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Diane Pretty pictured with her husband Brian

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Pretty
challenges
the current
law on
assisted
suicide
under the
Human
Rights Act**

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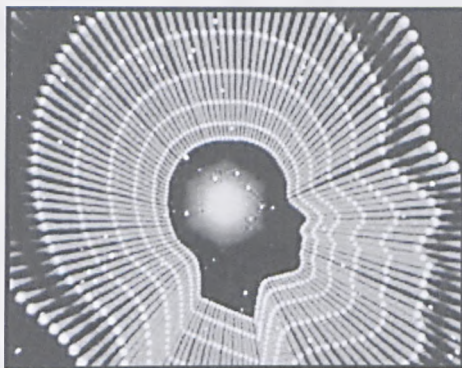
Here is a Muslim joke: Two businessmen seated on an airplane notice a Muslim man sitting in front of them. One of the men says to the other with a wink, "I was going to go to Africa until I found out that half the continent is Muslim so I don't want to go there".

The other says, "Well, how about Saudi Arabia then?" The first man replies "No way, that place is loaded with Muslims too."

The other man suggests a trip to the US, but his companion says "The Muslims have spread out over there as well. Every time I turn around there I bump into one".

Noticing that their words are having an effect on the Muslim – he is fidgeting and clearly becoming agitated – the men decide to up the ante. The fellow who began the baiting says "I really wanted to go to Pakistan but of course that place is crawling with Muslims too."

At this, the Muslim turns around in his seat and says sweetly: "Why don't you both go to hell? There are hardly any Muslims there!"



OK, not very funny – and even less so when one analyses the dodgy premise that hell is set aside mainly for us infidels. But hey, let's not be too picky. Humour is good and if it can exist within the otherwise grim-jawed, death-obsessed confines of a faith as unyieldingly dogmatic as Islam, it might one day flower into a much more powerful force, and people will come to realise that religion is *itself* a joke – albeit a very sick one.

I came upon the Muslim joke after an acrimonious encounter in an internet chat room shortly after the events of September 11. I am no fan of chat rooms, but entered this one in order to gauge British public opinion regarding military action in Afghanistan.

A young Muslim objected to a wisecrack I made about Islam. I had also stressed the point that all human beings were born atheists, and only became Jewish, Muslim or Catholic by dint of the indoctrination they later received. For some reason, this perfectly sensible statement enraged him, and I was bombarded with all manner of insults, and several death threats.

In a private e-mail message, the Muslim sent me a rather clever picture, made up of keyboard symbols and letters, of the twin towers in America being struck by two airliners, together with the message: "What a pity you weren't there, you atheist bastard".

This hysterical reaction made me think: "Do Muslims have a sense of humour?"

The only way to find out, I decided, was to check out the internet. Using that wonderful search tool, Copernic 2001, I typed in "Muslim jokes", and to my utter amazement discovered almost a dozen sites offering a variety of whimsical little quips – but none with any sexual content, which immediately ruled out the possibility of any being particularly funny.

But one did raise a smile. Omar was having trouble praying on time, so he enlisted the help of his good friend Nabil.

"Nabil, you are my friend. I am having trouble praying on time. I need you to call me every time it is time for prayer."

"OK," Nabil said, and both men walked to their homes.

At 2 am the phone rang at Omar's house.

Omar picked it up, "Hello?" he said in a sleepy voice.

"Time to pray," Nabil said.

"WHAT!" cried Omar, "It is two in the morning! *Isha* was six hours ago, and *Fajr* is still some four hours away!"

"I know," said Nabil, "but I just heard on the news that Ariel Sharon has been elected Prime Minister of Israel!"

At this point I asked Copernic to find me some Jewish joke sites, and was overwhelmed by the sheer number that appeared on my screen. Here's one of my favourites:

Q: What's the difference between a Catholic wife and a Jewish wife?

A: The Catholic wife has real orgasms and fake jewellery.

Next, I asked Copernic for Catholic jokes, and was taken aback by the large number of sites it produced. Here's one that made me smile. Two nuns find themselves stranded on a highway when their cars run out of petrol. They search the vehicle for a container in which to put some petrol, but only manage to uncover a bed pan.

This they fill to the brim at a nearby petrol station. As they get back to the car and prepare to empty the bedpan into the tank, two young black dudes walk past. "Hey bro, that's what you call *faith*!" exclaims one.

However, when I did a search for atheist jokes, very few sites surfaced, and those that did, like www.atheistalliance.org, leaned more towards satire than quipery.

The reason for this, I guess, is that the religious – those in the mainstream as well as the fringe – swing so wildly between the surreal and the downright ridiculous that we atheists are able to extract most of our laughs, not to mention the odd gasp of disbelief, from news reports of their antics.

I remember laughing out loud over a recent report in the *Sunday Times* which claimed that the Protestant William of Orange, hero of the Northern Ireland's Orange Order which detests all things Catholic, had in fact been secretly supported by Innocent XI who became Pope in 1676. According to *Imprimatur*, a book written by two Italian historians, Innocent XI gave substantial sums of money to William in the hope of securing himself a secret and powerful ally within the Protestant camp – and by all accounts they did not come much camper than our King Billy.

I thought this revelation would have Orangemen reaching for their heart pills, but one prominent Unionist, the Rev Ian Paisley Jr, was quite unfazed by it all. "So, William got money out the Pope. It's good to take money off a person and then kick their arse, isn't it?"

There's Christian morality for you.

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Secularists celebrate ditching of 'religious hatred' clause

JUBILANT secularists throughout the country last month celebrated the demise of the incitement to religious hatred clause which formed part of Home Secretary David Blunkett's Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill.

Peers twice threw out the clause, leaving David Blunkett the choice of either dropping it or seeing the entire Bill fall.

In the event, the Bill became law *sans* the controversial clause on December 14.

When it became known that the Home Secretary intended including a religious hatred clause in the bill, the National Secular Society, together with the *Freethinker* and other organisations and individuals, launched a campaign to have the clause ditched. Among the many individuals who took up cudgels against the clause was *Freethinker* reader, and anti-censorship campaigner, David Webb of London.

In a hard-hitting letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair and Mr Blunkett, he said that as "a humanist and veteran campaigner against censorship" he was outraged by David Blunkett's intention to introduce emergency legislation which would make incitement to religious hatred a criminal offence.

"Hatred of barbarity of any kind, however perpetrated and perpetuated, is surely the necessarily required response of every civilised

human being. That is what I fervently embrace – always have and always will.

"The barbaric beliefs and practices of the Islamic religion, justified by an absurd piece of fiction (*viz* 'The Koran'), and which have for so long and so disgracefully – and disastrously! – been condoned and legitimised by a timid, supposedly civilised world, inspire in me nothing less than outright, unashamed hatred – and so they jolly well should. I regard it as my *duty* to incite hatred for such outrages – religious or otherwise – whenever and wherever I can. "That I am now to be made criminal for so doing by the Government of a purportedly 'free society' is beyond belief."

The fall of the clause does not mean that the danger is over, warns the NSS in its latest annual report. "In the present climate, and with Mr Blunkett as Home Secretary, there seems little doubt that further religious discrimination legislation can be expected. The NSS feels strongly that such legislation must be resisted or, at the very least, framed in such a way that it does not directly or indirectly disadvantage non-believers or threaten freedom of speech. We should also guard against any new law creating a climate of self-censorship, as already happened to a degree following death threats against Salman Rushdie."

Jehovah's Witnesses beat their 12-year-old daughter to death

THE 12-year-old daughter of an American Jehovah's Witness couple died late last year after being struck repeatedly with a heavy length of electrical cable.

Laree Slack, of South Brandon, Illinois, was given the biblical punishment of "40 lashes, minus one, three times" by her mother and father, Constance and Larry Slack.

The blows Laree received caused internal bleeding, which led to her death.

Laree was being disciplined because her parents thought she was not being sufficiently cooperative in helping them look for a jacket containing Constance's wallet.

Laree was ordered to "assume the position" to be whipped. When she squirmed away after several lashes, Larry Slack ordered his two teenage sons to tie her face down to a metal frame, then lashed her 39 times. The mother took over, and rained 20 more blows on the girl. When Laree began to scream, her father stuffed a towel in her mouth. The girl's shirt was cut off her, and her pants pulled down. She was stuck 59 times on her back by both parents. When her back began to bleed, she was turned over and hit a further 39 times on her chest and stomach.

The couple have been charged with the first-degree murder of their daughter last November 10 and with aggravated battery of a child. This charge relates to them striking their eight-year-old son on the same day. Welfare authorities have taken the couple's five other children, all of whom exhibited signs of physical abuse, into state custody.

Lords refuse plea for a dignified death

plea for a dignified death

THE House of Lords has turned down Diane Pretty's plea to be legally allowed assistance to die at a time of her own choosing.

The House of Lords considered the case because Mrs Pretty has asked for her husband, Brian, to be granted immunity from prosecution should he help her to end her life. The Lords' judgement, which rejected her appeal, underlined the previous High Court decision. Mrs Pretty and her legal team will be appealing to the European Court of Human Rights.

Deborah Annetts, Director of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society said, "I am stunned that the Law Lords said there is no consensus in favour of assisted suicide. This is just not true. Every opinion poll shows over 80 per cent of the public support Diane's right to choose how and when she dies. We are saddened by the House of Lords' decision, which condemns Diane to yet more suffering. However, we welcome the finding that it is open to the Director of Public Prosecutions to put in place a policy which would help Diane and which would in effect decriminalise assisted dying for the terminally ill."

In response to the judgement Mrs Pretty, who has been totally disabled by motor neurone disease, said, "The Law Lords don't want to admit the law is wrong, but I want to go on. I am determined to fight on and have a say in how I die. At the moment, I have no rights."

She then declared her intention to mount the first ever legal challenge under the Human Rights Act to the current law on assisted suicide.

Bible promotes hatred

IT'S official – the Bible *does* promote hatred. The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission handed down this ruling last year after three people complained about a religious advertisement in a newspaper. The ad included several biblical references, including the Levitical passage that a man who "lies with a man" must be put to death. The Commission found that the ad exposed gay men to hatred, and ordered the advertiser and the newspaper to pay the three complainants \$1,500 dollars each.

webwatch: norman pridmore

THE world of the Internet is a world of paradox. On one hand it enables instant access to all kinds of strange and wonderful places and people and ideas from all over the world. On the other hand, it can require hours of trawling through links and sites, hours of sifting through rubbish, to bring out any worthwhile or really interesting stuff.

Most people have more sense than to spend time doing this. I don't. I'm quite happy to tolerate long periods of immersion in the world of cyberdross. The flickering screen is my friend ...

Prolonged inattention of this kind is sad, I know, but now may not be entirely useless. I hope to share with readers some of the sites I've found or been led to, sites which, for one reason or another, may be of interest to free-thinkers (whom I will assume to be, as a species, robust, good-humoured, outspoken and constitutionally hard to offend).

If you don't have access to a computer or to the Internet, or enough knowledge to go to a computer and get "surfing" don't despair. There are courses, often very short, that are quite enough to communicate the basics. My own introduction was a free one-day course at my local college. Once that's sorted, many libraries and colleges offer access to computers for which you pay according to time spent. Be assured, it really is very simple.

For the sake of convenience, and quite arbitrarily, I've decided that sites of interest to freethinkers come in three main categories.

The first contains sites devoted to the ideals of freethought, secularism, humanism and the like.

The second contains sites that are informative, interesting, entertaining, challenging or whatever, but which may not necessarily have a specifically secularist/freethought agenda.

The third category contains sites that are full of what I shorthandedly call "mad stuff". The sites may be those of religious fundamentalists, wacky cults, out-and-out nihilists, or conversely the sites of those intent on exposing them or poking fun at them through satire or ridicule.

OK, now on with the first few recommendations.

I would advise readers to head for the improved and updated NSS website. The address is www.secularism.org.uk Visitors to the site will immediately appreciate its clarity and simplicity. Those of us with poor sight must rejoice that the designer has chosen clear text and bold contrasts throughout. It's a real joy. Keeping it simple also means that it loads quickly. Small points, but how

Our New Year edition sees the start of a new feature in which Norman Pridmore scours the worldwide web for information of interest to secularists

often ignored in the quest for a slick look! Mind you, it looks slick too, so it can be done.

The content? Cool, well-written, clear. There is enough on the site, under the various headings, to catch and keep any casual visitor for quite a while.

But there's a lot more to it than that – this is a site with depth. There's a history of the NSS; a biography of Bradlaugh; a large number of very useful links; a good – no, a very good – archive of press stories, articles and features of relevance to secularists; easy access to NSS press releases; a useful FAQ section (for those who don't know, that's Frequently Asked Questions); some very good jokes (and a few bloody awful ones); a secularist soap opera; something utterly and joyously baroque by the (apparently self-appointed) Cardinal of Atheism, Jonathan Meades; pieces by Clare Rayner, Martin Rowson, Azan Kamguian, Peter Atkins, Terry Sanderson, Julia Bard, as well as by the Executive Director of the NSS, Keith Porteus Wood; and... well, you get the picture.

There are parts of the site still under construction which promise to be very useful – these areas concern schools, Lords reform and international matters. There are guides to resources – books and films as well as periodicals. There are reviews, there are... Well, just go and take a look – you won't be disappointed.

Second recommendation is the FFRF site. The initials stand for the Freedom From Religion Foundation and it offers an excellent insight into the efforts of secularists in the United States. Visit it as www.ffrf.org.

For a chuckle, I was hard put between recommending the 'Rael' or the 'Benjamin Creme' sites. Let's start with the Rael site and save the Creme for later (it's gone off anyway!). For po-faced interplanetary nuttiness Rael is pretty well unbeatable. Find it at www.rael.org.

You can make a religion like this at home, by the way, Blue Peter style. Just take any platitude of your choosing and extrude it to the point of infinity. It's really that easy! It certainly seems to be what the luxuriantly coiffured Rael has done (is that a mullet he's sporting?).

Lastly, visit www.normalbobsmith.com Enjoy his the Dress Up Jesus game (details of which appeared in last month's *Freethinker*). Ask God a question, and read His replies to previous petitioners. Peruse Normals' hate mail (and fan mail). It's weird. It's American. It's more fun than sitting on a Wurlitzer!

That's it. If you have a site you'd like to suggest or recommend, or if you have problems accessing sites suggested here, e-mail me on norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk Thanks, in advance.

Statue of Bourdin, 'the Cosmic Christ', is finally destroyed

FOLLOWERS of the "Cosmic Christ" described it as an act of vandalism matched only by the destruction of the giant statues of Buddha by the Taliban in Afghanistan. But residents of Castellane in southeastern France cheered when demolition crews moved in to destroy the 107-ft high concrete statue of Gilbert Bourdin, leader of the secretive Mandarom sect until his death in 1998. Residents of the town had complained that the statue was ugly, and had fought for years to have it removed on the grounds that it was built in the Alps without a permit.

The painted statue, built in 1993, depicted Bourdin with fluorescent eyes, wearing a golden crown and holding sceptres. Bourdin sometimes referred to himself as the "Cosmic Christ."

Bourdin's statue was brought crashing to the ground with a dynamite charge. Members of the sect looked on, praying, while the residents of Castellane cheered.

Police entered the sect's mountain retreat with court papers authorising the statue's destruction. Later in the day, they moved in with jackhammers. The town's mayor, Michel Carle, says he is pleased the statue has finally been toppled: "I ask myself how we let people build something so ugly in such a beautiful setting."

Bourdin, a former teacher from the French Caribbean island of Martinique, founded the Mandarom cult in 1969. Followers are strict vegetarians who wear loose-fitting tunics and keep their heads shaved.

two thousand christmasses

The Twentieth century divides into two halves. The first, which ended with the welcome death of Stalin in 1953, was the worst half century in the entire history of Europe. It saw two World Wars, the triumph of Nazism and Stalinism, the carpet bombing of civilians from Guernica to Dresden, and the Holocaust; and it climaxed outside of Europe with the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After Stalin's death things improved for most of Europe, but parts of the Balkans, Africa, Asia and Latin America endured the worst episodes in their histories. An unparalleled crop of corrupt, murderous dictators sprouted – Ceausescu, Milosovic, Idi Amin, Gadhaffi, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Papa Doc Duvalier, Pinochet. The massacre of the Tutsi in Ruanda eclipsed the Holocaust, and Muslim fundamentalism came to challenge Nazism as the most virulent ideology of all recorded time.

There were endemic civil wars, military coups, floods, droughts, famines and AIDS epidemics throughout the third world. All things considered, from Rasputin to Bin Laden it was a frightful century for mankind.

There are theological implications in this. The Christian faithful will point out that, with the exception of the floods and droughts and the odd earthquake, volcanic eruption and tornado, all these disasters were the work of evil men. In this they will include AIDS which they joyfully see as the just wages of sexual promiscuity. They will argue that all this evil-doing strengthens the case for the reality of original sin and the existence of a personal Devil. They do have a point, but their case fails because two other hypotheses fit the facts better.

The first of these has the virtue of simplicity. It is that the Supreme Being is malevolent. This, however, raises the question of why he should be so, only intermittently. The 19th century was, on the whole, one of peace and progress. Was the Wicked God sleeping?

The second hypothesis avoids this difficulty. It is to be found in the dualist theology of the Zoroastrians and Manichaeans, viz that there are two creator gods of equal power. One, the Ormuzd of the Parsee sect of Bombay, is benevolent; the other, Ahriman, is evil. They contend with each other eternally. Ahriman clearly won the 16th and 17th centuries (the age of religious wars and persecution and extensive witch burning). Ormuzd took the 18th and 19th (the Enlightenment and the rise of liberal democracy). The 20th century belonged to Ahriman and he's looking pretty good as we plough into the 21st.

This is more than mere clerical speculation. The historical evidence in its favour is so compelling that, if I did not know about the

immense age and size of a generally lifeless universe and the insignificance of *homo sapiens* within it, I might be tempted to waver in my atheism.

However, as a dualist I would be in a tiny minority today. Apart from a few thousand Parsees, there are no Zoroastrians or Manichaeans around now, the former faithful having been convinced by the superior persuasiveness of Christianity and Islam – or was it rather a matter of military conquest and persecution by Christians and Muslims?

By Jack Hastie

So, in terms of contemporary theology, we must re-assess the 20th century from the perspective of Christianity, the dominant faith of the age. Two matters strike me as significant.

First, many of the victims of man's and nature's destructiveness were devout Christians or Jews. It has to be assumed that most of them prayed for deliverance; in the trenches at the Somme; before the gas chambers of Auschwitz; in air-raid shelters in Coventry and Hamburg; in the tented refugee camps of Africa. Most of these prayers went unheeded. The brute fact is that the 20th century must have seen a rejection of Christian and Jewish prayer on a scale quite unprecedented in the whole history of religion.

My second point is that many of the perpetrators of crimes of the 20th century were themselves Christians. Even those who weren't, like Hitler and Stalin, were brought up in societies which had been Christian for a thousand years. Now Christianity makes certain historical claims which must surely be re-examined in the light of this wholesale backsliding into barbarism.

It insists that its admirable advocacy of mildness, meekness and love has been institutionalised in a formal church organisation which is guided by the Holy Spirit for ever. One might have supposed that such divine consultancy would provide better protection against the effects of original sin and the wiles of the Devil in countries which had been exposed to the faith for so long.

Christians also claim that, with the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, a seismic shift occurred in the relationship between good and evil on this planet. As the gospel song puts it:

Tell them what the Master has done.

Tell them that the victory's been won.

In other words Christian doctrine implies that after two thousand years things should be different.

The early Christians had Herod and Nero; we have had Hitler and Stalin.

They had the Massacre of the Innocents; we have had the Holocaust and the Ruanda genocide.

They had martyrs, crucified, stoned and devoured by lions; we have had non-combatants gassed, bombed and hijacked into suicide missions.

Before we wade deeper into the 21st century, it is surely time for a reappraisal. What have we actually gained since the victory was won and the Holy Spirit took on responsibility for the guidance of the Church? What has the Gospel story delivered after two thousand Christmasses?

Briefly...

AMERICAN White-supremacist brothers Benjamin Matthew Williams and James Tyler Williams are planning to use the Bible in defence of a murder they are accused of having carried out in 1999. The pair, who are due to be tried shortly for the murder of a gay couple, are basing their defence on the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality. The Williams brothers pleaded guilty last September to setting fire to three Sacramento synagogues and an abortion clinic.

BRITAIN'S greatest Shakespearean actor, Sir Ian McKellen, who plays the wizard Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, has revealed that whenever he finds a Gideon Bible in an hotel room, he removes a page in Leviticus. I turn to Leviticus 18:22 which is directed against homosexuals and rip it out. I really take exception to that section and I think by now I must have ripped out a few hundred pages.

PREMIER Christian Radio in London has run into trouble with the Radio Authority, which late last year upheld seven complaints against the station. The station was found to have breached rules, including those that prevent criticism of other religions. In one instance the Koran and the books of Hindus and Buddhists were described as being full of superstition and absurdities.

A WOMAN who believed that her four-year-old daughter was possessed by demons killed the girl while attempting an exorcism. Sabrina Wright, 29, of New York City, was charged with murder after the child died as a result of drowning.

just say no to religion!

"WE secularists have long been aware of the potential catastrophe that fanatical religionists pose to the world," says Denis Cobell, President of the National Secular Society in his introduction to the NSS's latest annual report.

"We have been warning over the past few years of the direction being taken by many Islamic countries, and the threat this poses to liberal, pluralist democracies. We have long drawn attention to the abominable treatment of women in these theocracies, the stifling of free speech, the cruel treatment of dissenters and the resistance to progress. Even most secularists, however, had seriously underestimated both the potential extent and likelihood of the catastrophe.

"Perhaps never before in its history have the aims of the National Secular Society been so urgently in need of achievement. Unless we secularise our public life, we can never provide equality for all citizens in our multi-cultural and multi-faith society. Only by giving privilege to none can we achieve equality for all. But the more we attempt to provide places in our civic and political life for all the hues of religious belief, the greater the likelihood of conflict on a massive scale.

"The radically changing demographics of this country and the dwindling support for the Church of England render its continued establishment unsustainable. If we are to avoid religious warfare in our own country, disestablishment must be addressed now and the process begun with all speed. No new faith schools should be established, and the long-term process of dismantling the system of religious schools should begin. Is the bloody evidence of the past months not sufficient to convince even Mr Blair that the ties between the state and religion must be speedily severed?

"Instead of seeing the obvious, however, Mr Blair is creating an atmosphere in the UK that permits religious bodies to consolidate and increase their power bases. The Church of England's plan to open a hundred new schools in England was welcomed by the Government, despite a widespread reaction against the proposals sparked by the NSS's campaign. Our warnings about the dangers of increasing sectarian education were graphically realised by the riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, and the sectarian intimidation of children on their way to school in Belfast.

"As religion becomes ever bolder in its demands – and the proof of its potential for destruction accumulates with every new day, the importance of separating religion from the state is becoming obvious – even to many who had never before considered the issue.

That's the message contained in the National Secular Society's latest annual report, which details a year of tremendous activity

This mounting debate is reflected in a growing interest in the NSS from those who are horrified to see our hard-won freedom from religious tutelage at risk. Our membership is rising, and the level of enquiry from the public and the media is probably at its highest for a generation or more.

"We have much work to do, and we hope that you, our members, will play your part either by active involvement or by providing the resources we need to defend society from the further encroachment of unreason.

"Our message must be 'Just say NO to religion,'" Denis Cobell concluded.

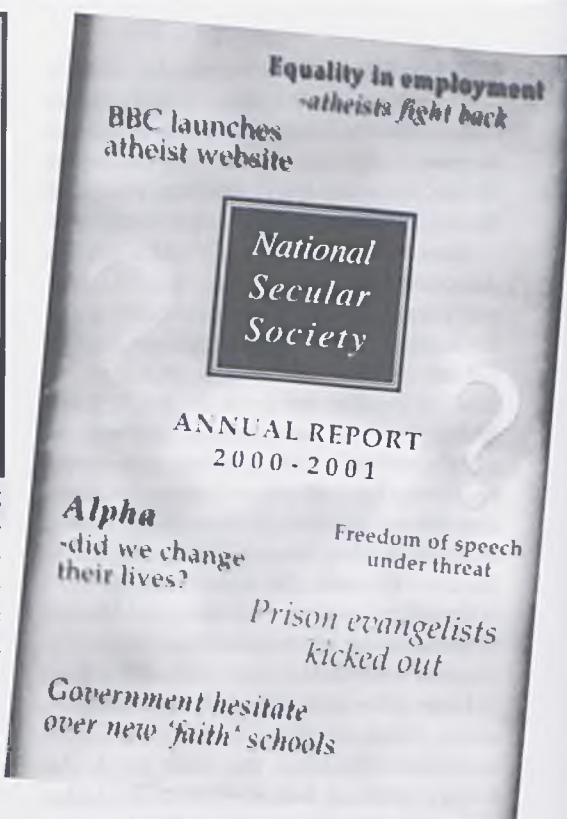
The NSS's biggest campaign this year has been on the topic of religious schools. In December 2000, the Church of England Schools Review Group, under the chairmanship of Lord Dearing, issued a "consultation paper" on the Church's proposals to open 100 new church secondary schools. The NSS suspected that the "consultation" was in reality a statement of intent to set up the 100 new schools regardless of objections.

The aim of the NSS's detailed response to those proposals was primarily to generate debate, rather than in any expectation of our suggestions and objections being heeded by the Church. We succeeded in stimulating a national debate on the desirability of church schools to an extent far beyond what we could reasonably have hoped.

Soon after the C of E consultation period expired, however, the Government issued its own Green Paper predictably welcoming the C of E's expansionist proposals.

The NSS's response to the Green Paper was rather more wide-ranging than that to the C of E, and it was eagerly picked up by the media.

A carefully placed article in the *Times Educational Supplement* by honorary associate Richard Dawkins resulted in a further flurry of controversy. Suddenly, far from being triumphalist about their apparent success, the C of E was on the back foot having to defend and justify its ambitions in education. A large volume of correspondence was generated in



newspaper letter

columns, as parents let it be known that they were not, on the whole, keen on religious schools. We had hit a nerve in the national psyche, and a deep well of resentment emerged, particularly about the unfairness of the admissions criteria and the danger to race relations that religious schools represent.

Then came the riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham (towns with large Asian populations). The country was shocked as race relations once more took centre stage. The *Independent* drew attention to our response: "Only last week the National Secular Society warned that a proliferation of church schools would lead to deteriorating race relations." Coincidentally, a report on the situation in Bradford was published at that time. In the report, Lord Ouseley (former chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality) opined that faith schools were a danger to community relations because they tended to separate children on religious and racial grounds, and this could only store up trouble for the future.

The scenes outside Holy Cross School in North Belfast, where Protestants threw missiles and abuse at Catholic children trying to approach the school, created yet another wave of protest against "faith-based" education. The Executive Director debated the issue on the *Today* programme with Chris Woodhead, the former chief inspector of schools.

Each of these disturbances stoked the debate about the place of faith schools in a largely secular society, a debate in which the NSS has played a prominent and continuing part. We

also continued to lobby the Government behind the scenes, and have held a number of meetings with senior civil servants to discuss the Society's formal responses in detail, as well as wider issues.

The NSS is convinced that the debate that it helped provoke and the representations we have made to the Government have had a positive effect, although (almost inevitably) it is still awaiting tangible results.

The dreadful events in New York seemed to mark a turning point. Even ministers now doubt the wisdom of increasing the number of faith schools. The *Independent* reported that the Prime Minister's advisors were urging him to scrap the idea. One was quoted as saying: "The situation in America is already causing problems within our own society. I am not sure that everyone has fully thought through this proposal." Significantly, the new Education Bill has been postponed. Could there yet be hope that even Mr Blair will see sense before creating an education infrastructure which has such an obvious potential for disaster and which, once established, would be well nigh impossible to dismantle, the report asks.

Another major campaigning priority last year was to ensure that the EU Directive on Discrimination in the Workplace did not give undue privileges to religious bodies, thereby disadvantaging non-believers. Many members responded to our request to lobby their MPs and MEPs.

The deadline for national implementation of the terms of the Directive is the end of 2003, and the consultation process has now started. The NSS was invited to the Department of Trade and Industry to put the secular case. The NSS proposed to the DTI that the principle be established that non-believers should not be disadvantaged in employment relative to believers. Believers being granted paid time off for worship and religious festivals is just one example of the circumstances where this principle should operate. Another would be non-believers being "put upon" by always being left to undertake extra work or to work during unsocial hours as a consequence of others being absent for devotions. We do not oppose groups of employees being given time off; but where one group is given a privilege, equity demands that the others be given some counterbalancing consideration.

Religious groups are showing little restraint in the privileges they are seeking. Incredibly, the Government has been lobbied by thousands of respondents petitioning for garages (sic) to be given exemption to discriminate on religious grounds. We have drawn the DTI's attention to the absurdity of this, which would presumably lead to the garage section of

Yellow Pages having to be subdivided by religious category (presumably including atheists)!

Even more disturbing is New Labour's manifesto pledge, reinforced by Conservative enthusiasm, to materially expand faith-based welfare. This could mean that vast swathes of hitherto public services could in future be provided by faith organisations, as they already are in Scotland, where the largest welfare organisation is the Church of Scotland. Despite much of the Kirk's funding being from the public purse, they declare brazenly: "All our work is done in the name of Jesus Christ, so those who work in his name have to know him."

Imagine the potential plight of the large numbers of welfare workers for whom, until now, their religion (or lack of it) has, quite rightly, never been an issue. Service users could also be adversely affected by publicly funded welfare services. These ought to be equally available and welcoming to all, without religious tags

attached. The NSS is already aware of church welfare being refused to those of whom the religious organisations do not approve. The NSS's fight should not only be to resist the spread of faith-based welfare, it must be to eliminate altogether this growing menace to welfare provision.

The NSS's involvement in the media is increasingly assisting it in its quest to raise the public profile of secularism in the UK. Its representatives have spoken on a large number of radio and TV programmes and been quoted in literally dozens of newspapers and journals. We have been invited to take part in prestigious – and widely watched and listened to – programmes such as *Newsnight* and *Today*."

• If you would like a copy of the annual report, please contact the NSS on 0207 404 3126 or e-mail kpw@secularism.org.uk

And now for something completely different – a religion 'czar' for Mr Blair

THE National Secular Society is seeking a meeting with the new religion czar, to ensure that the forty per cent of the population who are non-religious are not disadvantaged by the growing demands from religious bodies in this country.

Speaking after the revelation that John Battle MP had been appointed by the Prime Minister to advise on religious issues, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "Religious bodies are demanding ever more influence in society, even though their adherents make up only a small and shrinking minority of the population. Faith leaders, even those of small religious groups, are frequently in contact with No 10 already. Religion has a disproportionately large and growing influence in the UK." The NSS points out that:

- The UK is the only western democracy with bishops in its parliament, yet the Government wants even greater religious representation than the 26 C of E bishops in the House of Lords.
- The C of E controls a quarter of our publicly funded schools, yet the Government has welcomed the C of E's plans to open many more, despite 80 per cent of the population being opposed to such expansion.
- Teachers – even mathematics or science teachers – do not have equal access to jobs in publicly funded church schools*, which in many parts of the country are the only educational employer.

Religion unpopular

Mr Porteous Wood added that it was grossly unfair for the Government to give even more recognition to religious interests when religion has never been so unpopular. "Everyone has the right to believe and worship whatever they want, but there should be freedom from religion too. Those who do not believe should have the right not to be discriminated against and should be equally valued in society - but that is not the case in Britain today.

"Since September 11th, there is a growing realisation that religion divides our society of many conflicting faiths and none. The way to include everyone on an equal basis is to secularise our institutions and leave religion to the realm of the private conscience, the home and the place of worship. The state should be blind to religion, and religion should no longer have the privileged position in our public life that it has enjoyed for far too long."

*Proposals announced last week to outlaw discrimination at work have been badly compromised by promising exemptions to religious groups, who will be permitted to continue discriminating against atheists and non-married cohabiting couples (and probably homosexuals) without penalty, even if the jobs are paid from public funds.

"To blame Islam for what happened in New York is like blaming Christianity for the troubles in Northern Ireland!" Yes. Precisely. It is time to stop pussyfooting around. Time to get angry. And not only with Islam.

Those of us who have renounced one or another of the three "great" monotheistic religions have, until now, moderated our language for reasons of politeness.

Christians, Jews and Muslims are sincere in their beliefs and in what they find holy. We have respected that, even as we have disagreed with it. The late Douglas Adams put it with his customary good humour, in an impromptu speech in 1998 (slightly abridged):

Now, the invention of the scientific method is, I'm sure we'll all agree, the most powerful intellectual idea, the most powerful framework for thinking and investigating and understanding and challenging the world around us that there is, and it rests on the premise that any idea is there to be attacked. If it withstands the attack then it lives to fight another day and if it doesn't withstand the attack then down it goes. Religion doesn't seem to work like that. It has certain ideas at the heart of it which we call sacred or holy or whatever. What it means is, "Here is an idea or a notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about; you're just not. Why not? - because you're not!" If somebody votes for a party that you don't agree with, you're free to argue about it as much as you like; everybody will have an argument but nobody feels aggrieved by it. If somebody thinks taxes should go up or down you are free to have an argument about it. But on the other hand if somebody says "I mustn't move a light switch on a Saturday," you say, "I respect that."

The odd thing is, even as I am saying that, I am thinking "Is there an Orthodox Jew here who is going to be offended by the fact that I just said that?" But I wouldn't have thought "Maybe there's somebody from the left wing or somebody from the right wing or somebody who subscribes to this view or the other in economics" when I was making the other points. I just think "Fine, we have different opinions." But, the moment I say something that has something to do with somebody's (I'm going to stick my neck out here and say irrational) beliefs, then we all become terribly protective and terribly defensive and say "No, we don't

Distinguished British scientist, author and atheist RICHARD DAWKINS' "The God Delusion" won the "Richard Dawkins Award" on September 22 at the Freedom From Religion Foundation convention after the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States. He spoke at the Freedom From Religion Foundation convention in his stead by James Coors, a professor of Agriculture. This is a follow-up to Dawkins' powerful article, *Religion's Misguided Mission*.

Time to S

attack that; that's an irrational belief but no, we respect it."

Why should it be that it's perfectly legitimate to support the Labour party or the Conservative party, Republicans or Democrats, this model of economics versus that, Macintosh instead of Windows - but to have an opinion about how the Universe began, about who created the Universe . . . no, that's holy? What does that mean? Why do we ring-fence that for any reason other than that

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - Gore Vidal

we've just got used to doing so? There's no other reason at all, it's just one of those things that crept into being and once that loop gets going it's very, very powerful. So, we are used to not challenging religious ideas but it's very interesting how much of a furore Richard creates when he does it!

Everybody gets absolutely frantic about it because you're not allowed to say these things. Yet when you look at it

rationally there is no reason why those ideas shouldn't be as open to debate as any other, except that we have agreed somehow between us that they shouldn't be.

Douglas is dead, but I think he would join me in asking people now to stand up and break this absurd taboo. My respect for the Abrahamic religions went up in the smoke and choking dust of September 11th. The last vestige of respect for the taboo disappeared as I watched the "Day of Prayer" in Washington Cathedral, where people of mutually incompatible faiths united in homage to the very force that caused the problem in the first place: religion. It is time for people of intellect, as opposed to people of faith, to stand up and say "Enough!" Let our tribute to the dead be a new resolve: to respect people for what they individually think, rather than respect groups for what they were collectively brought up to believe.

Notwithstanding bitter sectarian hatreds over the centuries (all too obviously still going strong), Judaism, Islam and Christianity have much in common.

Despite New Testament watering down and other reformist tendencies, all three pay historic allegiance to the same violent and vindictive God of Battles, memorably summed up by Gore Vidal in 1998:

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal - God is the Omnipotent Father - hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from every-

DAWKINS, who was scheduled to accept an "Emperor Has No Clothes" convention, cancelled his appearance in light of travel difficulties. He supplied an exclusive article, reprinted below, which was read at the Agronomy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The essay is a follow-up to *Missiles*, which appeared in *The Guardian* on September 15, 2001.

Stand Up

one on earth, as he is not just in place for one tribe, but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good.

In the *Guardian* of September 15, I named belief in an afterlife as the key weapon that made the New York atrocity possible. Of prior significance is religion's deep responsibility for the underlying hatreds that motivated people to use that weapon in the first place. To breathe such a suggestion, even with the most gentlemanly restraint, is to invite an onslaught of patronising abuse, as Douglas Adams noted. But the insane cruelty of the suicide attacks, and the equally vicious though numerically less catastrophic "revenge" attacks on hapless Muslims living in America and Britain, push me beyond ordinary caution.

How can I say that religion is to blame? Do I really imagine that, when a terrorist kills, he is motivated by a theological disagreement with his victim?

Do I really think the Northern Ireland pub bomber says to himself "Take that, Tridentine Transubstantiationist bastards!" Of course I don't think anything of the kind. Theology is the last thing on the minds of such people. They are not killing because of religion itself, but because of political grievances, often justified. They are killing because the other lot killed their fathers. Or because the other lot drove their great-grandfathers off their land. Or because the other lot oppressed our lot economically for centuries.

My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a "they" as opposed to a "we" can be identified at all.

I am not even claiming that religion is the only label by which we identify the victims of our prejudice. There's also skin color, language, and social class.

But often, as in Northern Ireland, these don't

apply and religion is the only divisive label around. Even when it is not alone, religion is nearly always an incendiary ingredient in the mix as well. It is not an exaggeration to say that religion is the most inflammatory enemy-labelling device in history. Who killed your father? Not the individuals you are about to kill in "revenge". The culprits themselves have vanished over the border. The people who stole your great-grandfather's land have died of old age. You aim your vendetta at those who belong to the same religion as the original perpetrators. It wasn't Seamus who killed your brother, but it was Catholics, so Seamus deserves to die "in return". Next, it was Protestants who killed Seamus so let's go out and kill some Protestants "in revenge". It was Muslims who destroyed the World Trade Center so let's set upon the turbaned driver of a London taxi and leave him paralyzed from the neck down.

The bitter hatreds that now poison Middle Eastern politics are rooted in the real or per-

It is not an exaggeration to say that religion is the most inflammatory enemy-labelling device in history

ceived wrong of the setting up of a Jewish State in an Islamic region. In view of all that the Jews had been through, it must have seemed a fair and humane solution. Probably deep familiarity with the Old Testament had given the European and American decision-makers some sort of idea that this really was the "historic homeland" of the Jews (though the horrific stories of how Joshua and others conquered their *Lebensraum* might have made them wonder).

Even if it wasn't justifiable at the time, no doubt a good case can be made that, since Israel exists now, to try to reverse the *status quo* would be a worse wrong.

I do not intend to get into that argument. But if it had not been for religion, the very concept of a Jewish state would have had no meaning in the first place.

Nor would the very concept of Islamic lands, as something to be invaded and desecrated. In a world without religion, there would have been no Crusades; no Inquisition; no anti-Semitic pogroms (the people of the *diaspora* would long ago have intermarried and become indistinguishable from their host populations); no Northern Ireland Troubles (no label by which to distinguish the two "communities", and no sectarian schools to teach the children historic hatreds – they would simply be one community).

It is a spade we have here, let's call it a spade. The Emperor has no clothes.

It is time to stop the mealy-mouthed euphemisms: "Nationalists", "Loyalists", "Communities", "Ethnic Groups". Religion is the word you need. Religion is the word you are struggling hypocritically to avoid.

Parenthetically, religion is unusual among divisive labels in being spectacularly unnecessary. If religious beliefs had any evidence going for them, we might have to respect them in spite of their concomitant unpleasantness. But there is no such evidence. To label people as death-deserving enemies because of disagreements about real world politics is bad enough. To do the same for disagreements about a delusional world inhabited by archangels, demons and imaginary friends is ludicrously tragic.

The resilience of this form of hereditary delusion is as astonishing as its lack of realism. It seems that control of the plane which crashed near Pittsburgh was probably wrestled out of the hands of the terrorists by a group of brave passengers. The wife of one of these valiant and heroic men, after she took the telephone call in which he announced their intention, said that God had placed her husband on the plane as His instrument to prevent the plane crashing on the White House. I have the greatest sympathy for this poor woman in her tragic loss, but just think about it! As my (also understandably overwrought) American correspondent who sent me this piece of news said: "Couldn't God have just given the hijackers a heart attack or something instead of killing all those nice people on the plane? I guess he didn't give a flying fuck about the Trade Center, didn't bother to come up with

(Continued on page 13)

down to earth: colin mccall

Jews don't like the truth

THE conflict between science and religion continues – with Judaism, this time, in the nefarious role. A research paper demonstrating the obvious truth that Middle Eastern Jews and Palestinians are genetically almost identical has been pulled from *Human Immunology* after protests from readers. The article was removed from the journal's website; academics who had already received their copies were urged to rip out the offending pages and throw them away; libraries throughout the world have been asked to ignore or "preferably" discard them. "I have written several hundred scientific papers, some for *Nature* and *Science*, and this has never happened before", said the lead author, Spanish geneticist Professor Antonio Arnaiz-Villena of Complutense University, Madrid. "I am stunned".

The paper, *The Origin of Palestinians and their Genetic Relatedness with other Mediterranean Populations* involved studying immune system genes among people in the Middle East. Professor Arnaiz-Villena's team found no evidence to support the idea that Jewish people were genetically distinct from other people in the region. On the contrary, the paper showed that Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East share a very similar gene pool, and must be considered closely related. Rivalry between the two groups was therefore based on "cultural and religious, but not genetic differences".

But the journal, which accepted the article earlier last year, decided after printing it that it was politically-biased and contained "inappropriate" remarks about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The American Society of Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics, which publishes the journal, was threatened with mass resignations and "forced to repudiate it". Professor Arnaiz-Villena admitted that he might have softened his language a little and spoken of Jewish "settlers" rather than "colonists" in the Gaza strip, for example; but said that his historical references, the ones that were supposed to be politically offensive, were taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other text books. He has now been sacked from the journal's editorial board, which must appreciate that the myth of the chosen people is sacrosanct.

SPCHI

"LANGUAGE is not a cultural artifact that we can learn the way we learn to tell the time", wrote Steven Pinker in his book, *The Language Instinct*, "it is a distinct piece of

the biological make up of our brains". And he pointed out that it was Charles Darwin himself who first articulated this conception in *The Descent of Man* (1871) when he described it as "an instinctive tendency to acquire an art". Nor is it a capacity peculiar to humans: it is seen in other species such as song-learning birds.

Now, 130 years later, scientists in Oxford and London have identified the first gene involved in human speech and language after a ten-year hunt, with the help of a British family of three generations, of whom half spoke normally and half had a severe language disorder, now known to be caused by a mutation.

Professor Anthony Monaco of the Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics at Oxford, one of the scientists involved in the discovery, stressed that it was a beginning, not an end. SPCH1, as it has been labelled, cannot act alone, he said, "it will need to co-operate with other genes and proteins".

It does, however, show that Darwin got it right again.

Evolution in Tennessee...

THERE is a widespread misunderstanding of evolution among East Tennessee State University students, according to Niall Shanks, writing in *Free Inquiry* (Fall 2001). His students often tell him that they never covered evolution in science classes; some were told by their teachers not to believe in evolution; others said their teachers didn't want to cause trouble by teaching the subject. Much mischief had been worked in churches where evolutionary ideas were distorted and dismissed.

"My students have been spoon-fed with all sorts of alternative creationist 'explanations' for biological phenomena ... Many ... believe they have immortal souls and that they will go either to heaven or hell when they die. They have also been told by people they respect – family members, pastors, ministers and others – that evolution is not just wrong scientifically, it is rather an integral component in the same liberal conspiracy that favours abortion, homosexuality, bestiality, communism and other things deemed morally abhorrent". They therefore think that studying evolution will have terrible consequences for the fate of their souls.

But Niall Shanks added a warning. We are apt to forget, he said, that creationists don't just have complaints about evolutionary biology; they have complaints about most branches of science, including astronomy. So it is not just a case of teaching interesting and exciting ideas; "we are fighting the battles of the Enlightenment over again". Carl Sagan's vision of a scientifically literate public is still a long way off and, as ever, it is religion standing in the way.

...and Alabama

MEANWHILE, Alabama is maintaining its distinction as the only American state whose biology text books bear a sticker warning students that evolution is a "controversial theory" they should question, reported the *Chattanooga Times*, November 11, 2001, reprinted in the *Editor* (November 17).

The state board of education voted without dissent or debate to place the disclaimer on the front of 40,000 new biology text books to be used in the state's public schools. Joan Kendall, state education chairman, said the stickers were needed because biology text books contain outdated and disputed information about evolution. Certainly biology is continually developing but evolution itself is not in doubt.

Jesus leads the Exodus

A WEEK later the *Editor* printed a few extracts from *Non Campus Mentis*, a new book of errors by US college students, compiled by Anders Henriksson (Workman, £8.15), several of which reveal muddled thinking on religion. Moses, wrote one student, "was told by Jesus Christ to lead the people out of Egypt and into the Sahaira [sic] desert. The book of Exodus describes this trip and the amazing things that happened on it, including the Ten Commandments, various special effects and [wait for it] the building of the Suez canal."

Biblical diagnoses

I SHOULD have thought there were plenty of contemporary subjects for a neuro-scientist, but Eric Altschuler at the University of California in San Diego seems to specialise in that realm of fantasy, the Old Testament. He has previously suggested that Samson suffered from antisocial personality disorder which, as the *Guardian* religious affairs correspondent Stephen Bates commented, is probably what the Philistines thought when he pulled the temple down on top of them.

Professor Altschuler's latest biblical subject is the prophet Ezekiel, whose ramblings fill 48 chapters in the Authorised Version, beginning with a vision of God and a whirlwind of fire. This time the diagnosis is temporal lobe epilepsy, based on the prophet's frequent fainting fits, episodes of being unable to speak, aggression, delusions and pedantry. He may also have had a compulsive writing disorder, medically known as hypergraphia, said Dr Altschuler, who described the book as "impenetrable" and going on and on.

Indeed it does.

YOU WILL have recovered just in time from Christmas and the New Year to face a torrent of sickening sycophancy. Mrs Windsor will have occupied the throne for fifty years. But the media, which fawns upon her and her family, will totally disregard others who have been queens for a half-century.

The adulation will be near boundless as street parties of forelock-tugging subjects are organised, dusty flags and bunting put up, and numerous banal TV programmes screened.

For many the monarchy is little more than an over-long soap opera, a side-show to political life. It is, however, far more than that. In a country which prides itself on being a democracy, the existence of a non-elected hereditary Head of State – like that of a largely non-elected House of Lords – reveals a serious democratic deficit.

The British people are not citizens with rights defined and protected by a written constitution. They are subjects, and such rights as they enjoy are privileges which can be withdrawn if the subjects are found wanting in deference. Royal assent is needed for any Bill

passed by Parliament to become law, and in theory at least the monarch can dissolve Parliament and rule through the Privy Council. For as long as the monarchy exists it remains a threat to and a negation of any meaningful and effective democracy.

by Terry Liddle

Furthermore, the monarchy is not only a political institution – it is also theological and theocratic, and seems to be based on the priest-kings of the ancient Israelites.

The monarchy rules by the grace of God and bears the title defender of the faith – originally awarded by the Pope to Henry VIII for his attack on Lutheranism. The monarch is head of the Established Church, which is also represented in the Lords. Charles Windsor proclaims that he wishes to be defender of faith rather than the (Anglican) faith. Like his self-confessed adultery this must raise problems both for Anglicans and for those without faith.

The oath sworn by members of Parliament and members of the armed forces is not to a

written constitution but to the monarch and their heirs and successors. Many regiments of the army are commanded by members of the Windsor family. As long as this continues, there remains the possibility of the monarchy being used to legitimate a coup against a radical reforming government

In Britain there are two opposing traditions. One elevates a dysfunctional family to near godhead in the hope of gaining materially or in terms of status thereby. The other is radical, critical, disrespectful and not respectable. It favours a secular democratic federal and social republic in which the Head of State and members of any second chamber are elected, and a written constitution is the basis of law. Like Thomas Paine before him, Charles Bradlaugh fought both kingcraft and priestcraft. His scathing Impeachment of the House of Brunswick remains a classic of its kind. It is not for nothing that the National Secular Society opposed hereditary privileges which militated against human brotherhood.

Twenty-five years ago a handful of republicans and atheists gathered in the rain on Blackheath to oppose the Silver Jubilee. This time there will be a whole series of events centred on the secular democratic tradition. The first of these will be a celebration of the life and work of the Deptford Chartist, atheist and republican George Harney. Invited speakers include Bob Morell of the Thomas Paine Society and Chris Ford, author of a forthcoming biography of Harney. This will take place at the Forum at Greenwich, Trafalgar Road, Greenwich, London, SE10 at 3pm on Saturday, February 16.

• If you would like details of this and other events or a speaker for or help with organising your own events please call Terry Liddle on 020 8850 4187.

Anglican priest jailed

A 62-YEAR-OLD Anglican priest in Canada has been sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for fondling three young boys, including an eight-year-old cerebral palsy sufferer recovering from surgery.

The assaults took place almost 30 years ago when James Townley-Smith was an assistant priest at St George's Anglican Church, Winnipeg. In 1980 he was convicted of gross indecency with four Ontario boys and received three years' probation.

When the mother of one of the victims reported Townley-Smith to another Anglican priest, Charles Griggs, she was ignored. Griggs, 72, pleaded guilty earlier this year to sexually abusing ten boys between 1965 and 1986.

Competition corner

LAST November we ran a photo of Osama bin Laden participating in a karaoke competition, and we invited readers to name the song the mad Muslim was singing.

We received a tremendous number of entries, and some competitors even went so far as to compose entire songs!

In any event, the winner of our contest was Georgina Coupland, who thought the most appropriate song for Bin Laden would be *They're Coming to Take Me Away, hah hah*. Georgina gets a two-year subscription to the *Freethinker*.

Runner-up was Peter Richards, whose suggestion, *Halfway to Paradise* earns him a T-shirt.

This month we're inviting readers to suggest a caption for the picture on the left.

First prize is a two-year subscription to the *Freethinker*. The runner-up gets a year's subscription.

Please send your entry to FT caption contest, PO Box 26428, London SE10 9WH.



JUST before Christmas in 1839, Mary Shelley learnt that the young George Henry Lewes intended to write a biography of Shelley. She refused permission and turned down his request for an interview. It was a pity, because Lewes was an admirer and would have written a good life of the poet, as he did later of Goethe. But Shelley's widow didn't want a factual life; she wanted to turn Shelley, the religious and political rebel, into a figure of respectability. Above all, she wanted to rid him of his atheism. The same December, in her preface to his *Essays and Letters*, she imagined him risen to a new "sphere of being, better adapted to his inexpressible tenderness, his generous sympathies, and his richly gifted mind", where those he loved would one day join him. This about the author of *The Refutation of Deism* and, with Hogg, *The Necessity of Atheism*. It was, as Miranda Seymour remarks in this impressive biography, "an unabashed attempt at sanctification".

It was not the only one. Like many before and since, Mary Shelley became increasingly conservative as she grew older. The daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecroft, she ran away at 16 with Shelley and her 15-year-old stepsister Claire Clairmont to France and Switzerland, and had shared the poet's views on free love and republicanism. Life was never easy for her, but she was intelligent and resilient. In 1817, back in England, we learn that, between writing, helping to supervise her baby son William, and running a large new house crammed to bursting point with visitors, "she put herself through a gruelling reading course in Roman history while she searched for her next subject". And she was still only 19. Claire Clairmont told Byron that Mary faced all her many troubles with the serenity of a ship sailing "under a gentle and favourable wind"; and Godwin's second wife described her as, at 16, showing all the steadiness of a woman of 40.

When Shelley translated Plato's *Symposium*, becoming, in Richard Holmes' words, "the first major English writer to attempt an objective account of Platonic homosexuality", Mary was happy to copy it out and prepared to read it to friends, telling them that though "in many particulars it shocks our present manners ... no one can be a reader of the works of antiquity unless they can transport themselves from these to other times and judge not by our but their morality". She also shared Shelley's republicanism. It infuriated her when the Emperor of Austria visited Rome in Holy Week and his officers pushed back the crowds with drawn swords. Enraged by the people's passivity, she wrote

Colin McCall
reviews *Mary
Shelley* by Miranda
Seymour
Picador £8.99

a short story, *Valerius, the Reanimated Roman*, in which a senator returns to find his great city in ruins and is distressed to see the Pantheon, the shrine of the old gods, converted into a Roman Catholic church. A sadness many of us share to this day.

But, says Miranda Seymour, *Valerius* is also an affectionate record of Mary's response to her own surroundings. Her favourite spot in Rome was above the great ruined arches of Caracalla's Baths, where she often went to read while Shelley, sitting nearby, worked on the last act of *Prometheus Unbound*. It was, in her own words, a place which "joins the beauty and fragrance of Nature to the sublimest idea of human power; and when so united, they have an interest and feeling that sinks deep into my heart".

By 1819, however, she had been a mother three times and lost each child (she lost five in all), and when little William died in that year she told Leigh Hunt that it was she who "ought to have died ..." "I am not fit to live" was how she put it to his wife. Neither Shelley nor Godwin offered the necessary sympathy. Shelley buried himself in his work, and Godwin, worried that, like her mother, Mary Wollstonecroft, Mary might attempt suicide, stressed that it was her duty not to give up, "agreeing to be nothing". She, too, turned to writing: a novel, *Matilda*, which Seymour finds chiefly of interest as a work of self-revelation that repelled her father with its flaunting of the idea of death. Godwin, however, found *The Cenci* one of his son-in-law's finest works, although it drew upon Mary's misery for the portrait of Beatrice Cenci.

There was no doubt about Godwin's enthusiasm for his daughter's masterpiece, which most people know through films, rather than reading. *Frankenstein* was "the most wonderful work to have been written at twenty years of age" (she was actually 19). The circumstances of its writing are well known, but bear repeating. Mary set the scene: a cold summer evening in Geneva in 1816 crowded round a blazing fire with Byron and Shelley. "We will each write a ghost story", said Byron, "and his proposition was acceded to". A tale from either of her "friends" would be "far more acceptable to the public than anything I can ever hope to produce", wrote Mary in her 1817

preface. In fact, hers was the only one completed.

Frankenstein is a great work, says Miranda Seymour, "because we can read what we will from it. It has the resilience, the elasticity and the power of myth. Writers and critics have, since Mary's death, uncovered more ways of interpreting it than the young author can ever have dreamed of ..." One of the lessons her biographer sees in it is the danger of scientific experiment without full thought for the results.

Seymour finds many varied influences at work: writings by both Mary's parents; Humphry Davy's "lucid accounts of chemical experiments" and *Paradise Lost* among them. The difference from the last, in the Creature's case, is that his translation into a force for evil is directly influenced by his education. "Instinctively benevolent, he learns from the history of mankind to murder and to be cunning in his crimes. Again and again, Mary reiterated the notion, one dear to her father's heart, that man is a social animal, civilised by the knowledge that he is part of a group which shares the same needs. Against it, she set her own beliefs that it is from this supposedly civilised body that the Creature discovers its potential for evil".

As I have intimated, Mary Shelley's life changed dramatically after Shelley's death. She set out to popularise his work and "revised" it in the process. She didn't want to offend the poet's father, from whom she hoped to receive financial support. But Sir Timothy regarded her as the woman who chose to be his son's mistress when Shelley was already married to Harriet Westbrook and had "in no small degree, as I suspect, estranged my son's mind from his family, and all his first duties in life". Sir Timothy would be willing to maintain his grandson, Percy, her surviving child, but only on the condition that the boy was removed from his mother's care and fostered by a third party. Mary rightly refused and looked after Percy herself.

But, however much we sympathise with her, we can only regret her meddling with the works. She particularly disliked *Queen Mab* and approved a version "Free from All Objectionable Passages". And her baleful influence continued after her death. I take down my old (1908) Oxford edition of the poems and turn, for instance, to Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, his response to the Peterloo massacre, which ends with the rousing lines: "Rise like Lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number — / Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you — / Ye are many — they are few".

And I read in Mary Shelley's note that Shelley's revolutionary desire "had faded with early youth".

a plan for them." (I apologize for my friend's intemperate language but, in the circumstances, who can blame her?)

Is there no catastrophe terrible enough to shake the faith of people, on both sides, in God's goodness and power? No glimmering realisation that he might not be there at all: that we just might be on our own, needing to cope with the real world like grown-ups?

Billy Graham, Mr Bush's spiritual advisor, said in Washington Cathedral: "But how do we understand something like this? Why does God allow evil like this to take place? Perhaps that is what you are asking now. You may even be angry at God. I want to assure you that God understands those feelings that you may have."

Well, that's big of God, I must say. I'm sure that makes the bereaved feel a whole lot better (the pathetic thing is, it probably does!). Mr Graham went on:

"I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering. The Bible

says God is not the author of evil. It speaks of evil as a mystery."

Less baffled by this deep theological mystery were two of America's best-known televangelists, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. In a conversation on Robertson's lucrative television show (religion is tax-exempt), they knew exactly where to put the blame. The whole thing was obviously caused by America's sin. Falwell said that God had protected America wonderfully for 225 years, but now, what with abortion and gays and lesbians and the ACLU, "all of them who have tried to secularize America ... I point the finger in their face and say you helped this happen." "Well, I totally concur," responded Robertson. Bush, to his credit, swiftly disowned this characteristic example of the religious mind at work.

The United States is the most religious country in the Western world, and its born-again Christian leader is eyeball to eyeball with the most religious people on Earth. Both sides believe that the Bronze Age God of Battles is on their side. Both take risks with the world's future in unshakeable, fundamentalist faith that He will grant them the victory. Incidentally, people speak of Islamic funda-

mentalists, but the customary genteel distinction between fundamentalist and moderate Islam has been convincingly demolished by Ibn Warraq in his well-informed book, *Why I Am Not a Muslim*.

The human psyche has two great sicknesses: the urge to carry vendetta across generations, and the tendency to fasten group labels on people rather than see them as individuals. Abrahamic religion gives strong sanction to both – and mixes explosively with both. Only the wilfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today. Without a doubt it is the prime aggravator of the Middle East.

Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and speak out. Things are different now. "All is changed, changed utterly."

• Richard Dawkins is professor of the Public Understanding of Science, University of Oxford, and author of *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker* and *Unweaving the Rainbow*.

points of view

Morality and science

IAN Quayle was right to call my attempt to distinguish science from religion "convoluted" (*Points of View*, December). I tried to fit an essay into a letter, and when I saw it in print I cringed!

However, Ian criticises my definitions and goes on to define "moral" in terms of "goodness", which is begging the question: Ian, the Taliban, the Pope and I would all have different ideas of "goodness"!

Religionists often try to portray "science" as "the new religion".

Sometimes, but less often, they try to portray religious belief as logical, rational or "scientific". Ian and I would no doubt agree that the religionists are wrong in both cases.

The main distinction I was trying to draw was that science is not seen as "moral" in its own right by scientists, but religion is seen as "moral" in its own right by religionists. Someone who believes that religion is "inherently moral" is delegating moral judgements to someone/something outside themselves.

A scientist (in the widest sense) recognises that we have to make our own moral judgements about how we use the products of science and that we are personally

responsible for our decisions.

MIKE WILKINSON
Nottingham

Why proselytising is bad

MISSIONARIES who convert to Christianity people in Afghanistan and other non-Christian countries have much to answer for, however sincere they may be.

Proselytes are often cast out by their families and scorned by their community, sometimes becoming destitute and dependent on the charity of the mission that has brought about their situation. Many missionaries consider this martyrdom a victory and a sign of grace.

Religion is a product of culture: each religion is an expression of the needs and values of a particular culture.

Missionaries have no business attempting to impose a foreign and unrelated religion on often naive and impressionable people. Conversion is disruptive and divisive and often results in great suffering, as we have seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere. With good reason, proselytising is against the law in some countries.

HELEN COX
Bath

What's sauce for the goose...

LONG ago I forecast that state funding of "mainstream" Christian and Jewish schools would eventually inspire the proposition that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for all the ugly ducklings. So, in Britain's multicultural, multireligious society, let us rejoice at the potential multiplicity of parental choice.

Chiefly to be welcomed are the fundamentalist Islamic schools run by a consortium of ayatollahs, mullahs, muftis and imams. All these institutions will be single-sex, as girls won't be able to attend. Instead, they'll lead happy, fulfilling lives performing domestic duties and helping out in the family business (behind the scenes, of course). In the schools the language of instruction will be Arabic, while religious education and prayers will occupy at least half the syllabus. Government inspectors will be forbidden to monitor the practical classes in chemistry and biology. History and geography will insightfully divide the world into Muslims and infidels.

In most respects the mirror image of the fundamentalist Islamic schools will be the

(Continued on p14)

ultra-orthodox Jewish academies, with Hebrew replacing Arabic. Fewer lucky children will have the opportunity of entering these halls of learning as their mothers' ethnicity is an entry requirement.

Inspired by these examples, Catholics and Protestants will be encouraged to abandon any semblance of moderation and modernity. Ultramontane Roman Catholic schools, run by a newly created Torquemada Trust, will revive the mediaeval world-view, with happy consequences for theological, historical and social studies. Pupils - especially the duller ones - can rejoice that science (including Creation Science) won't be taught. Art classes will feature depicting the martyrdoms of Jesus and Saints Peter, Sebastian, Catherine and Lawrence, and the just punishment of the damned in hellfire.

Ulster-inspired Free Presbyterian schools will begin each day unfurling banners of the Pope and reciting Apocalyptic denunciations of the Scarlet Woman, Whore of Babylon, Anti-Christ and Beast (666). Dedicated to General William Booth and Major Barbara, Salvation Army schools will concentrate on the socially useful disciplines of tambourine and trumpet playing, public relations, tear-jerking, fundraising and expanding property empires. (Thank God for the Salvos!) When not succumbing to poison from ritually handled snakes or heat stroke from frenetic dancing or trauma from exorcisms, Pentecostalist students will amaze and delight language examiners by speaking in tongues.

Alas, I've no space to welcome the TV-based Worldwide Church of God and Assemblies of God, the Moonies, Maharishis, Rajneeshis, Scientologists, Children of God, Divine Light Mission, Aetherius Society, Astrological Society, Branch Davidian, Hare Krishna, Falun Gong, Supreme Truth and the rest - all conducting schools by courtesy of liberal-minded British taxpayers.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

Madalyn O'Hair

TOO many atheists have a god called Madalyn O'Hair. And to some people, the farther away she was, the better she looked. Up close, though, she wasn't worthy of veneration.

When Barbara Smoker writes that Fred Woodworth "vilifies the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair, when she can no longer defend herself", she conveniently ignores the fact that Fred has been exposing Madalyn O'Hair's tyrannical behavior since 1989.

when she tried to have him jailed on a false mail fraud charge. Had O'Hair been similarly analyzed starting about 25 years prior, atheists in this country would have been spared a lot of embarrassment.

Ms Smoker thinks it "absurd" that she might regard O'Hair as a celebrity to be worshipped. The picture accompanying her letter belies her claim: she's giddy with delight to share a photograph with O'Hair.

American Atheists was less an atheist group than O'Hair's personality cult.

O'Hair's "love of human freedom" was limited to herself. Since she didn't think that James Hervey Johnson should have the freedom to choose who should receive his assets when he died, she sued for control of his estate. She also sued Lawrence Wright and Brian Lynch because she didn't think they should have the freedom to accurately report what went on inside of her office building. None of these suits were successful.

She filed other lawsuits against former members and employees, mostly alleging mailing-list theft. These suits were the economic equivalent of police brutality victims being charged with aggravated assault.

Ms Smoker fails to adequately answer why Jon Murray wanted gold coins. Given the evidence presented at the Gary Karr trial, it remains possible that the Murray O'Hairs attempted to flee overseas, hired David Waters to help them out, and got double-crossed when the gold coins were delivered. O'Hair and Jon Murray met Waters at an Austin restaurant for about 10 days straight during mid-August, 1995, so it's pretty obvious no kidnapping was involved.

Furthermore, Jon Murray had the chance to alert the authorities that he, his mother and his sister were in danger when he picked up the gold coins, as he was in a room with the coin dealer and an off-duty San Antonio policeman, and no one else, for about an hour. The fact that he didn't ask for help, that he didn't even show any nervousness while he counted out the coins, indicates that his actions were voluntary and purposeful. Jon was also on his own for a few hours in New Jersey when he made the money transfer, and all three of them went to Bonnie Jean's bar in San Antonio in early September without chaperones. Had they felt endangered, they could have called for help on any of those occasions.

Madalyn O'Hair discredited every cause she attached herself to.

Those who continue to align themselves with her, after knowing the kind of disgrace she was, have abandoned any claim to credibility.

What Madalyn O'Hair really thought of atheists might best be described in her own

words. During a speech in Berkeley, California, she said, "I do not like atheists very much, if at all", and "Atheists are faithless, gutless, and brainless, and they cannot inherit the future".

She proudly claimed to be the most hated woman in America, and for a while it was true: she was hated not only by her natural enemies, but by those who would have been her friends.

JOHN RUSH
USA

Mary Whitehouse

I SHOULD just like to add a couple of points to your excellent obituary of Mary Whitehouse (*Freethinker*, December 2001)

Most people remember her remarks at the inaugural meeting of the Viewers' and Listeners' Association when she claimed "Last night I sat down to watch the TV at 6.30 pm, and I saw the dirtiest programme ..."

Years later, she was asked in a TV interview what that "dirty programme" was, and she confessed that she "could not remember"! A pity that she was never asked that question in a court of law, where an alert barrister would have leaped upon her answer as an admission that there never was any "dirty programme" and that her entire career was based on a lie!

In an episode of *Till Death Us Do Part*, there is a scene where Alf Garnett is discussing the previous night's instalment of the programme *Question Time*, in which Mrs Whitehouse had appeared, with his friend Bert (Arthur English); Alf asks Bert if he had seen Mrs Whitehouse railing against "all this hardcore porn on television"; Bert replies that he had, and that he had subsequently sat up all night channel-hopping, hoping to see some of this "hardcore porn on TV" for himself, and had been most disappointed when he was unable to find any. (In all fairness, this was before the advent of Channel 5!)

He wondered how that it was that Mrs Whitehouse could claim to be an expert on a subject that quite clearly did not exist.

In a recent comment in the London *Evening Standard*, the writer A N Wilson answered the great mystery of how it was that Mrs Whitehouse, who claimed to be an "ordinary housewife" could afford to pursue expensive litigation against the various theatres and art galleries that she saw as "undermining the moral fabric of the nation" (her usual response to this question was to accuse the person asking it of being homosexual); the answer was that she was financed by Moral Rearmament, a group of reactionary clerics and businessmen who saw themselves as the country's last bastion against the "overwhelming tide of permissiveness". Wilson summed her up perfectly:

"Sincere she may have been, but she was a very silly woman".

On another matter, on the treatment of children in church-run homes ("Abuse the kids and make them cry", December 2001) the Forde Enquiry, a Royal Commission investigating allegations of institutional child abuse in church-run children's homes in Queensland, Australia, has recommended that under no circumstances should the Church be allowed to run children's homes! The reason they gave was that, since Christianity teaches that sex of any kind, even within marriage, is "Original Sin", since children are born as a result of sexual activity then the Church must believe that they are *innately* evil and require regular beatings to drive the evil out of them! This was particularly marked in homes run by the Christian Brothers. The Commission blamed the over-reliance of the State of Queensland on religious charities to provide children's homes, being reluctant to provide state-run facilities, on the fact that Queensland is a "hillbilly state", which regards corruption and mutual back-scratching as "the normal way of doing business". Is this a pointer to how this country could end up, if Blair *et al* are successful in the quest to transfer the provision of social services to "faith-based" institutions?

KEITH J. ACKERMANN
Tilbury

IT WAS good of you to devote so much attention in your December 2001 issue to the passing of Mary Whitehouse CBE.

Most freethinking humanists, I am sure, aspire to the improvement of the human condition because for them life now is all there is. The campaign for better television, waged by Mrs Whitehouse and others over the last 40 years, has at least given rise to debate and discussion about the impact of the media on our society. In so far as this has contributed to an overall appreciation of the harmful effects, this has benefited everyone. Secular humanists surely cannot rejoice in some of the intellectually bankrupt excesses the broadcasters like to prescribe for our entertainment?

In the interests of accuracy it is just not true that Mrs Whitehouse was an "enthusiastic supporter of the South African apartheid regime". Whilst she may not have joined in with the raucous left-wing clamour to overthrow the regime, this cannot reasonably be construed to suggest the falsehood in your tribute.

JOHN BEYER
Director
Mediawatch-uk

Editor's note: Following a trip to South Africa in the 1970s, Mrs Whitehouse returned with warm words of praise for the regime.

Later, on a radio phone-in programme in London, she repeated that the British view of blacks being repressed under apartheid was wholly inaccurate and that wherever she travelled in that country she met "happy, smiling black people content with their lot". I have a clear recollection of challenging her on that phone-in, telling her bluntly that she had been duped by her South African hosts. My last words to her, before they pulled the plug on me, was: "You believe in God, Mrs Whitehouse. That's means you're prepared to believe any old rubbish"

Origins of Islam

IN reply to John Lawrence ("Mohammed and the Koran", *Points of View*, December 2001), the body of ideas, Islam, preceded the Koran which was published after the death of Mohammed (c 632 AD).

In his lifetime he absorbed ideas from the Jewish and Christian tradition, then hundreds of years old. In the words of G Margoliouth, in his introduction to *The Koran*, translated from the Arabic by J M Rodwell (1953):

"The matter is for the most part borrowed but the manner is all the prophet's own. Biblical reminiscences, Rabbinic legends, Christian tradition drawn from distorted apocryphal sources and native heathen stories all pass through the prophet's fervid mind and thence issue in strange new forms, tinged with poetry and enthusiasm and well adapted to enforce his own view of life and duty; to serve as an encouragement to his faithful adherents and to strike terror into the hearts of his opponents.

"As a book, it used the prophet's disjointed notes, speeches and the memories of those who listened to him."

Hubert Berg on Wansborough's *Quranic Studies* (1997) wrote: "Neither the Koran nor Islam is a product of Mohammed or even Arabia. During the early Arab expansion beyond Arabia there is no evidence that the conquerors were Muslim. Almost 200 years later "early" Muslim literature began to be written by the Mesopotamian clerical elite. The implication may be that the hitherto secular polity discovered and adopted a new movement which, though non-Jewish and non-Christian, was a product the of Judaeo-Christian sectarian milieu.

"This movement and its history were soon Arabized. The Koran, however, took somewhat longer to be canonized, not until circa 800 CE."

STEWART VALDAR
London

FOR those who wish to see into the origins of Islam, the best and most scholarly book is

Hagarism by Patricia Crone and M Cook (Cambridge 1977). There, the enormous borrowings of Mohammed from Christian, Judaic and Samaritan sources are meticulously explored. But if you don't want such scrupulous attention to a mass of wide reference the long chapter on the Koran in Ibn Warraq's book, *Why I am not a Muslim* (Prometheus 1995) is excellent. Then, there is *The Origins of the Koran* edited by Ibn Warraq. I have lost the publisher detail but the ISBN number is 1-57392-198-X. I would be zindiq indeed if I didn't add here that the Koran wasn't created in the last decade of the seventh century; there/here it was/is/has been/will have been always.

And the Prime Minister is no slouch in these matters. Regularly insisting that Islam means peace, clearly he is on to something the rest of the confraternity of scholars is ignorant of or has strangely – mischievously? – overlooked, for the late, celebrated Ayatollah Khomeini had explained: "The sword is the key to Paradise which can be opened only for holy warriors." There are hundreds of other psalms and hadiths, urging Muslims to value war and fight etc.

But as Mr Blair has read one of the sources, so we are told, three times, he will be aware of the penalty for "invention". (Hadith 28: Beware of newly-invented matter for every invented matter is an innovation and every innovation is a going-astray and every going-astray is in hell-fire.)

So, currently and quite properly, there is irritation with the sort of people who resort to such as Ibn Warraq, Crone and Cook etc, and must be, therefore, "economic with the truth". A list of recommended authorities might possibly be had from the Cabinet Office in return for an sae.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

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(preferably typed) to
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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, February 3, 4.30 pm. Public Meeting.

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: Secretary Alex Hill 0208 741 7016 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.

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.

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, January 8, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

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, January 31, 8pm. Barbara Smoker: *Towards a Secular State*.

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, January 17, 7.15 pm Neil Jenkins: *The Origins of Religion*.

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, February 6, 8 pm. John Hughes: *Shelley, Godwin and Wollstonecraft*.

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, January 9, 7.30 pm. Denis Cobell: *God in Public Life*.

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.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

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