations.

Intuitions do sometimes break the moulds which have hardened round perceptions. Yet, no matter how startling may be the illuminating images that slip across the frontier to the conscious mind, they are natural phenomena

which should be regarded as scientifically as any other.

Taking intuitions as a form of guidance to personal conduct is tempting to the superstitious. A strong intuition can be as heady as a drug, especially if there is a predisposition to look upon the phenomenon as revelatory. "That is what I am meant to do"; "God is speaking to me in this way"; "S/he is the partner for me"; "That is the answer to my problem". Such flashes of apparent insight have an illusory persuasive feel about them. An idea not previously considered, or perhaps thought of and then rejected, may surface with peculiar insistence. We must learn to treat such ideas, however, with dispassion.

There can be great reluctance to acknowledge that choices we apparently make, the good sense of which we tend not to question, are seldom the result of rational deliberation. Our behaviour, broadly, is emotion-based – not that we are consciously emotional as we go about our business. On the surface it seems calm and sensible behaviour.

And so it may well be. The truth that so many of us find hard to take on board is that our feelings, our likes and dislikes, our anxieties and hopes, our explorations and adventures, our defensive or aggressive mental states, our sensuality and sensitivity, and varying moods play a far larger part than cool intelligence,

Afterwards we rationalise about what we have thought and done, an entirely different mental process from that involving actions based strictly on reasoned principles (assuming that these may, in certain circumstances, take place). This does not mean that our actions (or our abstentions from action) are necessarily irrational in themselves (although they may be). Most of what we do is habit-driven, or what we want or feel under pressure to do, whether foolish or wise. But if we reason with sufficient regularity and thoroughness, this can rub off on subsequent rationalisations and behaviour.

Non-rational processes underlie behaviour, because during evolution they came first and occupied a lengthy period. Reasoning powers built on the existent brain structure enable us to analyse and evaluate what we experience and observe. This repository of all that information, like a kaleidoscope being shaken, can yield suggestive rearrangements.

Mental flotsam and jetsam constantly but ephemerally appear, going for the most part unnoticed and rarely found of any practical value. When some colour, shape or pattern

(Continued on p13)

I READ *The Meaning of Things* at Aix-les-Bains by Lake Bourget, France's largest natural lake, opposite a chateau where the greatest essayist of them all, Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) lived for a while, and whose books were placed on the Index in 1676. A C Grayling opens with Montaigne's salutation: "Reader, lo! A well-meaning Booke" and presents us with a collection of discussions or "sketch maps", applying philosophy to important aspects of human life. They appeared in the form of the "Last Word" column in the *Guardian Saturday Review*, where I first read the little gems.

Dr Grayling divides them into three categories headed "Virtues and Attributes", "Foes and Fallacies" and "Amenities and Goods"; and places subjects such as Christianity, faith, miracles and blasphemy in the second category. He realises this may offend religionists; and the anonymous *Private Eye* reviewer has already described the book as "fairly bursting with snooty little debunkings of religion in general and Christianity in particular". Needless to say, the reviewer makes no attempt to discuss these debunkings; they are merely declared "pious, if not sanctimonious" and compared to "a Lancaster dropping thermite bombs on a colony of ants". I take it he must mean "ants".

Assuming that he does, let us take up that image of the ants, because it rather well depicts the unthinking attitude of, say, the British royal family as they troop off every Sunday to church at Balmoral; or the Roman Catholic faithful as they enter the house of God, dip their fingers in the font and genuflect before the altar, then utter the various responses ingrained in their minds since childhood. Faith, as Grayling says, is a negation of reason, reason being "the faculty of proportioning judgment to evidence, after first weighing the evidence. Faith is belief even in the face of contrary evidence". For St Augustine "faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward for faith is to see what you believe". What makes that remark so sinister, says Grayling, is that if you can believe anything, you can see anything – and "therefore feel entitled to do anything: to live like an Old Testament patriarch, which is silly, or even kill another human being, which is vile". I don't have to emphasise how relevant that last point is today.

Byron's lines from *Don Juan*: "Christians have burnt each other, quite persuaded / That all the Apostles would have done as they did" introduce the essay on Christianity, which Grayling rightly calls "an oriental religion whose irruption into the classical world overwhelmed it and changed the course of its development". It is fruitless, he acknowledges, to speculate on how the histo-

ry of the West might have differed if Swinburne's "pale Galilean" had not "conquered"; but there's no harm in having a guess.

Plato's and Aristotle's academies in Athens would not have been suppressed in AD 529 on the grounds of their "pagan" teachings. Nor would there have been any Christians to put a stop to the Olympic Games in AD393 because

Colin McCall reviews *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life*, by A C Grayling. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £12.99

they disliked the athletes' nudity. "Gymnos, from which our 'gymnastics' comes, means naked".

Ah, but if Christianity had not been adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire, there would have been no glorious Annunciations and Crucifixions in Western art. True, but there wouldn't have been any Inquisition, religious wars or drowned witches and hostility to sex, which far outweigh the artistic contribution. And Grayling makes the important point that pagan myths are far more life-enhancing emblems than a "gloomy Deposition from the Cross". Indeed, I have often wondered how many lives must have been warped by the all-pervading image in Catholic homes of the bleeding Christ on the Cross.

Islam showed early tolerance towards other creeds but "splits and controversies followed", and that early tolerance "soon vanished, as did the early freedoms enjoyed by its women". As with Christianity, "the long-term legacy includes familiar horrors of intolerance, bigotry and persecution which characterise all organised religion".

Grayling relates the story of Urbain Grandier, a handsome, worldly priest of wit and intelligence who made the fatal mistake in 1618 of ridiculing a French government minister called Armand Jean du Plessis, the future Cardinal Richelieu. Twelve years later Grandier was accused by the nuns of the Ursuline convent in Loudun of conjuring demons into them. Following a visitation of the plague in 1630, there was a series of hysterical outbursts, and Grandier was accused of summoning the devil to possess the Mother Superior and most of the nuns. Grandier was first absolved by local bishops, but Richelieu reopened the demonism enquiry, which preposterously found the handsome priest guilty. Before being burned alive at the stake, Grandier was tortured in "boots", which crushed his feet and

lower limbs. His fate was, in Grayling's words, that "of a man lost under the joint government of religious superstition and human malice – a natural and ancient partnership".

Malice will presumably always be with us, but what about religious superstition: does it any longer deserve a place in the intellectual economy of the world? The history of human knowledge shows that it does not, says Grayling. "Religion is the legacy of our cave-men ancestors", a remark picked up in *Private Eye*, which sees him working himself into "a tremendous lather about 'sin' and 'faith'". But what is "lather" to that satirical fortnightly might better be called justifiable abhorrence at the damage done to humanity by Christianity and the other religions of the world.

One field in which science has largely superseded "religious lunacy" is sex, which Christian moralising mostly equated with sin. "The Catholic Church taught that masturbation is worse than rape because at least the latter might result in conception", writes Grayling. "The same moral premise is at work in the Catholic claim that contraception is bad for health (although, illogically, Catholics do not see celibacy as likewise unhealthy). Syphilis was regarded as a punishment for lust and, as sufferers had brought it on themselves, they should be shunned. To help its victims was to foil God's purpose in afflicting their bodies to save their souls. To help people avoid the disease with information or protective devices like condoms was to condone and encourage lust. So the Church opposed prevention and, when people contracted the disease, it opposed treatment." As it happened, he comments, "their opposition to treatment was almost a kindness, for what doctors offered sufferers was worse than the disease". He then instances religious attitudes towards AIDs today as almost exactly repeating the medieval response to sex-related disease. This dispiriting tale reminds us "that of all the diseases that afflict humankind, religious moralities are among the worst."

I mustn't, however, imply that *The Meaning of Things* is simply an assault on religion. My examples have been mainly taken from the "Foes and Fallacies" part of the book, while there are 23 essays listed under the heading "Virtues and Attributes" (including "Loyalty", "Love" and "Happiness") and 19 on "Amenities and Goods", beginning with "Reason" and "Education". But the treatment of those last two subjects inevitably involves consideration of their negatives: unreason in the form of religion in the first case; the prevailing attitude, which distorts education, in the second.

Whatever the topic, though, Dr Grayling combines wide learning with wise argument to fulfil the role he assigns to these essays – prompts to reflection.

IT'S back to normal service after God's spectacular and – unusually for him – successful demonstration of his power in the demolition of the World Trade Centre.

The husband of my wife's friend Cathy, has died of cancer. She, a member and graduate of Alpha, initially felt angry with the deity. That is a not unreasonable response. Her husband was a young man and leaves a young family. He was respected and admired in his profession and in the community. Prayers had been offered, but the Supreme Being had been unable or unwilling to respond.

I was consulted for an interpretation of these events. I rattled the bones of a rabbit I had killed at full moon at a place where three roads meet, gazed into the warm guts of a chicken I had just eviscerated and spake these words:

"There are three possible explanations of what has happened:

1 God is a sadist who enjoys inflicting suffering. Shakespeare instinctively got it right when he made Gloucester in King Lear say, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport."

2 God is the celestial equivalent of a middle-ranking local authority official. He's over-worked. His department is understaffed and under-resourced. He has currently two members off on the sick and his deputy is on maternity leave. Cathy's prayer had been placed in a queueing system since all the customer service saints were busy at the time. Unfortunately her husband died before a line became available. The Heavenly Host regret any inconvenience caused and hope Cathy will continue to use their services in future. She can expect to receive, in compensation, a voucher to the value of three Hail Marys.

3 God simply isn't there.

Faced with these options, Cathy did something quite incomprehensible. She rejected them all and decided she'd been wrong to blame God in the first place. Apparently, despite evidence to the contrary which is hardly insignificant, she rediscovered her faith that the Lord is kind and loving.

I found that chilling.

That many Muslims can define as "compassionate" a God who approves of crashing airliners into skyscrapers is monstrous.

That a relatively young widow can describe as "loving" a God who, despite her prayerful entreaties, allows a young husband and father to die painfully of cancer, is – what else?

They may interpret their religious obligations very differently, but, in their conception of the nature of God, Cathy and Osama bin Laden sit in the same pew.

does arrest attention, reason has to determine their utility if not their comprehensibility.

The whole gamut of feeling originates in physical sensation, response to light and darkness, heat and cold, touch and so on. At its other extremity is empathy – inward touching, aided by imagination, of another's similar solipsistic awareness, a sharing of thoughts commonly described as telepathy. Such experiences frequently spawn wild fancies and theories, whose incongruity with laws of physics are given scant attention by those determined

Intuition (continued from p11)

to have faith in them. Justification of such faith is expressed as leaping beyond where reason takes us. But in fact these people are leaping away from reason. Emotion has taken over.

The heart, as the emotive aspect of our being is traditionally described (the corporeal pump was believed in ancient times to be the seat of the emotions), does not have reasons of its own. Emotion has in itself no rational content

whatever. Reason must be brought to bear.

• Charles Ward is the author of the recently-published paperback *A Disbeliever's Bible*, in which ethical and religious themes in the Old Testament are examined from a humanist perspective. *A Disbeliever's Bible* is obtainable directly from the author at Primrose Cottage, 16 Clay Lane, Wendover, Bucks HP22 6NS (price £7.50 inclusive of packing and postage). Please make cheques payable to Charles Ward.

points of view

Three-cornered fight

IN HIS excellent article in the October issue Jack Hastie seems to attribute purely nationalistic motives to Slobodan Milosevic. Surely much of the ferocity and barbarism displayed in the dismemberment of former Yugoslavia had a religionist basis. The conflict was a nasty three-cornered fight between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Moslem Bosnians and Kosovans.

MR D M BENNETT
New Malden

The issue of race

SOME readers may be interested to follow up Connaire Kensit's thoughtful and well-informed letter (*Freethinker*, October) by reading *The Race Gallery* by Marek Kohn (Jonathan Cape 1995). This book looks in some detail at the history of the idea of "race" and of "racial difference". It traces the history of "racial science" and tries to provide some wider historical contexts for these ideas. It also

investigates some of the consequences of belief in the idea of race, and some of the complications and paradoxes inherent in the idea. It looks too at how ideas of race affect political debate and action, using examples drawn from very recent history. It does not simplify, or pretend that there are easy answers. Perhaps most importantly it seeks to widen and open up debate, rather than to shut it down. Five star freethinker material, on that basis alone!

On another matter entirely, I would appreciate some help from readers. Two vile and preposterous faiths are presently in open conflict. Powerful political adherents of each believe in their particular brand of nonsense with a seemingly equal degree of pop-eyed assent, and form a kind of unholy trinity – Bush, Blair and Bin Laden. Despite the imbecility of their theologies (or possibly because of it), the moral lead they give is clearly not insignificant. Thus their followers, neighing and braying, seem happy to accept the kind of primitive god-sanctioned justice that is presently being meted out, content that each side should ape and out-ape the other in its betrayal of the

hard-won norms of civilised behaviour.

My problem is this: how do I, if I wish to follow the example of these magnificent leaders, incorporate into my own daily life their profound and wonderful teachings? What are the individual implications of my possessing that sense of outrage which entitles me legitimately to ignore the rules of civilised behaviour in pursuit of justice? Am I likely to get into trouble?

Or will I, like them, be entitled to a mystical exemption of some kind? And what kind of trinkets should I offer those who might be accidentally (collaterally?) hurt as a consequence of my actions? Would glass beads be adequate, or do readers think that tin-ware or enamelled goods might be more acceptable?

All suggestions would be gratefully received, with precisely the correct degree of religious humility.

NORMAN PRIDMORE
Sleaford, Lincs

(Continued on p14)

IT IS tragical as it is ironical that the United Nations World Conference Against Racism should have ended up in utter farce. This could have been avoided if at the outset the UN had given a broad definition of racism and working guidelines.

I think Fidel Castro put it beautifully: "Social injustice in any form is racism". Racism need not necessarily relate to race, nor to discrimination on the basis of colour, creed, ethnicity and nationality, it also encompasses denial of social justice and equality of opportunity.

Focusing on these lines, the Hindu caste system as practised in India surely falls under racism. Hinduism is Brahminism which is nothing but social fascism – a form of social apartheid based on a pecking order. The Dalits or the untouchables are at the bottom of this social ladder. They have no rights whatsoever, and are treated worse than animals. They can even be bought and sold like slaves. The life story of Poolan Devi, a Member of Parliament, who was assassinated recently, illustrates these facts.

Although the suttee system (burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands) and child marriage are legally banned, they are still practised in some parts of India and the Hindu fundamentalists want to revive them. Only recently some hundreds of children under the age of 10 were given in marriage in the state of Rajasthan. Women are treated like chattels and female children are being killed soon after birth. This is Hindu India, where so many examples of man's inhumanity to man can be seen.

I hope the UN Secretary General will take serious note of the inhuman practice of caste in India and highlight this issue at the next World Conference for the sake of these voiceless millions.

YAL N ALAGAN
London

Science

I FOLLOWED the recent debate about "science" in the *Freethinker* with mingled interest and dismay. We must all have suggested to a religionist that religion causes more wars than anything else, only to be told that people cause wars, and that those people who commit murder (etc) in the name of religion aren't "really" Christians, Moslems, or whatever. Now we have a debate of our own in which at least some people are suggesting that people who do wicked things in the name of science or using scientific means aren't "really" scientists. Hmmm.

The meaning of a word is its use, and the

word "science" has many legitimate meanings, including: a method of inquiry; an international community of scientists; and simply knowledge itself. We run into difficulty when we start an argument using one definition of the word, but claim that our conclusions apply to another definition.

For a meaningful discussion, great care has to be taken in using terms consistently. If (a) "science" is a systematic method of inquiry based on hypothesis and experiment; (b) "the scientific establishment" is the international community of scientists who conduct research and subject their work to peer review; and (c) the applied products of science are called "technology", then it becomes clear that: (a) "science" is morally neutral, or amoral; (b) "the scientific establishment", like any other collection of human beings, ought to be morally good, but is flawed, with some individuals being immoral; and (c) technology is morally neutral, but is put to a variety of uses, some morally good, others immoral.

Here we can draw an important distinction between science and religion.

It is often alleged that "science" is the new religion. Using the definitions I have set out above, it could be argued that the "religious establishment", like any other group of human beings, ought to be morally good, but is flawed, with some individuals being immoral. However, if "religion" is the equivalent of "science" in this analogy, the difference is that religion is seen by its supporters as inherently moral, but science is morally neutral, and the product of religion (dogma) is seen by its supporters as inherently moral, but the product of science (technology) is morally neutral.

Thus, religionists argue that the basis and the product of religion are inherently "good" whereas I would say that the basis and product of science are neither good nor bad. This view asserts that responsibility for whether something is put to moral use or immoral use rests with human beings. We have no one else to blame if we do wrong! In my view, some of the comments in Points of View, the *Freethinker*, September 2001, obscured this important point.

MIKE WILKINSON
Nottingham

AIDS dissident

AMONG all the names available to us – freethinker, secularist, rationalist, humanist, infidel, atheist, agnostic, etc – I consider myself to be, first and foremost, a freethinker: someone who is intransigently opposed to censorship in all forms, who believes that there should be no topic under the sun that is closed to critical

examination.

Therefore, I was dismayed to read Terry Sanderson's article, "Religion & AIDS – A Toxic Mix" (*Freethinker*, August), which uncritically parrots the propaganda of the AIDS Establishment. I agree that religion and public health are a toxic mix, but AIDS itself is a religion, or cult. The AIDS Cult and its dogmas have been protected by intense censorship, especially in the United States, the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic. At least in the UK, critiques of the AIDS myths have been provided by Neville Hodgkinson in the *Sunday Times*, and by Meditel Productions over Channel Four (The AIDS Catch [1990], AZT: Cause For Concern [1992], and AIDS in Africa [1993]).

There is hardly space here to provide a critique of AIDS orthodoxy. Suffice it to say that hardly a single assertion in the Sanderson article is true. There is no evidence to support the HIV-causes-AIDS hypothesis. Not only is "AIDS" not a sexually transmitted disease, but there is no evidence it is infectious at all. AIDS has never been defined rationally, and the definition has changed radically several times. Originally, those with an AIDS diagnosis were close to death; now one can obtain the diagnosis without even being sick.

For genuine freethinkers, I suggest the following AIDS criticism resources: for those with Internet access, there are dozens of "AIDS dissident" websites, of which the best and largest is:

<http://www.virusmyth.com/aids/>.

There are books by Peter Duesberg, Neville Hodgkinson, Joan Shenton, and myself. For a critique of AIDS irrationalism, I suggest the book I edited with Ian Young, *The AIDS Cult* (Asklepios 1997).

JOHN LAURITSEN
Provincetown, USA

The Israel debate

I HAVE been reading with interest the dialogue about Israel and Palestine in your summer issues.

In my opinion, the problem is that whereas religions claim to know the Truth, in fact we humans are emotional beings who love rationalising our emotions. History and even science are valid attempts to arrive at the Truth, but when desperately seeking the certainty and the safety of the real Truth we have to resort to religion.

To me, to Derek Wilkes and many others, the Jews having suffered 2000 years of persecution, of hatred and of unimaginable genocide, are entitled to a secure homeland in their ancestral country.



I believe that in our new global culture it should be possible to settle emotional conflicts, provided conflicting sides do not resort to having the Truth of religion on their side.

DAVID IBRY
London

IN WHAT was otherwise an excellent statement of the case by Mr Simmonds concerning Israel, there is a suggestion of subterfuge on the part of Mr Wilkes. Of course Mr Wilkes in that earlier letter had not mentioned God's promise to give the Holy Land to Abraham. He didn't have to. As Mr Blair has taken pains to remind us, we are all children of Abraham and it would be embarrassing in the current crisis to have litigation about the bits of the inheritance which Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Tammy have a right to. For, with John Ashcroft, the American Attorney-General, as counsel, there is no doubt they would be more successful than Hizbollah.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Human rights

IN THE wake of the events of September 11, I read with interest the words of Dr Prasenjiit Maiti (*Freethinker* October 2001) on Islam and the "Clash of Civilisations". I found myself, however, somewhat surprised by one of his points.

Dr Maiti denies that human rights are western constructs. If they are not western constructs then they must be constructs shared by other cultures or be universal objective facts about the world. Muslims habitually make the very claim that Dr. Maiti is eager to dismiss and the history of political thought shows that even the ancient Greeks did not possess a concept of liberty rooted in the individual but rather in the justness of the state (ie a similar conception to that shared by Islam). We must infer from this that, in Dr Maiti's view, human rights are "certainly not" constructs but rather objective facts. All I can say to this is that it is interesting to see a writer in the *Freethinker* expressing belief in metaphysical entities (albeit not of the bearded and wrathful variety) with such ease and vehemence.

Moral judgements are epistemologically speaking extremely tricky; there are no scientific experiments we can perform to check the veracity of our moral claims. Even if such claims are ultimately true, it is impossible to determine whether they conform to some objective set of moral rules. To my mind this is the root of tolerance ... we tolerate others as their guess as what is right is as good as ours is.

The Taliban and much of Islam clearly do not share our belief in democracy and human rights. To therefore criticise them for failing to obey such concepts is much like a Christian criticising an atheist for being a sinner ... they miss the point. We are free to make moral judgements as we wish but we should remember that we do not speak with divine or metaphysical authority, only from our own viewpoint and with the values imbued in us by our culture and upbringing.

JVM McCALMONT
London

Billy Graham wrong ... as usual

AFTER George W Bush called for a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, he attended a service at Washington National Cathedral.

At the service, Billy Graham, a longtime advisor to American Presidents, preached that "we've always needed God. ... God is sovereign, and he is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering. The Bible says God is not the author of evil ..."

If Billy Graham read his Bible better he would know that God told the Prophet Isaiah, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things". Isaiah 45 v. 7.

So much for the knowledge of this advisor to American Presidents.

ROY SAICH
Kenilworth

Islamic intolerance

FOLLOWING recent events, I am alarmed at the Prime Minister implying Islam is only "disliked" by those who have misunderstood it. On the contrary, it is Islam that has no intention of understanding or tolerating anyone else's beliefs.

I have visited many Muslim countries and areas and can assure the PM that it is a suppressive, rigid and intolerant force in every single place I have been - including the UK. Mr Blair seems bent on supporting religions regardless of whether or not they may cause offence in this country or real harm to women worldwide.

A rather alarming footnote to all Mr Blair's religious posturing is in the correspondence I have had with Downing Street. They refuse to reveal the PM's beliefs. (And you thought we lived in a democracy!)

I asked if he agreed that all citizens should enjoy equal rights for their tax pound regardless of race, religion or other beliefs.

I also enquired what his educational plans are for children from non-religious families.

Jan Taylor replied (14 September 2001): "Mr Blair's personal opinions do not dictate the Government's agenda. I appreciate that you want to hear his personal opinions and views, however he believes it is the Government's view that is relevant." How strange seems his reluctance to stand up for equality for all!

I replied, pointing out the absurdity of this reasoning. I asked if the PM had any part in choosing the cabinet or any other appointments, because this would obviously make his views most relevant.

I added: "Just how many atheists are in the cabinet and does the percentage reflect the general population?" No reply.

I have been referred to various departments who, you would think, could then offer the "Government's" view. No appropriate answers forthcoming. Can anyone tell me how to get some answers to my questions?

It seems religious fanaticism is alive and well and heading our Government.

DOROTHY LEWIS
Surrey

Primo Levi

I THANK Karl Heath for spotting the slip in my August "Down to Earth". Primo Levi spent ten months, not ten years, in Auschwitz. Fortunately this was quite incidental to the point I was making.

COLIN McCALL
Rickmansworth

**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: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, November 4, 4pm. Beatrice Clarke: *Barbara Bodichon, Artist, Social Reformer, Freethinker*, Sunday, December 2, 4pm, David Powell: *Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolution*.

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.

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.

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, December 14, 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, December 6, 8 pm. Alan Blood: *The Greeks Had a Name For It*.

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, November 13, 7.30pm. Helen John: *Peace Activism*.

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, November 29, Barry Duke, Editor of the *Freethinker: 120 Years of Freethought*.

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 Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693

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

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

Oxford Humanists: Information: Jean Woodman on 01865 760520.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, November 7, 8pm. Hilary Cave: *The Need for Secular Education*. Wednesday, December 5: Annual Dinner. Enquiries: 0114 2309754.

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, December 12, 7.30pm. Public Meeting.

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.

Ulster Humanist Association. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: (028) 9267 7264.

Please send your listings and events notices to:
Bill McIlroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove BN3 1RU