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Freethinker

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Mary Whitehouse dead



A nation mourns – see p3

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Bad things happen when Christian zealots
gain the whip hand – *centre pages*

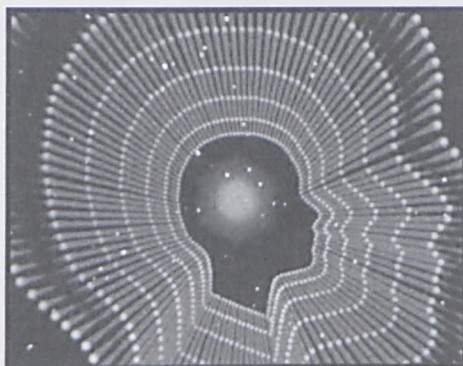
freethinking out loud: pamela bone

A JOKE going around on the internet pretends to seek advice on how we can live according to God's laws in today's world. It goes like this:

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. What do you think would be a fair price for her on today's market? I know I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15:19-24), but how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offence. I have a neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35.2 clearly states he should be put to death. Is it my duty to kill him?

Possibly not even the Helpers of God's Precious Infants, who stand outside abortion clinics praying for, offering counselling and otherwise harassing women who have already decided, with various degrees of regret or relief, to end their pregnancies, would want to live by these laws today.

The killing of a security guard outside the



Fertility Control Clinic in East Melbourne recently had nothing to do with this group, they said. They deplored it. Nor did it have anything to do with Right to Life, whose chairwoman, Margaret Tighe, said she abhorred this violence just as she did the violence that took place within the clinic. But really, what could you expect? "You will find these things occur because people get very stirred up because the unborn children are denied basic human rights," she said.

What people? Most people can tell the difference between human embryos and children. A woman who suffers a miscarriage may be grief-stricken, but no one believes it is the same grief she would feel if her five-year-old child died. A potential life does not have the same value or the same rights as a thinking, feeling actual human being.

The problem with the religious right is that it sees everything in terms of moral absolutes. Yes, nearly everyone has some reservations about abortion, especially late abortion. Yes, there is a line to be drawn at which abortion is no longer acceptable, but the laws of human beings are capable of deciding this, as they do all sorts of difficult issues.

Besides, at least some of the 80,000 or so abortions that are performed in Australia each year would not be necessary if Australian women had access to the morning-after pill, RU486, which a few religious politicians have ensured they don't have because, according to "God's laws", birth control is also a crime.

God's laws helped US President George W Bush decide to stop funds to overseas family-planning agencies that provide abortion advice, despite the fact that in some countries the population is still growing at a "phenomenal" rate, according to a recent UN report.

God's laws prevented a strong global commitment to reducing the numbers of people dying from AIDS, after Islamic countries and the Vatican banded together to prevent homosexuals and prostitutes from being mentioned among those most vulnerable. According to God's laws, homosexuality is a crime. So, of course, is prostitution, and you can be fairly sure prostitution is women's fault. (If they

don't blame women for homosexuality it's probably because, like Queen Victoria, the men who wrote "God's laws" didn't realise women did such things.)

The Board of Imams of Victoria has complained to the Federal Court about a segment on the ABC's *BackBerner* program that contained a fictitious Islamic song that went: "A for Allah, B for bomb, C for clitoridectomy ..." I agree it was in bad taste, but how much did it really distort fundamentalist Islam? Allah – they don't complain about that, surely. Bombs – Islam encompasses the idea of the *jihad*, or holy war, and Palestinian suicide bombers are taught they are religious martyrs. (And extremist Jews teach their children the land of Israel is theirs by God's law).

Clitoridectomy? Female circumcision is not a requirement of Islamic law, but unfortunately many Muslims think it is. Is the Sheikh Fehmi El-Imam (Melbourne's Chief Imam) who wants an apology and compensation from the ABC the same Sheikh Fehmi El-Imam who some years ago said to this reporter – most kindly – in relation to that subject: "You probably don't need it, but women in hot countries do"?

Throughout history, God's laws have dictated that the sexual transgressions of women be severely punished. The reason is that God's laws were made up a long time ago by men for one overriding purpose: so that men could know their children were their children (women should be grateful there is now DNA testing). The fact that women are among the staunchest upholders of these laws doesn't make this any less so.

"God's laws" are irrelevant to the way most men and women live their lives today. You can laugh at a group that calls itself the Helpers of God's Precious Infants (if they are serious, there are millions of infants orphaned by AIDS that they could help). You should be able to laugh at all kinds of religious extremism. Unfortunately, some of the consequences of it are far from funny.

• Pamela Bone is an associate editor of *The Age* in Melbourne, and this article is reprinted with permission.

SECULARISATION must be making some progress, say *Freethinker* readers Elizabeth and John Bonython who drew our attention to a "stations of the cross" remark made by a news reader on the ITV evening news on October 21. According to the newsreader, the stations of the cross "are where Christ stopped when he needed a break on the way to the crucifixion".

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Mary Whitehouse, 'the nation's No 1 detergent', dies aged 91

MARY Whitehouse, self-appointed guardian of the nation's morals who brought a successful private prosecution for blasphemy against *Gay News* in 1977, has died at the age of 91.

Whitehouse, who founded the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association in the 1960s to combat sex and violence on television, was dubbed "the nation's No 1 detergent" by the then *Freethinker* editor, Kit Mouat. In 1965 Mouat accused the morals campaigner of ignoring "the real obscenities" of our time: "Does Mrs Whitehouse, in her purple turban and pearls, care about the bereaved families in Vietnam, the homeless in our own country, or the Africans who are treated as second-class citizens in order that the greed, and power of white people shall be fulfilled?" (Whitehouse was an enthusiastic supporter of South Africa's apartheid regime.)

Later, after Whitehouse had brought her infamous blasphemy prosecution against *Gay News*, Barbara Smoker, then President of the National Secular Society, commented: "This,



Mary Whitehouse, who died on November 23

the first successful prosecution for blasphemy in 56 years, must make Britain the laughing stock of the civilised world."

On learning of Whitehouse's death, the Gay

and Lesbian Humanist Association issued a statement saying that many lesbian and gay activists who remember "the toothy Christian busybody's virulent homophobia" may say "good riddance", but "GALHA has good reason to be grateful to her".

"Following the opposition to her private prosecution of *Gay News*, Whitehouse frequently referred to a humanist/homosexual lobby, and, though none existed at that time, her action led directly to the formation of the Gay Humanist Group, now GALHA, which has become one of the longest established and flourishing national lesbian and gay campaigning organisations in the UK."

GALHA secretary George Broadhead added: "Whitehouse may be gone, but her Bible-based homophobia is as widespread and influential as ever.

"Christian pressure groups like the Evangelical Alliance and the Christian Institute still exercise considerable political and (through their allies in the media) public influence. All the bigotry that Mary Whitehouse stood for is still alive and flourishing."

Whitehouse's last TV appearance of any note was on ITV's *My Favourite Hymns* on September 10, 2000.

Reviewing the programme the following day, the *Evening Standard's* TV critic Victor Lewis-Smith said that the "tireless, tiresome campaigner against filth" was "simperingly" described by the programme's presenter, John Stapleton, as a person "imbued with good Christian moral values".

"But the sight of this sweet old lady enjoying her hymns shouldn't blind us to the tremendous damage she once caused to our national culture," said Lewis-Smith.

"For decades she did her damndest to stifle innovation and honesty on TV (from *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Up the Junction* to *Brookside* and *The Singing Detective*), as she stood, Cnut-like, trying to hold back what she saw as an oncoming tide of filth.

"But the tide kept coming in anyway, and a good job too, because it swept away the hypocrisy that once characterised British society, and Whitehouse is now seen by almost everyone (except Stapleton) for what she always was: a silly old Cnut."

'Islam is an evil and wicked religion' says top US evangelist

NEGATIVE impressions of Islam "are most often based on a lack of accurate and objective information", Nihad Awad, the Executive Director of the Council on America-Islamic Relations, has said in a letter to the Rev Franklin Graham.

According to a report in the *New York Times* (November 20), Mr Awad had written to the evangelist after studying a transcript of remarks made by the son of Billy Graham on NBC's *Nightly News* in October.

In the course of the broadcast Mr. Graham said Islam had attacked the United States on Sept. 11. He said that Muslims worshipped a different God than Christians and that he believed Islam to be "a very evil and wicked religion".

Mr Awad had written to Franklin Graham to ask the evangelist to meet with him and Muslim scholars. He said he wanted to give Mr. Graham "a chance to know Islam first-hand".

Mr. Graham has emerged as a major figure among evangelical Protestants, offering prayers at national events, including President Bush's inauguration, reported the *New York Times*.

"His criticism of Islam stands out when many public figures have emphasized inter-religious understanding, not least Mr. Bush, who has asked Americans not to blame the faith for the acts of September 11."

Mr Graham has responded with a statement saying that a group of which he is President, Samaritan's Purse, a Christian relief organisation, was providing "more relief and aid to Muslim people" than to anyone else. He also said his calling was as a Christian minister, proclaiming God, not analysing other faiths.

But he said, too, that he had expressed concerns about "the teachings of Islam regarding the treatment of women and the killing of non-Muslims, or 'infidels'".



in search of a humanist strategy

THERE has been a fair amount of debate in the *Freethinker* about the tactics and particularly the tone of its anti-religious activity. Perhaps we ought to be thinking harder about broad strategy and letting tactics and tone follow from that. We know we're against religion, but just what should we be trying to achieve?

It seems clear that the National Secular Society is the campaigning arm of humanism but it is not clear which, if any, of the humanist organisations regards itself as having the lead role in articulating strategy for the humanist movement. In effect the British Humanist Association did articulate strategy in its 1995-99 Management Plan. That plan was entitled, *Making Humanism Happen*, which was itself a strategic objective. The plan included five aims, one of which I would regard as strategic and representing some sort of a definition of *Making Humanism Happen*.

Aim 2 seeks the recognition of humanism as having equal status with religions in education, public ceremonial, the administration of justice, the provision of chaplaincy services, broadcasting etc., or by the removal of special provisions and privileges attaching to religion.

I can see why the drafting committee which produced the above thought it had set out a practical, two-pronged, gradualist approach in the course of which pressure could be applied through whichever prong seemed likely to be the more penetrative at any given time. But I don't think the strategy is calculated to do the best for either humanism or human society. And the problems of human society should be a starting point for humanists.

It is perhaps easier at the moment than it would have been a few months back to argue that there is a dire need to manage human affairs much better, globally, regionally and locally. But the need was there before Bin Laden struck. He has merely illuminated things. Suggestions as to how the need might be met are legion. Many of them contradict each other and many of them evoke passionate, though not necessarily reasoned, response. Few of the suggestions engage with the fact that humanity's problems arise very largely from humanity's misguided and often mischievous ways of tackling problems. Humanity needs to achieve a better social performance, and a better social performance is unlikely to be achieved unless and until the attitudes and reactions of most human beings reflect a clearer view of reality and a better choice of basis for moral values.

Humanity depends heavily on its institutions to tackle problems by formulating and

Religion is now a significant part of the human problem and a major barrier to human improvement says Jim Ross, of the Humanist Association of Scotland

trying to implement policies. But many of the policies chosen are distorted and rendered ineffectual, or even malign, because humanity's approach and preconceptions prevent an effective analysis of problems. Even where the analysis and consequent policy are sound, implementation is often frustrated by entrenched human attitudes. Sound analysis and sound effective policies all depend on sensible attitudes which face facts, whether or not palatable.

Whether humanity's acceptance of evidence and ways of tackling its problems can be significantly improved without genetic change is impossible to say, but there is no sign that genetic change, at least of this kind, is going to become achievable in the foreseeable future. The only avenue of improvement which can realistically be attempted now is that of cultural change. There are many institutions, including Governments, already calling for cultural change and, in some cases, attempting it. Unfortunately, almost without exception, these calls are directed not to constructive cultural change but to either cultural regression or cultural confusion.

The road to cultural regression lies in the attempt to revive religion. That attempt faces the formidable difficulty presented by modern scepticism, to which many who remain, or wish to remain, religious have felt obliged to yield much ground. The consequent revision of traditional religious doctrine, without support from traditional authority, has left many people with the feeling that they are quite entitled to invent a religious illusion to suit themselves. Hence the decline in church going, partly balanced by a growth of new evangelical sects and a good deal of woolly mysticism.

The notion that religion in any form is good and that "spirituality", whatever that may be, is of social benefit dies hard. However, whatever may have been the case in the past, religion, any religion, is now damaging to society. The essential problem humanity faces is the huge social

behavioural gap between its best and its worst. Hence the objective for humanity must be to find a culture which encourages humanity's best and, as far as possible, closes the door to its worst. Religion has never met this requirement and has no prospect of ever doing so.

There has never been better than dubious hearsay evidence for any religion ever practised. By its very insistence on faith, religion admits that it does not have an arguable case, and the religious are constantly driven to admit that they don't understand the God in whose name they claim to speak. By its disregard of, and indeed resolute resistance to, testable evidence, religion sanctifies unfounded assumptions and unreasoning beliefs. It can be almost anything its professed devotees choose to make of it. It is undeniable that some people have so interpreted and applied religion as to live commendable lives. It is equally undeniable that millions have behaved abominably while claiming to be acting in the name of God. At the same time their actions have been widely accepted.

A major cause of human conflict and destructiveness is the existence and persistence of prejudice. The only cure for prejudice and the only reliable means of resolving conflict is an insistence on evidence and an open-minded acceptance of facts. Religion is not the sole cause of prejudice and resistance to facts but, by glorifying faith in handed-down authority and "spirituality" as morally superior to fact-based reasoning, and by giving credibility to the notion of personal communication with God, it lends massive support to attitudes calculated to engender, reinforce and continue prejudices of all kinds. It also gives implicit moral support and disastrous leadership influence to many self-appointed fanatics whose clinical sanity may be doubted in at least some cases and whose dishonesty has been proven in others.

Religion is now a significant part of the human problem and a major barrier to human improvement. The road to human improvement would be much more open if religion were recognised as a weakness of those who cannot quite face the real known world, and one which, like many other not entirely creditable hankerings, was kept private. Morality can not only be founded on a non-religious base, it is far better founded on a realistic acceptance of facts than on a faith the foundations of which can never be tested.

I suggest that the essential strategy of the campaigning arm of Humanism is to get this message across. It can be expressed entirely in polite and general terms – but, make no mistake, it will attract fiercer responses than any amount of assaults on, or ridicule of religious specifics. But that would be a sign that we were beginning to make Humanism happen.

The Onion is a well-established American magazine, and its website is a mine of deliciously irreverent material.

Last month, the magazine carried a "news" item about Jesus' shock conversion to Islam.

Here is an extract from *The Onion* report:-

Jerusalem – In a surprise announcement with far-reaching theological implications, Jesus Christ the Nazarene, founder of Christianity and spiritual leader of nearly two billion people, revealed on Monday that He has converted to “the one true religion” of Islam.

The controversial announcement has sent shockwaves through religious circles around the globe.

“Allah is the name of the One and Only God,” Christ said. “Allah has 99 beautiful names: He is known as The Gracious, The Merciful, The Beneficent, The Creator, The All-Knowing, The All-Wise, The Lord of the Universe, The First, The Last, and many more. He has revealed Himself unto Me through the holy words of the blessed Qur’an, and I have put My trust and faith in Him.”

As part of His conversion, Christ said He has taken a new name, Isa Ibn Maryam al-Salaam Christ Shabazz.

Christ, 33, is urging Christians worldwide to renounce His former religion of Christianity and join Him in embracing the Muslim way of life.

“People of all nations, in the past, you have heard Me say that whosoever shall believe in Me shall not die, but have eternal life,” Christ said. “But now, I say unto you, forget I ever said that. There is only one holy revelation of Allah, the Qur’an, which was dictated to the Prophet Mohammed, Praise Be Unto Him, by the Archangel Jibreel in the 7th century after I died.”

The controversial retraction of two millennia of Christian doctrine has provoked strongly divided reaction. Millions of devout Christians, insisting that obedience to Christ's commands is the cornerstone of their faith, have heeded the call and converted to Islam. Millions, however, have decried the recalcitrant apostasy, breaking ties with Him who said, "I am God." His conversion "a heathen act" of blasphemy before Himself."

"Jesus, or Isa Shabazz, or whatever He's calling Himself these days, is the way, the truth and the light. It says so in the Bible," said devout Catholic Kathleen Langan of Cork, Ireland, kneeling toward Mecca for the first

Religious sites
abound on the
worldwide web –
but their messages
are often subverted
by mischievous
freethinkers. Lynette
van Dam dips into
two satirical sites

time. "My loyalty to Him is absolute. If He told me to be a Buddhist, I'd do it. All praise and thanks to Allah."

Ruth-Anne Girolamo, a Sunday school teacher in Stillwater, Oklahoma, disagreed. "I've been a Bible-believing Christian all my life, and nothing, not even a direct order from Christ Himself, is going to change that," Girolamo said. "If Christ is going to leave the fold and become a sinner, we'll just have to go on worshipping Him against His will."

The Roman Catholic Church is just as divided: approximately half the members of the Vatican's College of Cardinals have advocated embracing Islamic law, while the other half is calling for Christ's immediate excommunication and recommending the interim worship of Pope John Paul II until a suitable replacement deity can be found.

In perhaps the oddest development, the Jews For Jesus organization announced that it has split into three separate groups: Jews Still For Jesus, Jews For Allah, and Jews For Just Being Jews Again.

Explaining how he had come to Islam, Jesus said he had come across a mosque.

"I walked in nervously, unsure of why I was even there. After all, during the Crusades, My followers had slaughtered thousands of these people in My name, and I thought maybe they wouldn't accept Me," Christ said.

“But as I listened to the Imam deliver the weekly sermon, or *khutba*, I felt the power of Allah in My heart. For the first time, I knew I’d found true inner peace.”

"I now know it wasn't random chance that brought Me to that mosque," Christ continued. "It was the will of Allah."

When asked about His future plans, Christ said His next move will be to undertake the Hajj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca all

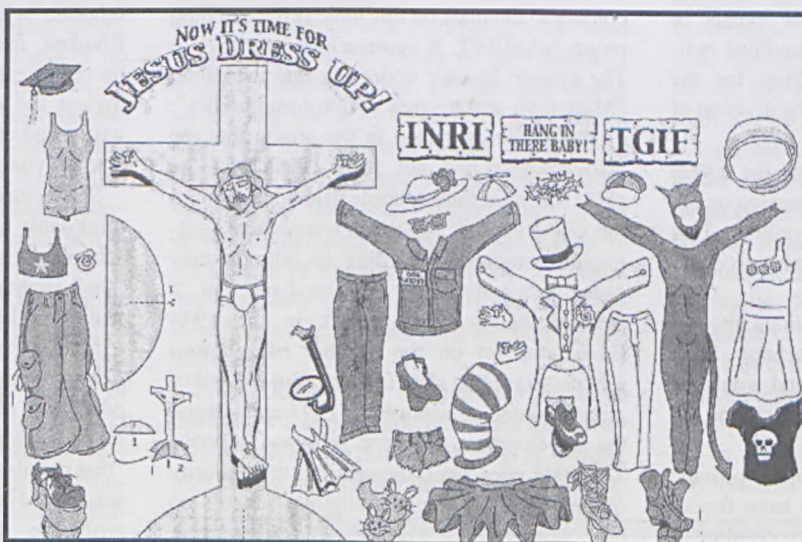
Muslims are required to make at least once in a lifetime. After that, Christ said He hopes to take a few months off to rest and meditate before starting the next phase of His ministry: traveling to churches around the world and imploring the Christian faithful to stop believing in Him.

“My new spiritual advisor, the Righteous Hassan Abdul al-Aziz, has explained to Me that I am not – nor was I ever – actually the Son of God, but merely one of many Prophets of the divine revelation which was to come after

Me," Christ said. "After all, there is only one God, so any belief in a triune god, or 'trinity,' is polytheistic and contradicts the word of Allah Himself."

“It turns out, worshipping Me isn’t the key to the Gates of Heaven, after all. Salvation can only be found in the Five Pillars of Shahada, Salat, Saum, Zakat and Hajj. I can’t believe how obvious it all seems to Me now.”

Neither the Father nor the Holy Ghost could be reached for comment.



ONE CAN happily waste a half-hour or so putting silly costumes on Jesus by entering www.jesUSDressup.com. The site invites players to “dress Jesus by dragging items to him with your mouse. They’ll snap into place. Then pick your favourite outfit, print it, cut it out and proudly display it for friends and family to admire and cherish.”

"This is precisely the kind of obscene material we've come to expect from the internet," an outraged C of E spokesman said in a newspaper interview.

and now for the good news

No, the good news is not about Jesus, but concerns events that will gladden the hearts of secularists everywhere. So, this column is devoted to recording some positive words which, back at the start of 2001, we could hardly have contemplated reading.

We start with quotes relating to education – an area in which the National Secular Society has been especially active.

Top honours go to the MP for Halifax, Alice Mahon and the Early Day Motion she tabled in October which bears over 60 MPs' signatures:-

"That this House opposes the increase in segregated faith schools as outlined in the Education White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success*, notes that the White Paper says that church and other faith schools must be inclusive but that schools with a particular religious ethos cannot by their very nature be inclusive, because there is discrimination through selection with those of a particular faith being favoured over children who are not of that faith or indeed are atheist, that religious schools choose their children rather than the other way around, that an increase in religious schools may lead to less integration of communities, causing division; and being taught in a religious school is not necessarily a sound basis for living in a multi-cultural society; and further notes that events in Northern Ireland and also in Bradford indicate that we should be working for the greater integration rather than the division of our schools."

We were also impressed by the Local Government Association's submission on the Education White Paper in November. This extract shows that they made some excellent points:-

"The LGA has deep reservations about a national drive to increase faith schools. Such a move is potentially divisive and would be another indication of central dictation of local education provision.

"Local authorities must be able to provide school places for parents who have fundamental objections to sending their children to a faith school and must ensure that in areas where the only school in reasonable travelling distance is a faith school, then an appro-

We are pleased to report that John Cryer has given notice of his intention to abolish the blasphemy law, as his father Bill Cryer had tried to do in the wake of the Satanic Verses disturbances. The Bill then fell because it ran out of Parliamentary time.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, looks back on some very heartening support in Parliament and the media for the secularist cause

priate education is provided."

Following this they laid out the conditions they would like to impose on any new faith schools. They clearly had particularly strong concerns about "mono-faith" schools. They advised against the type of schools controlled by the faiths and if there were to be privileged entry to those of that faith they suggested it should be limited to 25 per cent of the intake.

Another organisation not afraid to nail its colours to the mast on this topic is the teaching union NASUWT. It summarised its views in *The Career Teacher* under a banner headline: "More faith schools may divide communities".

The union suggested in the article that the "Government had not fully considered the plans for more faith schools [it] had laid out in the White Paper". The union warned that "segregating students according to religion may cause social division". It pointed out that "a delicate balance was struck in the 1944 Education Act on the number of religious schools to receive state funding. But the end of grant-maintained schools in 1997 encouraged the development of more religious schools. The 1944 consensus showed that the majority of people could accept religious schools so long as their existence did not lead to other problems developing elsewhere in society. The NASUWT urges [that] more faith schools could lead to serious social divisions. NASUWT emphasises that this would apply to all faiths."

While articles opposing faith schools are very welcome, there is a degree of inevitability about their content. The following letter printed in *Guardian Education*, however, took the argument forward:-

"However tolerant church schools are – and I know many excellent C of E and Catholic

ones – their *raison d'être* is to promote their doctrines. Having chosen to teach and have my children educated in English state schools for reasons other than religious ones, I nevertheless think that the French system of *Ecole Laïque* (secular schools) is the most satisfactory answer to the needs of a multicultural society. It is forbidden to teach religion or to have an act of worship in these schools, which teach over 80 per cent of all children aged 5-16. In order to allow children to have instruction in their own faith, parents can send them to churches of their choosing, or to none, on Wednesdays.

"Our society does not need to be instructed at school; it needs to be educated in the widest possible sense, to learn about and compare all religious and philosophical beliefs. This way we can hope for tolerance, not for the benevolent attitude of even the broadest-minded faith school towards those who do not share their beliefs."

Sharing top honours with Alice Mahon MP is our very own Polly Toynbee who has written a clutch of magnificent articles over the last year setting out the secular case on a number of topics. Here is a synopsis of her tirade against faith schools (from the *Guardian* of November 9):-

"Another Labour policy is about to perform a beautiful boomerang of a u-turn. Religious schools, whose 'ethos and success' David Blunkett famously yearned to bottle, have become a serious embarrassment." She catalogued the reasons why faith schools were wrong and unfair (familiar to *Freethinker* readers, but vital information for others).

She pointed out that even the rightwing think-tank Civitas had reported that church schools are not doing well. She concluded "their slightly better results barely reflect their mainly far better intake".

She reported the excellent *Times Educational Supplement* exposé of the C of E's education officer's claim about the performance of St Christopher's School, Accrington, "that deludes people about the value of church schools". He had compared its high standards with the low standards of the adjacent Moorhead High. The TES revealed however that the church school had "only 12 per cent special needs children while Moorhead had 69.8 per cent ...

"With great care an ordinary state school can educate girls well, with enough sensitivity to satisfy religious anxieties – better by far than segregating the faiths. There should now be a freeze on any new faith schools and a ban on any religious selection ...

"Given the heathen nature of Britain, religion still plays an astonishingly powerful part

in educational politics, from the prime minister to his (Christian) education policy adviser and his (Christian socialist movement) schools' minister, Stephen Timms. Nonetheless, given the weight of evidence against religious schools, it looks as if the Christian soldiers may not march much further onwards," Polly Toynbee concluded.

I was told by a senior Government official that ministers get cuttings of all such articles and this one – "Keep God out of Class" – should have made them sit up and take notice.

The Rt Hon Frank Dobson MP, whose constituency coincidentally includes the NSS's offices, has been one of our leading foot soldiers in the House of Commons in recent months. He asked some very awkward questions about the relative deprivation of pupils at faith schools compared with community schools.

Opportunities were taken to voice secular concerns during the Commons proceedings on 19 November during the passage of the worrying emergency measures against Incitement to Religious Hatred. We reproduce below some of Frank Dobson's words from this debate.

"I believe in equality before the law, so I am glad that the Home Secretary accepted our argument that the proposed change in the law should apply to people of any religious belief.

"The law should also protect people of no religious belief, because 40 to 45 per cent. of the population of this country—and I am one of them—subscribe to no religious belief. Atheists and agnostics are just as entitled as anyone else to protection against fanatics having a go at them. We should all be equal before the law.

"If we pass this measure, it will remove the last fig-leaf of legitimacy for the present law on blasphemy. As long ago as 1949, Lord Denning described it as a 'dead letter'. In 1967, Parliament repealed the Blasphemy Act of 1697 and in 1985 the Law Commission recommended – and no wonder – that the common law offence of blasphemy should be abolished. It has never been clearly defined. People may commit a crime without knowing that they are doing so. Despite that, there is strict liability, so if people commit a crime they may be guilty even if they never intended to cause offence in either sense of the word.

"The last time that the courts considered the matter in 1991, it was decided that not Christianity but only the Church of England was covered. That relied on the summing up of a judge in *Gathercole's* case at the York summer assizes in 1838. I am proud of my native city and its contribution to English history, but

that is ridiculous.

"There is no reason why any religion should require special protection over and above what the Bill intends to provide.

"I understand that the Archbishop of Canterbury and others have objected on the grounds that the change might lead to things being said that cause offence to people of deeply held religious beliefs. Deeply held religious beliefs are not a monopoly of the Church of England. Roman Catholics, Quakers, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs all have deeply held religious beliefs and have no protection at all from blasphemy. Although I am not a believer, I recognise their deeply held beliefs and I do not believe that the Church of England is in such a bad state that it needs some special measures. As my Right Hon. Friend knows from his experience as Secretary of State for Education and Employment, special measures are usually an indication of real trouble.

"I have tabled an amendment, which I understand that my Right Hon. Friend favours. It was drafted by the Law Commission and comprises just 84 words to amend a Bill of 114 closely printed pages. I hope that he will ignore his officials and, if the Archbishop of Canterbury has objected, that he will ignore him. The Church of England should learn to stand on its own feet.

"I am reminded of a glorious episode—and I mean that—in the history of the Church of England when Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley were being got at by Catholic theologians. It was said that Cranmer leant upon master Latimer in the argument, master Latimer leant upon master Ridley and master Ridley leant upon the singularity of his own wit. People in the Church of England should now lean upon the singularity of their own wit and look after themselves. They do not need the state to protect them."

Frank Dobson later made similar points on the BBC's *Today* programme when his adversary was Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford. The bishop maintained that the C of E would

not oppose the abolition of blasphemy provided that it was replaced by a workable measure protecting all religions. (An impossible combination?) But when he opined that the abolition should not be hurried and needed much more consideration, Mr Dobson retorted by asking him how long he needed, pointing out Lord Denning's condemnation over 60 years ago, and the Law Commission's in 1985.

The latest Education Bill is about to be presented to Parliament. I hope readers will write to their MP and any peers to point out the widespread hostility to faith schools (a recent *Observer* survey found 80 per cent opposition), and especially the opening of new ones. Personally, I suggest that, pragmatically, you concentrate on:-

1. Calling for no reduction to be made in the contribution required to be made by faith groups to the building costs of Voluntary Aided schools. (The Government is proposing a reduction from 15 per cent to 10 per cent.)

2. If there must be new faith schools they should be limited to Voluntary Controlled ones (those controlled by LEAs, rather than by the churches), as recommended by the Local Government Association.

3. In no new faith school should the places allocated on the basis of faith exceed 25 per cent, as also recommended by the Local Government Association.,

4. Similar restrictions to 3 above should be imposed, as a first step, on existing faith schools.

I am not departing from the NSS's policy of the eventual elimination of faith schools, as set out in the NSS's latest Annual Report (free on request to the editor), and in letters to ministers at the Department for Education and Skills. So profound is the extent of the influence of religion in the education system, however, that, realistically, we have to think in terms of a staged withdrawal. While I am pragmatic about a progressive loosening of the grip of religion in education, the ultimate aim remains complete withdrawal.

KEITH Porteous Wood described as "worrying" the emergency measures against Incitement to Religious Hatred. They were being unwisely rushed through Parliament in the latter part of November as part of an anti-terrorism package.

"There is a distinct danger that they could be an even greater threat to free speech than the blasphemy laws, and, with a seven-year jail term proposed, they could be even more oppressive," he said.

"Such fears have been expressed widely in the press and also by Labour back benchers and an unusual alliance of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. We fear that the measures will have reached the statute book by the time this issue of the *Freethinker* is published.

The *Freethinker* will cover this matter in more detail as soon as more information is available. Meanwhile readers can keep up to date with events by visiting the NSS's regularly updated new look website www.secularism.org.uk.

Abuse the kids and

Because not all Christians believe in corporal punishment, it cannot be considered an integral part of the Christian religion. This was the pronouncement by Mr Justice Elias, who, on November 15, rejected a challenge by Christian schools to re-introduce corporal punishment.

The Christian Fellowship School claimed that the ban on corporal punishment in schools prevented parents from expressing their faith. But Mr Justice Elias said that upholding the ban did not infringe parents' human rights, nor did it breach their rights to practise their religion.

The ruling came as a grave disappointment to Christian Fellowship School headmaster Philip Williamson, who said that physical discipline was necessary to ensure that children adhered to the moral code which played "an essential part in our Christian and Judiac ethic".

He added that a child who behaved badly or disobeyed its elders, despite being spoken to, deserved to be physically punished.

The judgement, he declared, "was the final nail in the coffin as far as this country being a Christian one is concerned".

However, the judgement was welcomed by Peter Smith, secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. "We do not see how violent punishment, even in the form of a smack, would reduce the amount of aggression in schools," he said.

This case got me thinking long and hard about the link between cruelty and Christianity, and I went delving into a file filled to the brim with cuttings detailing various instances of institutional (as distinct from individual) cases of cruelty.

One of the saddest and most horrifying was the obituary of Bill Brennan, which appeared in *The Age* newspaper, Melbourne, in January, 1999.

Bill Brennan, who died at the age of 63, worked in the leather trade – a trade the Australian-born orphan learned at an early age at a Christian Brothers' orphanage.

At about the age of 13, Brennan was performing chores in the orphanage's boot shop. A Christian Brother, now dead, was impressed with his labours and asked him to make a "strap" – a type of leather "cosh" used by the Brothers as a means of punishment and a symbol of authority.

Brennan, interviewed shortly before his death, said: "He just came into the shop one day and asked me – ordered would be more correct – to make a strap for him. He gave detailed instructions. It had to be 18 inches long, an inch-and-a-half wide, and made from the best hide.

"He also sought certain 'special' require-

ments. It had to have a 15-inch band-saw section with a lead pellet in it. The pellet was to be set in a recess neatly cut in the two inner layers, one half inch back from the rounded end. The whole strap was to be hand-sewn together with palm-rolled, heavily waxed 10-strand flax thread, tightly drawn so as not to project above its bed.

"I made the strap for him and left it in his room. He was in the shop the next day. He seemed pleased and treated it like a successful physics experiment, enthusing over flexibility and balance as he swished it through the air."

A short time later Brennan was approached by another brother, also seeking a strap with personalised embellishments.

"Though he opted for a shorter length, he specified four layers of leather with a weight at both ends. He then requested two band-saw sections, each of which had to be set beneath the two outside layers."

Brennan was then asked if he would make straps for brothers in other institutions and in schools in Victoria and New South Wales. "I had little choice but to say yes," he recalled.

Asked not to tell the other boys about his new

**'Youngsters
were made to
stand chest-deep
in manure. One
boy was smeared
from head to toe
in cow shit'**

duties, Brennan found the work "challenging". But, he observed, "I tried not to think of the real purpose of the things I was making."

Many years later he recalled his anguish when he saw one of the straps he made being used on a boy called Kevin, who was his friend. "His only crime was that he used to wet his bed."

Over the next few months Brennan had the misfortune to see his straps used against more of his close friends. There were rumours that one brother hardened his by keeping it in a tray

**A group of Christian schools in t
attempt to bring back corpora
rejected a legal challenge by the C
Liverpool – representing 40 small
did not accept that the schools' c
mandate" to smack children. Th
editor Barry Duke to take a clo
Christianity and**

of water overnight.

Was Brennan ever hit by his own straps? "No, I was never hit by the straps I made, though I was hit by others. They used to punch me instead."

Over the next two years he made "about 20 straps – I think eight of them were rejected".

In 1992, Bill Brennan became an early member of the victims' organisation VOICES and in 1993 he participated in a class action lawsuit against the Christian Brothers, but declined, "on a matter of principle", to take the out-of-court settlement accepted, in 1996, by other former inmates.

About that time he discovered he had inoperable cancer.

Bill Brennan's experiences took place many years ago, but it would be a grave mistake to believe that some educational institutions operated by religious organisations are any less cruel today than they were in the past.

To demonstrate this I turn to a report in the *Washington Post* of June 21 this year concerning church-run youth homes in Texas.

While he was Governor of Texas, George W Bush – already hooked on the idea of "faith-based initiatives" – introduced a scheme to exempt youth homes from state inspections, thereby freeing them from "unnecessary legislative, regulatory and other bureaucratic barriers that impede effective faith-based and other community efforts to solve social problems".

Instead, Bush devised a plan to allow independent religious groups to accredit each other's homes and conduct periodic inspections. Only eight juvenile homes signed up for the Texas plan. The others clearly sensed that the removal of state inspections might cause problems.

They were right. Allegations of abuse at two of the eight homes freed from inspection sur-

and make 'em cry!

real life

in the UK last month failed in its corporal punishment. The judge, who the Christian Fellowship School in small independent schools – said he ls' claim that they had a "biblical". The case prompted *Freethinker* a closer look at the link between and child cruelty.

He was arrested almost immediately, and the state was called in to investigate charges of abuse committed by caretakers. On June 6, one of those caretakers was convicted by a Corpus Christi jury of unlawful restraint against a teenager in the home.

"I think there's a lesson here for the nation," said Darla Morgan, spokeswoman for state Senator Carlos Truan, a Democrat who opposed the law. "As soon as the regulation stopped, people were hurt."

The Texas experiment was supported mainly by churches from the more independent, evangelical strain of Christianity, part of a long American Protestant tradition that respects Jesus as its sole authority and rejects government oversight.

Caretakers associated with these churches complained that state inspectors were suspicious of their methods of disciplining wayward youth, which included intense evangelising and occasional corporal punishment.

The law's opponents warned that allowing religious groups to regulate each other would create a mutually affirming atmosphere, in which people of a similar mind-set would be reluctant to report abuse.

Last April, Texas police arrested four men at the Roloff Homes, a group of five juvenile and young adult shelters, which had moved to Montana to avoid state oversight. But the Rev Wiley Cameron Sr, president of Roloff Homes, lobbied strongly for Bush's bill so they could return to Corpus Christi.

When it was passed, he became the first to apply for exemption from inspection.

Within a few months of Roloff's approval in 1998, a young girl complained she was beaten and tied to a bed. State inspectors stepped in and confirmed the allegation. They then banned Faye Cameron, supervisor for Rebekah Home for Girls, and Cameron's wife from ever working or being present at any juvenile home in

Texas. Two years later, two teenagers at another Roloff home complained they were tethered together and made to dig in a sewage pit through the night. One ended up in a hospital, his feet swollen with bruises and insect bites.

Police arrested Alan Lee Smith, who was in charge that night, and four other men. Smith was convicted on June 6 of a misdemeanor charge in a trial that centered on the nature of Christian discipline. "The pit was important," Smith said under cross-examination. "I just wanted to make it as difficult as I could for them to see if they were willing to stay."

"I don't really think the nation wants Roloff Homes all over the country," said Ashley McIlvan of Texas Freedom Network, a group that monitors the religious right.

Neither, I hope, would Americans want the sort of school operated by Charles Sharpe, a long-time political ally of America's Attorney-General, John Ashcroft, who is a Christian fundamentalist and an ardent supporter of George Bush's "faith-based initiative".

Sharpe, an insurance mogul, operates Heartland Christian Academy in Missouri – a non-denominational school that prescribes paddles and prayer for troubled youths.

This summer five of the academy's staff members were arrested for placing 11 youngsters in manure pits at Sharpe's dairy farm which borders the school.

Concerned farm workers called a child abuse hotline, reporting that the pits often include bacteria-filled afterbirth from calving, and that youngsters were made to stand chest-deep in manure. One boy was smeared from head to toe in cow shit, they said.

When invited by the *New York Times* to explain this practise, Sharpe said he had halted the manure pit punishments six weeks before the arrest of his staff members. He added: "I always thought that doing good, you wouldn't offend people."

A common theme among the most conservative Evangelical Christian sects is that it is important to start the discipline of children at an early age. A leading fundamentalist Christian leader, James Dobson of Focus on the Family, recommends spanking children from the age of 18 months. Some believe that corporal punishment is the only effective method to be used. Discipline and spanking are often closely linked; the terms are often used interchangeably. Non-violent parenting techniques are rarely emphasised.

Christians often promote the belief that, without spanking and hitting, children will grow up completely undisciplined.

One evangelical source points out that a child who is forced to accept punishment from her/his parents will be more likely to accept punishment and chastisement from God as an adult.

As the *Freethinker* was going to press, American immigration officials were pondering the problem of what to do with a group of fundamentalist Christians who had crossed the border earlier this year from Canada.

The group has asked to be granted asylum on the basis of their desire to break Canadian child-abuse laws.

More than a hundred members of the conservative Church of God congregation from Aylmer, Ontario, moved across the Canadian border to Ohio and Indiana after child welfare workers in Ontario took temporary custody of seven children because of allegations that the children were being physically abused. The group claims that the Canadian government is persecuting them by attempting to prevent the corporal punishment of their children with switches and paddles. The Aylmer group comprises mainly German-speaking Mennonites from Mexico. It is their belief that the Bible requires that when they spank their children, they must strike them with an object, typically a wooden stick or a leather belt. They believe that they are forbidden to spank their children with their hand, because the hand is considered an instrument of love, guidance and comfort.

United States law makes it clear that asylum can be given only after a credible fear of the threat of torture or other serious persecution upon return to the country of origin is proven.

In an article posted on his website (www.sparethechild.com), American anti-corporal punishment campaigner Jonathon Cook says: "The irony of the case of the Aylmer fundamentalists is that the self-described refugees are seeking asylum in order to protect their ability to torture and persecute their own children with impunity!"

"Are the terms 'torture' and 'persecution' too strong to describe the corporal punishment meted out by the Aylmer fundamentalists to their children? Not at all. The definition of torture is the use of pain for the purpose of coercion or punishment."

"The Aylmer fundamentalists complain about unfair treatment at the hands of Canadian authorities in order to justify their flight across an international border. Yet, when the fundamentalists attempt to coerce their own children through punishments

(Continued on page 13)

That peaceful feeling

SO Archbishop John Aloysius Ward of Cardiff has had to go. He was too much of an embarrassment to the Roman Catholic Church, and the Pope gave him his marching orders. Ward didn't like it. He had been "shocked and deeply hurt", he said, "by those sections of the media and members of the Catholic Church who did their utmost to attack me ... they were and are poor servants of justice and truth" (*Guardian*, October 27).

But, as Margaret Kennedy of Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors (Macsas) reminded readers on November 1, some of those who "attacked" Ward were victims of the priest paedophiles he supported.

Ms Kennedy called for an independent public inquiry into what happened at Cardiff and how the Archbishop could allow the ministry of not one, but two paedophile priests, both later imprisoned.

It is unlikely her request will be granted. Similar requests were ignored for inquiries in Birmingham (Bishop Curve de Murville and paedophile priests Eric Taylor and Sam Penny) and in Westminster where, of course, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor admitted that, in his previous diocese of Brighton, he had moved a priest who was the subject of complaints during the 1980s. The Cardinal had appointed him a chaplain at Gatwick, where the man later committed sexual offences for which he was jailed.

Archbishop Ward insisted he had not been forced to resign but had offered his resignation to the Pope and "immediately felt at peace". So that's all right then.

Darwin among the philosophers

PLATO'S *Republic*, rather surprisingly these days, topped the list of "Important Tracts on the Human Condition" in a recent survey of more than 1,000 philosophers, academics and students by the *Philosophers' Magazine*. More surprisingly for some, including Ted Honderich, editor of the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Darwin's *Origin of Species* came third. "Something has gone badly wrong", Honderich said. "Darwin was a splendid fellow ... but it is always a mistake when scientists turn their minds to something which philosophers should claim as their natural right. I blame philosophers for vacating the ground to people who have no sense of logic."

Honderich also thought it "monstrous" that Wittgenstein should come before Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and

Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. It showed that "we live in a culturally degraded society".

There is, however, quite a bit about Darwin and Darwinism in Honderich's *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, where we read that "Evolution raises questions of considerable philosophical interest and much controversy" and it is acknowledged that "credit ... is due to the English naturalist Charles Darwin".

Fear of the female touch

WOMEN clergy have condemned C of E discrimination and prejudice against them nine years after the vote in favour of female ordination. A fifth of the ordained clergy are now women, but they are often treated abominably by their male colleagues. Primitive attitudes persist in the ministry, and some women are accused to their faces of being witches, while some male clergy decline to be touched by female priests during ordination, alleging them to be tainted (*Guardian*, October 25).

John Broadhurst, Bishop of Fulham, has said that "proper women would not think of becoming priests". Can the same adjective be applied to men?

Spiritual concerns

PASTOR Pascal Orome told the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, the child-abuse victim, that she was possessed of evil spirits and needed prayer, not medical attention. When Victoria's great-aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao took the child to a service at the Mission Ensemble Pour Christ in the Borough, south-east London, in August 1999, Mr Orome prayed for her deliverance from "witchcraft or a wicked spirit". He noticed scars on Victoria's face and hands but assumed they were from injuries received while playing. He didn't recommend a visit to the doctor because "as a spiritual man, my concern is the spiritual part".

As we all know, Kouao and her lover, Carl Manning were jailed for life for murdering Victoria after torturing her for months. There was no wicked spirit involved, but two sadistic humans.

A tall order

BRITISH Muslims are hard to please. To whom can the media go when it wants a definitive Islamic view on a current issue? The BBC was taken to task by Faisal Bodi, editor of ummahnews.com, writing in the *Guardian* on October 22, for approaching the Muslim Council of Britain. This apparently gave "the impression, as did the Muslim Parliament during the Rushdie affair, that it legitimately

speaks for British Muslims".

Nothing could be further from the truth, said Bodi. He would like to see "an accurate reflection of the real breadth and depth of [Muslim] opinion". But that seems a tall order. I can't see it being any easier than accurately reflecting the breadth and depth of Christian opinion, and who would you approach for that?

R J Hollingdale

R J HOLLINGDALE, who died on September 20, aged 70, was one of the two men responsible for rehabilitating Nietzsche for English readers; the other was Walter Kaufmann, an associate professor of philosophy at Princeton University, who published *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* in 1960. Hollingdale's own *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy* came five years later.

He collaborated with Kaufmann on a number of translations and was solely responsible for several more, including *Beyond Good and Evil*, voted ninth in the *Philosophers' Magazine* poll (see above). Hollingdale was not an academic but a journalist on the *Guardian*, who paid for private German lessons after national service.

Needless to say, both men were atheists but, as Hollingdale remarked in his study of Thomas Mann, "the radical and universal consciousness of the death of God is still ahead of us. Perhaps we shall have to colonise the stars before it is finally borne in upon us that God is not out there".

Sectarian hatred

IT'S not only in Northern Ireland that the legacy of sectarian divisions is perpetuated by denominational schooling. The *Observer* reported (on September 30) the words of a Glaswegian boy who attends a Roman Catholic school close to a Protestant one. "We call them Proddy dogs and they call us Fenians, and we fight because we hate them and they hate us", he said. "Last winter they put glass in their snowballs."

Let's hope they confine their future antagonism to Rangers-Celtic derbies or, preferably, grow out of it.

The phoney sage

SO Prince Charles' guru and Margaret Thatcher's confidant, Sir Laurens van der Post, has been exposed for the liar and phoney that he was, in J D F Jones' biography, *Storyteller* (John Murray). Whether those two devotees will read the book is doubtful. Such people don't like having their illusions shattered.

STOP the Christmas band wagon, I want to get off. Already, the shelves in Tesco are groaning under the weight of festive biscuit selections. Even the pet food section has been infiltrated with gaudily packaged, overpriced gunk in the shape of snowmen guaranteed to make the dog throw up.

Already the weekly food shop has become a hazardous affair – Supermarket Sweep meets Santas Grotto. Siege mentality has taken hold. Forget the starving Afghans, concentrate on stockpiling mince pies, packets of dried dates and those ridiculous crackers. Perhaps some poor distant child has earned ten pence a week for manufacturing them so your kids can throw the tacky contents in the bin with a contemptuous shrug.

Ram your trolley into the old fart with a walking stick who is pondering the price of a loaf to go with the tin of spam. Let him figure out his measly pension elsewhere. He's in the way of the sundried tomato focaccia bread and panitone.

Children are alight with avarice and parents are beginning to creep inevitably into debt to procure the very latest computer game/designer trainers. Nationwide, usually sane people have begun to make anxious plans to appease estranged family members they haven't seen since last Boxing Day when Aunt Marge had too much sherry and tried to snog the neighbour's husband under the mistletoe and her dentures fell out.

I am saving some books and videos as an antidote to the saccharine nonsense which is bound to seep from the TV during most of December. How many more times can they show *It's A Wonderful Life*? My friends defend this as a classic but to me it's no different from the schmaltz dripping from *What Dreams May Come* – all angels and afterlife with a points system.

The sanctimonious will lament that the true meaning of the season has been lost but the direct correlation between belief in Father Christmas and faith in a virgin birth seems wasted on them. *Hello!*

At least the music is sublime. Even as an atheist I think the carols are delightful, except when a couple of lines of Jingle Bells are squawked through the letterbox by some entrepreneurial twelve year olds who glower menacingly under the streetlights in a thoroughly un-Dickensian manner. They approach carol singing with the same aggression as those youths who leap out at red traffic lights, chuck some suds on your car windscreen and demand a quid. I shall console myself with Berlioz' *Shepherd's Farewell*, buy the dog a proper bone and take the fuse out of the telly.

– Joanne Holland

Two freethinkers – Joanne Holland and Barry Thorpe – contemplate Christmas with a mixture of gloom and deep cynicism

AS the Great Winter Festival draws near again I find myself smothering a yawn – the sponsors have come up with the same theme as last year: some fat bloke in Coca-Cola livery with a swag bag and an odd interest in small children, all mixed up with an unmarried mother giving birth in the desert.

Come to think of it, it's been the same for a long time. And the fat bloke never gets to meet the unmarried mother. Is he paying her maintenance?

I also learn that the same firm has been monopolising the sponsorship of the Spring Festival as well, with another weird theme of chocolate eggs and the public torturing of a nearly naked man. Did they hire Stephen King as adviser?

On investigation I find that the company sponsoring the festivals is part of a public-private partnership. What's more, they have not held a review of their sponsorship business plan for many hundreds of years, showing a distressing disregard of their contractual duty to give value for money. It is obviously long past the time for the Culture and Heritage Secretary to refer the theming of these important national festivals to the Regulator of Festivals And Public Holidays (Off-faph).

I am sure the public would welcome a change of theme every year. For example, we could expect sponsorship proposals for the Winter and Spring Festivals from Richard Branson (model trains and balloons), Calvin Klein (fashion and fragrance) or Monsanto (giant beanstalks and garden makeovers).

Readers will no doubt forward their own suggestions to the Culture Secretary.

But I see that there may be a problem: several members of the cabinet are share-holders in the present franchise holder. I take it they have declared this on the Register of Members' Interests and will exclude themselves from discussions on the subject.

Reader's Generosity Boosts Freethinker Fund

THE FREETHINKER fund received an excellent boost of **£1,358.00** over the past few months, and we would like to thank the following for their generosity.

£85.00 A Aitken; **£75.00** Humanist Society of Scotland; **£50.00** M J Essex; **£35.00** K Moore, D N Towers; **£33.00** Musical Heathens; **£25.00** A Taylor, R S Parfitt, L Dubow, H Dowell, C Kensit; **£20.00** C I Ward, L J Clarke, K S Clair, P T Beeton, R Watkins; **£15.00** B J Forbes, P Proctor, C Baker, J J Penn, F N Fish, K Baldry, R Hutton, K D Corrie, S L Gille, D Tall, D Elvin, D M Bennett, N Boyd, D N Whyte, A Glaiser, E Haslam, H Millard, R Deacon; **£12.00** A Varlet, J B Kaniewski, J E Dyke; **£10.00** I Kirkland, S J Belfield, P Robbins, S Campbell, M Fox, G Francis, V Lelliott, E Durbridge, P Cox, C A Shives, M Pickover, J G Wilson, B McCullough, D T McIntyre, J Bassett, G A Kirby, K MacLeod, G Chambers, R J Giles, M Crewe, J G Hunt, T Risk, L Shurmer, E Wakefield, H Hinchcliffe, N J Potter, B Thorpe, D McKeegan, R Baker; **£5.00** R M Howells, R Bell, T E Franks, I Mathieson, L Glyn, B E Hall, T P Milton, T D Tyson, D Munnings, S Williams, J McCalmont, N Collins, A J Ringer, J Dodds, I Murdoch, C F Jacot, M L Lake, P Edmondson, N Green, C S A Malet, K T Langford, B C Whiting, R W Vickers, A Harvey, R Webb, J E Wilson, B Clarke, E W Penry, C F Ablethorpe, P J Howell, A Newton, T Wyatt, G Jones, S Rowe, G Tuck, B Able, C Rubenstein, M Berg, E Carson, E Wakefield, J Murray, E Radcliffe, K Byrom, V Martin; **£2.00** F R Evans, C F Payne.

These donations were received between July 24 and November 21.

SOME people judge a book by its cover; with an up-to-date comprehensive reference guide such as this claims to be, it might be better to judge it by its index. And indeed we find there a spiritual Disneyland, a treasure-trove of information on religious groupings and individuals, mainstream and far-out, past and very much present: from the Catholics to the Scientologists, from General Booth to Billy Graham, from Sufism to Swedenborg, from the Druid Forum to the Nation of Islam, from Yogic Flying to the Dawn Horse Communion (don't ask!).

How does one approach the task of guiding the general reader through such a vast and varied collection? David Barrett sets out his stance from the start: "This book treats no theological position as more 'true' or 'valid' than any other", he declares. In describing a particular cult or sect's beliefs and practices his approach is one of strict objectivity: "This is what these people believe and do, as described by themselves and observed by others". Even if many of the beliefs described seem hard to credit, such as Joseph Smith's revelation of the Book of Mormon, Barrett points out that many intelligent and sensible people do believe in these things ... in this book, both the beliefs and the believers are treated with respect". On the whole, this balanced approach works, the facts of the history, doctrines and personalities of each sect are set out, leaving the reader to form his or her own judgment.

The first section of the work offers a detailed study of the nature of contemporary religious cults and sects, their doctrines, their recruitment activities, their charismatic leaders, their secrecy, their control over the minds – and often the money – of their converts, and many other aspects of their often controversial behaviour. Where do cults originate? How are they funded? How hard is it to quit a cult? Can cult-watching groups help? These are just some of the questions the author tackles, and even with his fair-minded approach, some cults are exposed as at least dangerously deluded, or motivated by sexual or financial drives, or even possessed by a collective death-wish, as with the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate sect in San Francisco.

There follows a brief survey of the history and current state of the principal world religions, leading into a much more detailed treatment of the major disputes and schisms in Christianity over 2,000 years. Barrett concentrates on the positive explosion of break-away movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, many of which, like the Nonconformists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have survived to the present day, in spite of bitter disputes and upheavals in their

John Hughes reviews *The New Believers – Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions* by David V Barrett (Cassell 2000, pp 544)

own ranks over the years. There is a wealth of fascinating and often unedifying detail here, historical, theological and sociological, as well as much ammunition for those of us engaged in disputing the claims of each successive sect that it alone offers the one true path to salvation.

As for the ecumenical movement, doggedly trying to draw the various Christian denominations closer together against the menace of atheism, it is still making little headway in persuading the churches "to share the 99 per cent they have in common, rather than argue about the one per cent that separates them", as Barrett puts it. He then goes on to contradict himself by outlining some of the basic doctrinal differences keeping them apart – the day of the Sabbath, transubstantiation, apostolic succession, ritual, iconography among others – which clearly amount to far more than the "one per cent separating them" and which should keep the ecumenists busy for centuries to come, at the present rate of progress. The Devil, as they say, is in the detail.

By contrast, the author turns next to a loose grouping of latter-day Christian movements which have developed outside the mainstream churches and represent something of a success story, at least in terms of numbers of adherents. Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, the names may differ but the style is much the same: simple ritual and dogma based on unquestioning belief in the Bible, fervent and often noisy worship with much display of healing and prophetic "gifts of the Spirit", led by charismatic preachers (usually male).

Barrett then considers some similar break-away movements from the other "Religions of the Book". Islam is not the monolithic faith it seems; it suffered deep schism between Sunni and Shi'ite factions over the leadership question after the Prophet's death, and even today offshoots from mainstream Islam survive, none more successfully than the Baha'i faith, founded in 1863 when a Persian Muslim took the modest name of Baha'u'llah ("the Glory of God"), proclaimed himself as the Expected One and proceeded to write voluminous tracts relaying God's revelations to a growing band of followers. Today, Baha'i numbers some five million

devotees around the world, according to Barrett.

He sees the secret of the faith's success lying in keeping a low profile while offering itself doctrinally as all things to all men, thus, "for Muslims, Baha'u'llah could be seen as fulfilling the Koran's promise of the coming 'Day of God' and the 'Great Announcement' when God will come down to Earth".

Today, after several crises over succession to the leadership, Baha'i has a relatively democratic structure: no priests or bishops, no gurus, no ayatollahs.

There is much less to admire in another breakaway Muslim sect, the Nation of Islam. This black power movement had its complex origins in America's post-depression era, the most charismatic personalities in its colourful story being Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and, today, Louis Farrakhan. Put simply, their creed seems to be that the white races, especially the Jews, are the children of the Devil and the suppressors of the black races, who were the original inhabitants of the Earth and who will one day reclaim it by force.

The author reports next on some of the many exotic offshoots of Hinduism and Buddhism which have taken root in the West, such as Transcendental Meditation, which claims to bring one "in touch with your own inner self", or there is Eckankar, whose initiates "explore heavenly worlds through Soul Travel, in which they meet the Masters and learn from them". Or the Impersonal Enlightenment Fellowship; or the Movement of Inner Spiritual Awareness; or many other "vegetarian" options from the spiritual menu.

Finally, Barrett tackles what many would consider the real lunatic fringe end of the religious spectrum, the myriad neo-pagan/witchcraft/Druidic groups, many of which he sees as innocently concerned to keep alive the ancient polytheistic traditions of Goddess and Nature worship, magic and witchcraft. Naturally, such groups are violently opposed by fundamentalist Christians, especially those they see as dabbling in Satanic rituals. This section is something of a miscellany, covering such diverse movements as Theosophy, the Rosicrucians, Wicca and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as well as some "flying saucer" cults like the Aetherius Society or the Raelians. Barrett does well to keep a straight face in describing the history and practices of some of the further-out of these sects.

Copious notes, references, an index and a directory of useful addresses round out this authoritative guide to the bewildering range of alternative religions, cults and sects confronting the seeker after truth. But how can each of them offer the truth? The sceptical freethinker can only conclude that none of them does.

designed to inflict physical pain, they offer no opportunity for legal recourse, let alone escape. When adults are treated in such a manner, no one hesitates to condemn the violent act as a crime, or even a human rights abuse. However, when it comes to the treatment of children, the use of pain as a tool of coercion and punishment is described by many as a noble practice. The Aylmer fundamentalists can try to hide behind the euphemism of 'discipline' if they want, but their true motives are laid plain by their equation of basic child-abuse law with persecution.

"If the United States grants asylum to the Aylmer fundamentalists, it will turn international law on its head, providing protection for torturers from sovereign governments which seek to control illegal behaviour through reasonable means.

"How embarrassing that the US is regarded as a safe haven for people who wish to beat their own children without governmental interference. For the sake of the dignity of our nation and the safety of children within our own borders as well as abroad, the Aylmer fundamentalists must be promptly returned to Canada to deal with the humane child welfare laws there. Furthermore, to prevent another shameful display of our nation's disregard for the welfare of children, the legal tolerance for the physical abuse of children in the United States must come to an end. The corporal punishment of children is scientifically, legally, and ethically insupportable. It is high time that our nation recognizes that torture is torture, no matter what the relationship between the tor-

turer and the tortured."

Finally, a visit to the publication that gives the Aylmer fundamentalists, their Liverpool brethren, and other Christian sects their "mandate" to inflict cruelty on children: the Bible, in which corporal punishment is strongly recommended in Old Testament Scriptures. (It should be pointed out that the most often-quoted phrase used to justify corporal punishment – "spare the rod and spoil the child" – is often attributed to the Bible, but it was, in fact, first written in a poem by Samuel Butler in 1664.)

Most of the biblical quotations advocating corporal punishment of children appear in the book of Proverbs, which religious conservatives generally believe was assembled by King Solomon, circa 1000 BCE. He brought together a group of sayings which were already current in his time; some may have been his own thoughts, others may have been first written down centuries earlier. The passages which deal with spanking presumably reflect his own beliefs regarding his son Rehoboam.

The following quotations come from the King James Version of the Bible: -

Prov 13:24: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes (diligently)."

Prov 19:18: "Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying."

Prov 22:15: "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him."

Prov 23:13: "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die."

Prov 23:14: "Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell (Shoel)."

Prov 29:15: "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."

An additional verse from the New Testament is occasionally cited as justification for physical punishment of children: **Hebrews 12:6-7:** "...the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?"

The Bible itself records the negative effect that Solomon's parenting style had on his son Rehoboam. He became a widely-hated ruler after his father's death. At one point, he had to make a hasty retreat to Jerusalem to avoid being assassinated by his own people.

So it would appear that, at the root of Christian child cruelty is King Solomon, although this aspect of Solomon's personality seems to have escaped Robert Ingersoll, the well-known 19th-century freethinker, who, in 1891, had some pretty terrible things to say of the "wise" ruler:-

"To me it has always been a matter of amazement why civilized people, living in the century of Darwin and Humboldt, should quote as authority the words of Solomon, a murderer, an ingrate, an idolater, and a polygamist – a man so steeped and sodden in ignorance that he really believed he could be happy with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines."

points of view

Mixed reactions to FT cover

THE COVER of the November issue of *Freethinker* ("If Islam Ruled the World") is offensive, racist, and counter-productive to the aims of humanist, atheist and secular societies.

I am a male atheist since childhood, have a beard and sometimes wear funny hats. Veils are commonly sexual rather than religious devices, and many fashionable non-Islamic women have worn them. I've even seen a photo of Cherie Blair wearing one, before she began to believe in crystals and other forms of magic.

Page 9 ("Name that song") is worse. Whatever else he is, Osama bin Laden is surely no crackpot – well, less so than the Blair-Bush-Straw-Blunkett-Putin holy quintet.

And to equate Bin Laden with all Islam is a gross error of judgement. Would you put all Christian God-worriers – say, members of the

Society of Friends or Christian Aid – in the same ethical box with the fundamentalist bigoted warmongers and crusaders?

DR SIDNEY HOLT
Crickhowell

I MUCH enjoyed the photomontage on the cover of November's *Freethinker* which was amusing but, hopefully, not prophetic. A veiled Statue of Liberty, a bearded Tellytubbie and President Bush were all spot on ... but why a bearded Rowan Atkinson? Has he, unknown to me recently, done a Cat Stevens?

MARTIN KIRBY
Nottingham

Freethinker triviality

IF, as the late Dr Khalim Siddiqui would have it – for, after all, demographic trends favour his case – an autonomous Islamic government were set up around Huddersfield, there would

be two publications it should welcome, the *Guardian* and the *Freethinker*. The former is brim with a kitsch version of late 19th-century rationalism which would provide a little amusement to Muslims about town. The second, with its anecdotes of Muslim quirkiness, would be used by the mullahs for their Friday sermons before televised mock-executions and mock-stonings, especially of women.

You pull the hairs and twitch the feathers of the fattening beast, the pair of you!

It seems impossible for liberals to understand that Islam is business. It means business because it is business. So it doesn't matter what you or, occasionally, the *Guardian* – or *Independent* or *Observer* – produce to highlight Islamic indecencies, the Home Office Race Relations Unit, and BBC TV and radio will always be able to trump it

(Continued on p14)

with anecdotes of, say, a Sheffield Attercliffe Somali enraptured at his first sight of the pagan Kaba'ah in Mecca. They will always beat you at this game; they win. You don't even score a point. So, why don't you consider attacking Islam and the supporting British ruling class which ceaselessly improvises on the principle of divide and rule?

Muslims, as things stand, think you are funny. The latter, fixated on winning the thirty-something marginals where Muslim votes can swing it, ignore you.

I suggest you get smart while there's time. Islam, like pre-exilic Judaism, is primarily a political system. The nearest the West has been to anything like it is Nazism. Islam has to be taken apart and it is because you and other liberal publications refuse to do this that Dr Younis Shaikh will probably die like all the others whose names could take up the newsprint of all the week-end posh papers.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Evil will not redress injustice

WHY does the Muslim world always feel that their religion is under attack when we take steps to remove evil from the world? Regardless of whether a peoples' cause is right or wrong, evil will not redress any injustice being done.

There are ways of doing this without resorting to violence, and more people will be sympathetic to their cause. They should take a lesson from Mahatma Gandhi who rid his country of one of the most powerful empires in history and never even raised his voice.

If they cannot see that Bin Laden's methods are evil then there is no hope for them or the future of civilisation.

These people take it upon themselves to claim that they are carrying out God's work and have declared a *jihād* or Holy War, which to my mind is a contradiction in terms, as Islam is supposed to be a religion of peace which holds human life sacred.

What is a holy war anyway? Is it when people confront each other and bore the other side to death with prayer? Also, if both religions share the same god, which side is he going to take?

I think it is time for rational thinking people to put their views forward for a secular alternative to religion, which for thousands of years has failed to eliminate evil. If not, conflicts between religions are eventually going to destroy civilisation.

ALISTER RANKIN
Fife

These virgins aren't "ghostly"

SURELY, as Barbara Smoker suggests (*Points of View*, October 2001), the suicide bombers were motivated by posthumous rewards in Paradise, as promised in the Koran. However, hours are not "ghostly"; they are the all-too-bodily virgins awaiting the faithful, to whom they will be "married".

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Palestinians should offer friendship

YOUR correspondent, Dave Simmonds (*Points of View*, October) says the Palestinians have nothing left to give to resolve their conflict with the Israelis.

But they have. They can give something the Israelis want probably more than anything. In fact it is probably *all* they want, and in exchange they will give almost anything. It is their friendship.

And if they give that the Israelis, who are technologically advanced, will help them set up industries on the West Bank so they will become prosperous. The Israelis have universities among the best in the world. Palestinian youngsters will be welcome to attend them.

The Palestinians would surely find this a million times better than feeding their hatred based on imaginary grudges. It would be better than suicide bombers and killing and maiming children. Why not give it a trial?

DEREK WILKES
London

Mohammed and the Koran

I WAS much interested by a letter from Stewart Valdar in the March 2001 *Freethinker*, in which he says the Koran and Islam were produced some 200 years before the time of Mohammed. It is evident to an open-minded reader of the Koran that it is not the product of one man's inspiration, although Mohammed did probably collect a lot of religious ideas during his journeys.

Up to now I assumed that those around and after him, some of whom were clever and literate, produced it among themselves.

The official story is that Mohammed's "revelations" were told as they occurred to him, to "professional remembrancers" and then were written down by his followers on whatever scraps of material were around at the time – even shards of pottery.

"These were all preserved and later collected into this large book." The idea that much of it was in process before Mohammed's time had not occurred to me, but now has me excited. In

one English version of the Koran, the Penguin Classics version by N J Dawood, the introduction says that "impressed by Jewish and Christian monotheism, a number of theists, or spiritual fundamentalists, known as hanifs, had already rejected idolatry for an ascetic religion of their own" – but it does not say how far back they went.

I earnestly hope that Stewart Valder will be kind enough to provide the sources which he has found on this aspect.

JOHN LAWRENSEN
Leicester

Accurate descriptions are vital

I QUITE agree with Norman Pridmore's description (November *Points of View*) of Connaire Kensit's letter on race as "thoughtful and well-informed". Yet on turning the page, I found Yal N Alagan praising Fidel Castro for the nonsensical statement that "social injustice in any form is racism". So a white who is unjust to a white, is a racist? But Mr Alagan may have been misled by our British media's often sloppy terminology, as in TV news reports around that time saying that anti-Islam comments were "racism".

Especially where people's sufferings and freedoms are being discussed, it is essential to use accurate descriptions, as I discovered during years in apartheid South Africa. For apartheid itself was not just "apartness", but a "weasel-word" which in practice was copied directly from Hitler's race laws (compare them; I have). But they were cloaked in obfuscation. Example: the Race Classification law defining Coloured (mixed race) people went something like, "A person who is obviously non-white, but not obviously black or other non-white". Very scientific. As was the practical test: push a pencil into the hair at the side of the person's head. If it stays there (held by the tightly curled African hair) then he's black. If it falls out, he's probably Coloured. Or Indian. Or a white man with a sun-tan?

One lunatic result of this classing of people by their genes – real or alleged – occurred in the 1960s, when Pretoria's nut-cases, eyes on Japanese trade, classed Japanese as "honorary White" while Chinese stayed "non-white". Result: the white driver of a "whites-only" bus mistook a "white" Japanese consular official waiting at a Pretoria bus-stop for a "non-white" Chinese, and drove past.

Result: diplomatic incident. But an example of how racism marks out people for quite unique humiliation occurred also in the 1960s.

Interracial marriage (or sex) being forbidden under apartheid, an Indian man and a white woman, in love, had to get married elsewhere,



then exile themselves.

After they were married, but before becoming exiles, they were spotted in bed together by a snooper who informed the police, who hauled them out of bed, arrested and manacled them. At that point, a reporter from the *Rand Daily Mail* (as I recall) chanced upon the scene, to find a policeman photographing the married couple's bed. When asked why, the policemen replied "Because it's the custom in civilised countries to photograph the scene of the crime"; a married man making love to his wife.

But if it had been just a Muslim and a Christian in bed together? Racism is uniquely obscene. Especially in the hands of the boastfully holy.

JOHN CLARKE
Uxbridge

AIDS dissidents

HAVING taken the time to look at the AIDS dissident website recommended by John Lauritsen (*Freethinker*, November), I am left wondering if I am the only one struck by the similarity between AIDS deniers and creationists. Both groups are selective with data, sport a few highly-qualified individuals who do not represent mainstream opinion, redefine things to suit themselves and claim they are victims of a conspiracy to suppress their beliefs.

As space here is limited I suggest your readers check out some anti-AIDS-denial items such as:

www.skeptic.com/03.2.harris-aids.html or
www.aegis.org/topics/mdelaney.html for detailed refutations.

On entering the AIDS denial site I was hit by the astounding statement that, "People die because they are poisoned to death by toxic anti-viral drugs". Tell that to dying Africans who've never been near such a drug. For me, one of the most compelling proofs of the deadliness of HIV is the fact that it is precisely those drugs that have had such dramatic effects on the death-rates of AIDS patients taking them. The obituaries in some American gay newspapers have dwindled to a trickle and people have literally risen from their deathbeds and returned to work thanks to these medicines. If HIV does not cause AIDS then why on earth do drugs that specifically target the biochemistry of HIV work so well?

Finally, I have a challenge for Lauritsen and all other AIDS dissidents. Prove you have the courage of your convictions and inject yourselves with blood from an AIDS patient – all in the name of science, of course.

STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

Hitler was not a vegetarian

I WAS rather surprised to see repeated in your feature ("Dallying with the Departed", September) the old myth about Hitler being a vegetarian.

Whilst repeating this nonsense will no doubt please the meat industry and annoy vegetarians, I would have expected the editor of the *Freethinker* to know that although Hitler's doctor prescribed a vegetarian diet, and this fact was exploited by the Nazis for propaganda purposes, there is ample evidence that Hitler took no notice at all of his doctor's advice.

Perhaps you will consider putting the record straight.

RICHARD DANIELIAN
Ruislip

Increasing awareness of the FT

I HAVE read several articles recently about the 40th anniversary of that darling "naughty boy" of the press, *Private Eye*, and the usual sprinkling of assertions of press freedom in one context or another. Journalists and commentators croon lovingly over, and smile indulgently at its every cheeky wheeze, and irreverent quip or cartoon. They see the free availability of PE as a symbol of a free press and freedom of speech.

Yet writers and editors totally disregard our journal, which has just celebrated 120 years of continuous publication, and is to religion what *Private Eye* is to the political and media establishment. Also ignored is the wholly "reasonable" *New Humanist*. I suspect that most do not even know of these publications.

There has never been a greater need for attacks upon superstition in general and religion in particular, and I would urge all readers of the *Freethinker* to make a concerted effort to widen awareness of the FT by publicising it in any way they can. This can be done by sending letters with copies to anyone and everyone in any part of the media or elsewhere.

SUE LORD
Westerham

Science and religion

MIKE Wilkinson has made an interesting contribution to the "science debate" (*Points of View*, November). However, it seems to me that the important distinction between science and religion is not the convoluted moral one that he tries to present. It is simply that science develops a model of the universe that works, whereas religions are usually concerned with the belief in and worship of a

superhuman power.

The former is a process with a related working model, the latter is a belief system. The two ideas are thus of different categories and can only be compared if ever one strays into the other's territory. Science, by any definition, never does this and religions do so only when they attempt to explain the physical universe (but such trespassing is nowadays often avoided by treating ancient religious explanations as being allegorical). There is thus a category error in any comparison of, or attempt to find some equivalence between, religion and science.

Furthermore, Mr Wilkinson offers a definition of what he believes people may mean when they refer to "science", but fails to take the same precautions with his use of the word "moral" and its variations. Morals are surely about the goodness of human behaviour towards other human beings (and to other forms of sentient life). How then can one ascribe a moral value to anything but the acts that people do to each other? Therefore not only are science and religion of different categories, but generalising that either is morally this or that has no more meaning than saying that prayers are pink or equations happy.

IAN QUAYLE
Burwell

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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, January 6, 4.30 pm. Philip Carr-Gomm: *Why Do We Need Religion?*

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. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore 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, December 11, 7.30 pm. Granville Williams: *The Future of*

Mass Communication -Who Will Benefit?

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, December 20, 8 pm. Winter Solstice Party.

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: The Secretary on 01434 632936. The Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, December 20, 7.15 pm. Public meeting and discussion.

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, January 2, 8 pm. Frank Abel: *Review of the Year.*

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. Discussion: *Making Sense of the World*.

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. E-mail: brian@mcclinton.to website: www.ulsterhumanists.freesevers.com

Please send your listings and events notices to:
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Hove BN3 1RU