

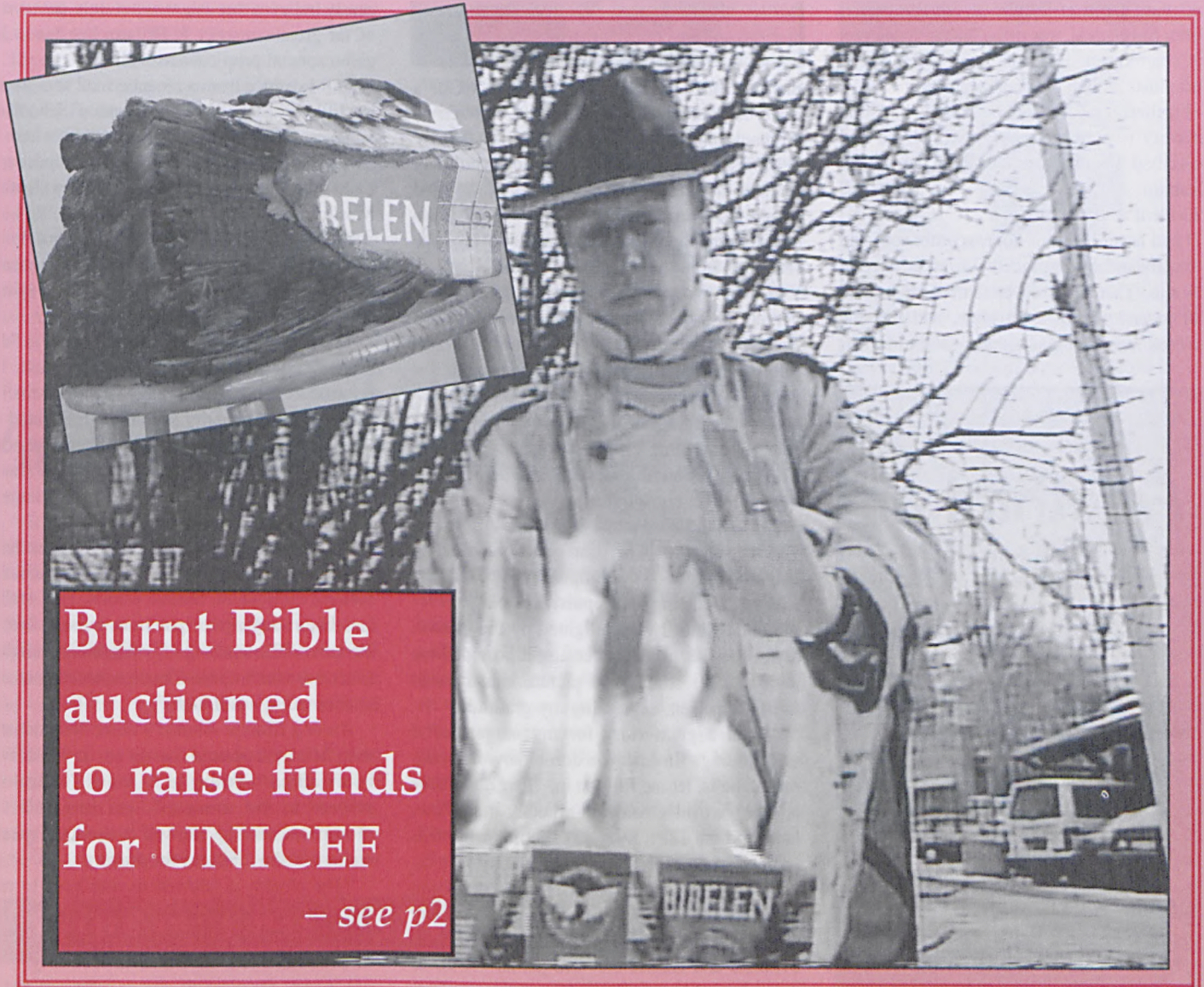
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March 2002

# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



**Burnt Bible  
auctioned  
to raise funds  
for UNICEF**

*– see p2*

## Also in this issue:

A close encounter with Islam – *p5*

Latest on faith schools – *centre pages*

Intelligent people 'more likely to reject religion' – *p10*

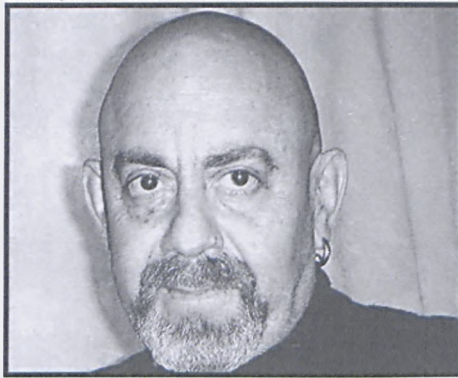
# freethinking out loud: barry duke

KIRSTEN Johansen, of Denmark, is not a happy bunny. Last month, for reasons known only to herself, this total stranger contacted me via e-mail to enlist my help to "stop a blasphemous website".

Clearly mistaking me for someone who would be upset by the odd spot of blasphemy and come dashing to her aid, she informed me that **horrorcomix.com** was a "satanic" site, and that the man behind it, Danish writer Søren Mosegaard, was using his site to auction the charred remains of an enormous bible to "occultists and all kinds of satanists".

Furthermore, Mosegaard had had the temerity to write a novel in which he had described people like the Pope and Billy Graham as "cult leaders", and the US President a "drunk driver".

I had never heard of **horrorcomix.com** and – understandably intrigued – went at once to the site. There I discovered that Mosegaard had indeed set fire to a bible, and that the remains were being auctioned – not to further



the aims of Satanism, but in aid of UNICEF's drive for emergency supplies for children in Afghanistan. He is hoping to raise \$120,000.

Mosegaard explains that he had publicly torched the bible a few years back "to remind people all over the world of a thousand years of Christian book-burning", and "to provoke reactions from the extreme Christian right".

He then wove these reactions into a controversial 880-page novel *The Creature from Bethlehem*, produced by Denmark's largest publisher, Gyldendal. One commentator, Klaus Rothstein, of the *Berlingske Tidende* newspaper, said that its horror-comedy theme was "like nothing else in Danish literature ... Christianity and the Church are depicted as manipulative, conspiratorial, corrupt, criminal, perverted and obsessed with power". But Lars Tjalve, of the Christian daily *Kristeligt Dagblad*, wrote: "I don't think I have ever read a more disgusting and repulsive book."

I must admit I was delighted by the discovery of the site, not least because it provided me with an interesting cover picture, and I wrote to Ms Johansen, expressing my gratitude.

"What a great story for my magazine," I said, adding: "In case you don't know what my magazine is, let me fill you in. *The Freethinker* is the world's oldest atheist magazine, launched in 1881 by G W Foote, who was promptly put in prison for 'blasphemy'.

"Blasphemy is a very curious crime, don't you think? As no gods exist, one cannot commit any crimes against them, but Christians (and Muslims and Hindus etc) still get all hot under the collar when the likes of me point out how utterly stupid – and very dangerous – their gods and beliefs can be. One need look no further than the toppling of the twin towers to see that.

"Christians are particularly stupid when it comes to sites like **horrorcomix**. I had never heard of it until I received your unsolicited e-mail. Now, thanks to you, I will be publicising the burnt bible auction, and will actively promote the book you describe as 'blasphemous'.

"Finally, may I ask what is this obsession you Christians have with burning things? If it's not Harry Potter books, it's records, or films or videos. I think what you would really like to do

is burn people, as you did in the Middle Ages!

"Good riddance to Christianity, Islam and all the other poxy religions that infect our planet!"

WHY would a country – largely indifferent, and in many instances openly hostile to its own state religion – cheerfully embrace an alien one? I ask this question because there appears to be a breed of Muslim in Britain who sincerely believes that Islam is not only deserving of far greater respect in Britain, but has to be given special privileges as well!

This I deduce from a recent e-mail sent to me by Iftikhar Ahmad, of the London School of Islamics, who says that British society, which is "institutionally racist", must learn to respect and understand the Islamic faith and the British Muslim community.

"Muslims," he adds cryptically, "are not Asian because their needs and demands are entirely different from other communities. It is meaningless to call a Muslim an Asian."

The source of this institutional racism is "the British education system which must be reformed. Those state schools where Muslim pupils are in a majority should be designated as Muslim community schools managed and controlled by Muslim educational trusts and charities." (And subsidised, of course, by the largely atheistic British taxpayer.)

Furthermore, "qualified Muslim teachers should be recruited from abroad to teach the national curriculum, Islamic studies, and Arabic and Urdu languages right from nursery level." However, "the teaching of comparative religion is not required because Islam teaches respect and understanding of all faiths."

Among Iftikhar Ahmad's other demands are that Muslims should be given at least two hours off each Friday to attend "obligatory prayers in the mosques" and that "all the mosques should be allowed to use loud speakers to call the devotees for prayers.

"The church is allowed to ring bells to call for Christian worship but mosques are not allowed to do so. This indicates that the spirit of Crusade is still alive in British society."

I know bugger all about "the spirit of Crusade" but I do know a great deal about noise pollution, living in a street which doubles as a 24-hour race track for police cars, fire engines, and assorted speed fiends in souped-up motors. There is also a nearby church which frenziedly lets rip with its awful bells at entirely inappropriate moments.

I am sure the millions like me who are being driven to distraction by the din of modern life would be filled with absolute dread at the thought of having existing noise levels cranked up several notches by wailing bloody imams calling the foolish to prayer.

## The Freethinker

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## International Rationalist Award for Jim Herrick

JIM Herrick, editor of the *New Humanist* and Chair of G W. Foote & Co. publishers of the *Freethinker*, has been given the International Rationalist Award 2002.

He received the award in person at the conference of the Indian Rationalist Association in Delhi in February.

It was announced that the award was given for "dedicated work for several decades in the promotion of rationalism ... in his own country and all over the world ...

"His tireless efforts in defence of the liberation of the human mind from the bondage of religion, blind belief and all kinds of dogmatism has made a lasting impact on the intellec-

tual climate of our times ... He has authored books with deep understanding about the history of the rationalist movement and written hundreds of articles and carried the ideals of rationalism with deep commitment."

In accepting the award Jim Herrick spoke of the long-standing links between Indian and British rationalists.

He said that for the twenty-first century we needed "rationalism plus", that is reason "to solve problems, work out strategies and debunk nonsense."

He said that the occasion was a call for him and all rationalists to renew their efforts towards this important goal.

## Surrey vicar slammed for 'unbelievable' attack on Islam

A VICAR who claimed in a parish magazine that "one of the spiritual roots of Islam is violence" has outraged Christians and Muslims alike.

Reverend Peter May of St Bartholomew's Church in Horley said in the article that the events of September 11 left no doubt that Allah and basic Islam represented a violent spiritual force.

He added that there was a spirit of deception in the religion, as it purports to be peaceful..

He was not, he said, worried about Muslims being offended by his comments, as he believed it to be the truth. His comments drew

a swift response from Zulfikar Kahn Noon, president of the Islamic Centre in Redhill, who said: "This is unbelievable. The Koran is full of love for humanity. That is the basic pillar of Islam."

Canon Bruce Saunders, of the Southwark Diocese, added: "Little is gained by focusing on the worst aspects of another faith. Present circumstances require us to practise the Christian virtue of looking for the best in one another."

Ruth Rainbird, a deacon at St Andrew's, Limsfield Chart, added that "all the great religions should co-operate with one another."

## "God is a git," says Muriel Gray

TV VIEWERS in Scotland were amazed to hear the well-known broadcaster and author Muriel Gray say that if God exists, he's "a git"

In an interview on the *Eye to Eye* programme on Grampian and Scottish Television last month, she said religion was holding back progression of the human race, and if she met God she would kick him where it hurts.

Ms Gray told interviewer Catherine Deveney: "I am so jealous of people who have a faith on one hand and contemptuous on the other.

"I understand what that must feel like, a return to that infantile delight of having some-

body care for you. There is a plan and it's all worked out, but it is self-evident to me that it is not true."

Ms Gray said she despises religion: "It is so damaging. In terms of the progression of the human race, it seems so clear to me that it is that single vice that is holding back the entire process."

Asked her reaction if she turned out to be wrong and met God on the Day of Judgement, she said: "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to deliver a swift boot to God's testicles before I am tossed into Hell, because if I am wrong he's a git"

## Snippets



A SELF-STYLED Muslim sheikh who allegedly called for Jews to be killed was charged last month with incitement to murder. Abdullah el-Faisal (above) was arrested in London. Concerns surrounding the activities and alleged comments of the sheikh had been highlighted in the House of Commons following claims that the East London religious leader had toured the country calling for the killing of Jews and infidels.

AN Italian priest has been fined because a church bells tape he plays is too loud. Following complaints from local residents in the town of Crema, a local court fined Father Bruno, of the Santa Maria Assunta ad Ombriano church, the equivalent of £95 for disturbing the peace. The priest will also have to pay any medical expenses incurred by his neighbours as a result of hearing problems caused by the noise.

"BE it known from this day forward that Satan, ruler of darkness, giver of evil, destroyer of what is good and just, is not now, nor ever again will be, a part of this town of Inglis. Satan is hereby declared powerless, no longer ruling over, nor influencing, our citizens," is the wording of a declaration posted in public by Carolyn Risher, Mayor of the Florida town of Inglis.

But the declaration has been disowned by the Town Commission, which decided it was the work of an individual, not a town official, because it was never officially sanctioned.

Mayor Risher said she had been prompted to post the declaration in various parts of the town through her concern over issues like "drunken drivers, fathers who molest their daughters and people who steal".



A THINKER whose name often appears in these pages is Richard Dawkins. Opponents often try to dismiss him as a kind of atheist fundamentalist and as a simplistic and unfeeling materialist. They're wrong, of course. Dawkins, a man of wide-ranging talents and interests, is hard for them to deal with precisely because he does feel deeply and is passionate. His "offence" is that he has dared to take real science and rigorous thinking into those areas of human concern that theocrats and god-botherers have tried to claim as their own. The results are frequently devastating.

Dawkins' books are deservedly well-known. But his essays, lectures and journalism are equally thoughtful and deserve just as much attention.

The Internet enables readers to have access to many items that would formerly have been inaccessible. Visit the "World of Dawkins" and take a look. Don't be put off

by the disclaimer that it's not an "official" site – Dawkins himself directs people to it from his own website (which is very much just a name, rank and number affair) with this quote – "I have no official website. John Catalano has an excellent unofficial one which does everything I could possibly do if I had a site of my own, and much more. It is located at <http://www.world-of-dawkins.com/>".

If Dawkins is mentioned, so too must Stephen Jay Gould. There's a good site at [http://www.freethought-web.org/ctrl/news/stephen\\_gould.html](http://www.freethought-web.org/ctrl/news/stephen_gould.html).

It's the same mix as the Dawkins site – reviews, lectures and the rest. Real evolution anoraks can flick back and forth and give themselves headaches over the Gould-Dawkins "punctuated equilibrium" debate. The rest of us can just enjoy Gould's sparkling wit and apparently inexhaustible knowledge about everything!

Now time for something very different. This

site comes with a health warning – visit <http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/> at your peril, and remember, these guys are not entirely joking! It's a kind of nihilist-Dadaist site and takes "freethinking" just about as far as it's possible to go – in this one direction at least. My own thoughts about it, for what they're worth, are that the Church of Euthanasia exemplifies the kind of despair and anger that humanists sometimes feel but which for most act as a spur to positive action. "Anti humanism" here is at its rawest – and it's even more scary than a visit from your neighbourhood evangelicals!

Now hold on to your hats, everyone!

The Rapture is coming...and you gotta be ready. Find out how at <http://www.raptureme.com/index.html>. This is a splendid site! It's a mixture of obsessiveness, paranoia, pedantry and illiteracy all wrapped up in the gummy ticky-tacky of religious mania. Actually, I'm with the Christians on this one, and hope that the Rapture comes quickly – and takes as many of the daft blighters as possible back to their home planet!

Now perhaps an antidote to all this madness is needed. Visit <http://www.crank.net/> and select your own. Its subtitle, "Cranks, crackpots, kooks and loons on the net" just about sums it up.

It's a very, very big site – but is clear and well-organised too. Of course, one person's crank is another person's guru: so don't be too surprised if one of your own cherished notions is listed here labelled as confused or illucid!

It was through one of the links on this site that I discovered the e-magazine *The Despondent*. It is at <http://www.thedespondent.com/index.htm> and it's a home-grown British publication. Satirical, bilious, slick and frequently very funny, it's well worth a look.

Have a look too at a new and growing site – 'Sma' Vennel'. It's at <http://www.smavennel.org.uk> and is a magazine of the libertarian left. It has very good links (some useful and unusual ones) and has the potential to turn into a really excellent resource. It welcomes contributions and is refreshingly open and undogmatic in its approach. Support it in whatever way you can!

Lastly, just a few more suggestions *sans* critical comment:-

<http://www.rit.org/> (critical and independent thinking); <http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/> (japes and high jinks); <http://www.thehappyheretic.com/default.htm> (feisty stuff, and crisply atheistic) and, lastly, <http://adbusters.org/home/> (sick of advertising – this is the one for you!).

Your suggestions are welcomed. Please send them to [norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk](mailto:norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk).

## Litigious Christians win huge payouts

A WOMAN who fractured her arm when she was overcome by "the Holy Spirit" at a pentecostal church service has won \$80,000 (around £50,000) in damages.

Sophia Reitan, 65, from Long Island, New York, fell backwards while a church minister was blessing her.

The incident occurred in September, 1997, and Ms Reitan subsequently sued the Upper Room Tabernacle Church for \$4-million (£2.5-million).

Acting on behalf of Ms Reitan, lawyer Andrew Siben told the *New York Post*: "She was caused to fall by the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately there was no-one there to catch her when she fell."

Members of the congregation frequently tremble during services as a result of the Holy Spirit, then fall back when the minister gives them a push, Mr Siben said.

Court papers claimed the church should have provided safety devices including ropes or cushioning to catch falling worshippers.

On learning last month that the church's insurance company was prepared to settle with an \$80,000 payout, Ms Reitan said: "God loves me", but would not comment further.

Mr Siben said his client could not comment because "God told her not to speak

about the case. If God told her not to speak, she's not going to violate that," he said.

Another jubilant Christian is Kaziah Hancock, a Utah woman who won \$270,000 (around £169,000) in damages against a fundamentalist church which failed to deliver the Second Coming.

She was told she would meet Jesus in the flesh if she handed over land and water rights to the The True and Living Church of Jesus Christ of the Saints of the Last Days in Salt Lake City.

When the messiah didn't show up, she sued the church for breach of contract, fraud and emotional distress.

Ms Hancock agreed to give 67 acres of her farm and shares of water rights, worth a total of \$270,000 to the church for redistribution among members.

The church, headed by its founder Jim Harmston, was also ordered to pay \$20,000 (£14,000) to another woman, Cindy Stewart, who gave money from her retirement plan.

Harmston's attorney said that, in awarding the two women damages, the jury had set a "chilling precedent". He pointed out that if the verdict was upheld by the Supreme Court, "it will mean that anyone who has left a church and given donations while a member can later demand their money back."

## Steuart Campbell describes "a dialogue of the deaf – a close encounter I would not wish to have again!"

ON November 6, 2000, in "Islam Awareness Week", I spoke to the Edinburgh Humanist Group about my memorable encounter with Glasgow Muslims.

The Glasgow University Muslim Students' Association (GUMSA) had approached the Humanist organisations through the internet looking for someone to speak on "Is Jesus relevant to the modern world?". I volunteered, thinking that no one else was likely to do so and that at least I had some knowledge of the subject.

Later it turned out that GUMSA had arranged a series of "dialogues" from March 20-24 on the occasion of a visit to Glasgow by a Canadian Muslim leader. Shabir Ally is originally from Guyana but has lived in Canada for the last 20 years. He is a "self-taught expert on Comparative Religion" and regularly debates the matter. He has his own radio show in Toronto and had visited GUMSA in 1999. A leaflet about the visit is headed "The Awakening Has Begun" and seems concerned that "Muslims throughout the world are being misrepresented". GUMSA was formed in the late 1960s with the aim of clearing up misconceptions and creating an atmosphere "conducive to the Islamic spirit, wherein Muslim students at the University of Glasgow may practise and observe their religion".

Eventually, probably at Mr Ally's suggestion, I was billed as debating with him on the subject "Is there a God?"; I was described, correctly, as an atheist. The "dialogue" was to be held in the Wellington Church in University Avenue on the evening of March 23. On March 21 there was to be a similar "dialogue" with Christian doctor Peter Saunders on "This House believes Jesus was a Muslim"

In preparation, I looked at Mr Ally's website ([www.islaminfo.com](http://www.islaminfo.com)), which presents itself grandly as the "Islamic Information & Dawah Centre International". I was especially interested in its claims that Islam encourages the use of science and the scientific method and that the Koran anticipated modern scientific discoveries, showing that it was divinely inspired and that therefore God (Allah) exists. Of course close examination showed that the Koran was being distorted and reinterpreted, with a preference for poor English translations and an over-reliance on the confused scientific understanding of Dr Maurice Bucaille, the author of *The Bible, the Qu'ran and Science* (1975). Bucaille was a French (Catholic) surgeon who became the family physician of King Faisal and, evidently, an apologist for Islam. Ally's website pretends that Bucaille was a reputable scientist.

The Wellington Church was packed with Muslims (women upstairs) and a few brave Glasgow humanists (they had reserved 300

tickets for us!), including Alan Henness who had agreed to act as a co-chairman. The format did not facilitate dialogue; each speaker was allocated a set time to speak in rotation, from the high pulpit.

I went first, pointing out that the question posed was one about "truth" and that this was not attainable. Through science, we can "approximate" truth and this has not shown any evidence for the existence of a god. Moreover, since the existence of god would be extraordinary, the onus of proof was on those who claimed that god exists to show evidence. I did not have to show that he did not exist. In any case, as David Hume and Immanuel Kant showed, there could not be any evidence for the existence of a mysterious god. Nor was the existence of a god "necessary".

Occam's Razor (a basic principle of science) teaches that we should not multiply entities unnecessarily; in fact we can explain almost everything around us without invoking a god, the ultimate entity. Claims of revelation are worthless and useless as evidence. Not even the claims of Jesus or Mohammed are of any value and both were wrong about Jesus' identity. I emphasised that claims are not evidence and ended by claiming that belief in a god has led to much misery and death for countless

generations and that it distorts people's view of the world. Atheists believe that the cosmological claims of theists do not make sense and that they are mistaken. There is no god.

Mr Ally, in reply, naturally disputed that the onus of proof was on him and cited five reasons for believing in the existence of god, as follows:

1 The existence of the universe; God must have created it.

2 Argument from design (the Strong Anthropic Principle); since we exist in the universe, God must have intended us to be here.

3 Existence of moral values and the meaning of life. Without God there can be no morality.

4 The Koran, which reveals things unknown at the time.

5 People's experience of God (revelation).

He also showed some slides, but I could not see them.

I tried to answer these points, refuting Ally's arguments, but found it strange and surreal to be debating cosmology with him when the subject was beyond most of the audience. We spent some time debating the origin of the universe and the universal constants! Fortunately this is a subject I know something about, but my comments were wasted on both him and the audience. After a break, questions were directed at both Ally and me.

It was evident that the "dialogues" are arranged to give Ally a platform on which he can encourage the faithful and demonstrate his superiority and the inspiration of the Koran. It was in fact "a dialogue of the deaf" and a close encounter I would not wish to have again.

## Devout Muslim killed daughter

A DEVOUT Muslim has been jailed for life for murdering his 24-year-old daughter after discovering that she had a "secret" boyfriend

Faqir Mohammed flew into a rage when he came home to find his daughter, Shahida Perveen Mohammed, with a boyfriend in her bedroom.

When the boyfriend, student Bilal Amin, escaped by jumping out of an upstairs window, Mohammed grabbed his daughter in a headlock and repeatedly stabbed her in the head and stomach.

A jury at Manchester Crown Court last month found Mohammed guilty of murder and he was sentenced to life by the judge, Mr Justice Field.

Mohammed, a father of ten, described in court as a "strict" and "devout" Muslim, came home early from evening prayer at his local mosque on June 28 last year.

Tipped off on her mobile phone by her sister, Shahida immediately came downstairs, locking her bedroom door behind her, but unknown to her, her father had a spare key to her room. He found Mr Amin lying, fully-clothed, on Sahida's bed.

# learning to be an effective campaigner

IT is just a year ago that Tony Blair told a group of Muslims how truly wonderful their religion was. He painted a picture of tolerance, and a story put out by the Islamic News Agency said: "He described Islam as a 'deeply reflective and peaceful' and even a 'beautiful' religion that 'proclaims the sanctity of human life, the inviolability of human dignity and the equality of all, irrespective of race or background'."

Blair was offering his "sincerest best wishes" for the celebrations of *Eid al-Adha*, a festival that marks the willingness of the prophet Abraham to murder his son, Isaac.

I forget now how I came across this information. Possibly it was posted to a news-group or discussion list, and I followed the link. It certainly got me infuriated enough to send a complaining email to my MP, who was swift to reply. In it I asked: "How can Tony Blair, representing me, you and everyone else in the UK, say, on our behalves, that these people proclaim 'the sanctity of human life, the inviolability of human dignity and the equality of all, irrespective of race or background', when you know as well as I Muslims' attitudes towards women, homosexuals and men who don't wear beards?"

She responded very quickly, with some puzzlement: "I don't know the detail of any of Blair's speeches but take your points very much on board," she wrote back. "Particularly in light of this week's events perpetrated by the Taleban in Afghanistan [the destruction of the huge Buddha statues]. I will pass a copy of your message on to the Prime Minister's office and draw attention to your concerns."

When, six months later, I had not had a reply from the PM's office. I chivvied them, ending my letter: "I think the Prime Minister owes a response and an apology (although I am sure he will not have the visceral fortitude to give that) to people in this country and elsewhere who feel thoroughly disgusted that a Labour Prime Minister can stoop to such vote-catching tactics, and to hell with the victims of the group he is addressing." (It would not be long, remember, before the general election.)

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that there had been no reply. Only a few months ago in the *Freethinker* letters column I saw a similar complaint that the writer had received no response from someone or other in government. That they receive a lot of letters is indisputable; however, they should not make their problems our problems.

This time, though, I did get a reply – from one very annoying Stephen Clarke in the Direct Communications Unit – telling me that the PM had asked Mr Clarke to thank me,

and had "taken care note" of my views. He goes on, with typical civil servant's spinelessness and equivocation, to say: "Every religion in the world has its good and bad elements and the vast majority of Muslims are decent law-abiding people and Mr Blair condemns the extremist actions of any religious group."

Hmm. And yet, despite soundings from no less a body than Amnesty and other human rights groups and campaigners, the Blairs trotted off to Egypt for their winter hols, blithely ignoring the criticism, seemingly oblivious of the serious human rights controversy that has blown up in that country over the punishments meted out to a group of men accused of homosexual behaviour.

**When it comes to difficult issues such as religion and human rights, politicians and civil servants just don't have the bottle to cope with hard, reasoned argument. In this article ANDREW ARMITAGE uses his own experience with the Sir Humphreys of Downing Street to make a case for us all to become campaigners – in however small a way.**

But back to 2001, and Mr Stephen bloody Clarke. Naturally, I was incensed that he had insulted my intelligence by saying that Mr Blair had "taken careful note" of my letter. Let's get one thing clear before I go on: I do not believe that Prime Ministers should spend their time answering letters; I do not believe that the PM should necessarily have answered my letter personally, although I did suggest that, if he was in the habit of answering a sample personally, then this ought to be one of them.

Having told the silly man that it was flippancy in the extreme to say that every religion had its good and bad points (define "good", define "bad"), I decided to tear into him on the question of "law-abiding". "It is the law in some Muslim countries to flog in public," I informed him, "to stone, to behead, to amputate. Those officials are obeying the law and are, as such, law-abiding. So the term is meaningless unless you have first defined what you mean by 'law'; and, to use the term as a synonym for 'good', that law, too, must be deemed good." This, I told myself, was sure to blow this twerp's tiny mind.

Lest this turn out to be a rehashing of one annoyed subject's letter to his Prime Minister, I'll summarise. I believe I wrote a challenging letter that left anyone who tried to respond to it honestly with no option but to embarrass the Prime Minister. It ended with a dozen questions of the "if the answer to (1) is 'yes' and the answer to (3) is 'no', then what of ...?" variety. Was the PM, for instance, aware of

barbaric punishments practised in some countries? If so, would he condemn them? If so, would he condemn those Muslims in this country who agreed with them? I told him how Iqbal Sacranie of the British Muslim Council told Dr David Starkey in a Radio 4 programme in 2001 that homosexuality "brings harm to society and is the equivalent of murder". How, I wondered, did Mr Blair square that with this "beautiful" religion that proclaims "the inviolability of human dignity and the equality of all"?

You get the gist.

That letter was dated October 8. It was only after I had sent a reminder in January of this year, enclosing a copy of the whole epistle, that I got a reply. Well, of sorts. The reply was from one Julie Guilfoyle, informing me that my letter had now been forwarded to the Home Office.

You'll be in no doubt that I am still just a bit miffed by this shabby treatment. This whole sad story demonstrates how officials and politicians will use obfuscation, prevarication and procrastination to avoid having to explain themselves. Nonetheless, I believe it is important for all of us to write letters – and not only to write letters but to force a response. I believe it's important to take some time to put a reasoned argument that is hard to deny, let alone refute. We all have it in us to be campaigners. We do not have to belong to campaigning groups, although such a membership may help. We do not have to be high-profile crusaders. Those who say it does no good can say that only because people, in general, don't campaign.

My dealings with Sir bleeding Humphrey (yes, I'm still annoyed) at Number Ten will not change the world, but if enough letters are received by him and his cohorts, they will have to tell the politicians that they need to hone up on issues that matter and be prepared to cope with hard-edged and incisive argument.

Word processors and email have of course made it easier: you can visit websites and build your database of personnel in various government departments; you can fire off emails and faxes quickly; you can keep information in a searchable form; you can download documents and quote from them as liberally as you wish with copy-and-paste.

Those without the bee's knees in IT will no doubt have their own filing systems, and a good supply of stamps. One bit of advice: always send a copy of your letter to someone else (your MP, perhaps). Although it is ostensibly 'as a matter of courtesy', it tells the chief recipient that someone else has your complaint.

Oh, if I get anywhere with the Home Office, I'm sure the editor of the *Freethinker* will be pleased to know about it. But I doubt it, somehow.

• Andrew Armitage is editor of *Gay & Lesbian Humanist magazine*.

# are religion & science incompatible?

AMONG the views I have heard on the question of whether religion and science are compatible are these:-

1 There are two sources of knowledge, science and revelation (eg that of the prophet Mohammed). In cases of apparent conflict revelation (of course that of the speaker's own faith) takes precedence.

2 Religious authority (eg the Bible) is literally true. Apparent conflict with science is due either to scientists faking the evidence, or to God "planting" it, perhaps to test the faith of believers.

3 Religion and science present "different sorts" of truth. Science deals with facts and religion with "spiritual" truth; or sometimes, religion is symbolically or metaphorically true, not literally.

4 Science and religion deal with separate questions (roughly, what is and what ought to be), and hence cannot be in conflict unless they stray from their proper roles.

5 Science and religion adopt methods, assert some facts, and make some assumptions, that are contradictory and can be tested. When this is done science proves the more reliable source of knowledge. I wish to argue in favour of the last. I must first consider what science and religion are, or at least what I mean by the words. I mean by science an attempt to establish how things are, as objectively as may be, and subject to free independent testing. It is not a fixed body of knowledge, though progressively more reliable knowledge does accumulate through the scientific method, as we see for example in the treatment of disease.

Religion, one might say, covers a multitude of sins. There have been probably many thousands of religions varying widely in almost every respect. The chances of any one being true are statistically tiny, but let that pass. All religions I know of make assumptions (though not the same ones), for example about the structure of the world and its inhabitants, and the nature of human beings such as whether we are intrinsically good or bad, whether we survive death, etc. All make specific assertions of fact, for example historical events or miracles. All religions, even the most dogmatic, rest ultimately on faith. Reason and evidence are frequently deployed in support, but they are not allowed to *disprove* what the religion asserts. (It is true that in some cases a bit of doctrine will be admitted to be no longer tenable and abandoned, such as belief in the geocentric theory, but it is then normally claimed to be not a vital belief after all.)

I suggest that religion and science are incompatible in at least three ways. First, in their approach to the truth. I hold what is called a "correspondence" view of what truth is. There are objective facts that exist, and truth consists in describing these accurately. It is often

difficult to do this, and often difficult to be sure that we have done it. Nevertheless, progress is possible, in particular by the (scientific) method of proposing a view and testing it to see if it can be disproved. If so, we modify or abandon it; if not we continue to hold it pending further tests. Religion cannot take this approach: believers know their faith is true, and contradictory evidence must therefore be false. I reject the view that religion deals with a "different sort" of truth. This usually seems to mean, either ethical or moral issues which are a matter of decision, not truth; or individual experiences of a spiritual kind. These are certainly true in the sense that the individual really has an experience; but what it signifies and how it arises are subject to investigation like any other psychological phenomenon. (I cannot be refuted if I say I feel cold, even when the temperature is 30C – I might be ill or have just come from an even hotter environment.)

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## John Radford, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London, poses the question

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Nor will it do to say that doctrine is merely symbolic or metaphorical. It must be symbolic of some real thing, or lose all meaning. Christians are required to believe in the literal resurrection of Christ. If one says that the resurrection may not have happened but symbolises God's forgiveness, then it is in that forgiveness that one must literally believe. But the one is no more likely than the other.

Second, at least some fundamental assumptions made by religions are contradicted by science. Christianity, for example, assumes that human nature is intrinsically evil. The doctrine of original sin following from the fall of Adam is intended to explain this assumption. But psychological evidence tells me that it is nonsense.

We are all born with a variety of potentials, including those to do evil or good. These potentials vary greatly as between individuals, and are further modified by all sorts of environmental factors. What also varies is the degree of control over what we do. At an extreme, some individuals, and perhaps most of us in some circumstances, have little control over whether we act for good or bad. But in more favourable circumstances we can make rational choices. There is no universal built-in sin which must be "redeemed".

Again, many religions assume that this world must necessarily have been created by some supernatural being. The various creation myths

seek to explain how (and sometimes why) this happened. Again, there is no valid argument or scientific evidence for such an assumption.

Third, religions make specific assertions which science shows to be untenable. Many religions assert that there is life after death. Science tells us that body and individuality are dependent on each other, so that when the physical substrate decays, the person also ceases to exist. As I have put it, it is not that we are no more than physical bodies, but that we cannot be less than them: they are a necessary condition for existence.

Christianity rests on the doctrine that one historical individual in particular transcended death. Not only is this implausible scientifically, there is not a shred of reliable evidence for it. Again, religions often assert that individuals receive direct messages from God or gods. Undoubtedly some individuals hear voices, see visions etc. But the best hypothesis is that these come from within themselves. Apart from the lack of evidence that gods exist, the attribution is invariably to those of the individual's own culture. No-one has ever reported a revelation from Jesus who was previously unaware of him. If Jesus really does communicate, why is he so selective? Some Christians hold that bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. They don't. (A more sophisticated version holds that it is the Platonic "essence" that changes, not the substance. But there is no such essence as Plato believed in.)

The first of these three ways is the most fundamental. Faith cannot achieve progress in knowledge since it is arbitrary, rigid and undisprovable. When it is used as the basis for behaviour or for moral or ethical principles, it is bound to lead to error. Indeed I would argue that unchallengeable obedience is intrinsically neither moral nor ethical. Good conduct is a matter of human decision, but it must be based on sound knowledge, especially about ourselves. Science and reason are not infallible, but they are the best we have and, unlike faith, they accept that they are provisional, and so allow for progress. If this is so, one may ask why numbers of scientists hold religious beliefs. Scientists are no more immune to irrational thinking than others.

Mostly they are trained to apply their rationality in a specific field, and they may keep their beliefs in a separate box. However, the figures suggest that the more their science is concerned with people, the less religious they are. Fewer psychologists are religious than physicists. I suggest partly because they are brought up against the implausibilities of religion in respect of human behaviour.

# Faith Schools Remains Deaf to I

The great faith schools debate reached a climax in the House of Commons on February 6, when Frank Dobson (Lab) and Phil Willis (Lib Dem) sought to amend the Education Bill to require faith schools to take a proportion of their pupils from other faiths and none. A further amendment, moved by Dr Evan Harris, was intended to remove the discrimination on religious grounds in the employment of teachers in faith schools.

I sat through the six-hour debate on February 6, and heard MPs taking impassioned stands on this important topic. But with Labour whipping its members to vote against the amendments and the Tories being against them anyway, any rebel victory was doomed from the start. Nevertheless, such was the strength of feeling on the issue that around 45 Labour MPs defied the whip and voted against the Government.

The Bill is massive: 200 pages long, and so complicated it necessitated explanatory notes running to around 100 pages. (Incidentally, the National Secular Society's response was referred to in the official research paper prepared for MPs.) Yet only two days of debate were allotted to it.

Given that it was only in amendments rather than the Bill itself that faith schools were referred to, we were fortunate they were debated at all. Incredibly, in the event, the majority of the debate—to the Government's dismay—was devoted to faith schools.

Suspensions were expressed that the Government had tried to manipulate the business timetable of the House to curtail the debate on faith schools, or at least delay it (and the anticipated rebellion) past the copy deadline for the daily newspapers. These delaying tactics backfired, however, and the faith schools debate took up almost the entire second day.

A disturbing consequence of the long faith school debate was that the remaining 30 pages of amendments to the Bill were not voted on until late at night, without any debate – either in committee or on the floor of the house.

Another example of our democratic deficit was so little interest being shown in the opinions of the dissenters or the public by the Government, and their attempts to stifle publicity about it.

In other respects, though, it was reassuring to see that when such a great matter of conscience arises, the House of Commons can rise to the occasion. It was also refreshing to hear full-blooded expression of secular sentiments in Parliament.

Indeed, in moving the amendment (to



reduce the exclusivity of selection to those of the "appropriate" faith) Frank Dobson set out by describing himself as being of "no religious belief whatever". Readers may be surprised, however, that the co-mover of the amendment, Lib Dem Education spokesperson Phil Willis, is a believer and not really a secularist. He told the House that there were some "hon Members who would frankly like [faith] schools to go altogether. They have that point of view and they support [a] secular society. I do not and that is not Liberal Democrat party policy". Nevertheless, for believers to support this amendment, as many did in the interests of fairness and cohesion, was, in my view, to their utmost credit

Many of those supporting the amendment did not (openly, at least) oppose faith schools in principle. And even some of those who did, thought that—as we already have so many of them—it would not be practical to convert them. Then, thankfully, there were those MPs who expressed total opposition—most notably Alice Mahon, Piara Khabra, Dr Ashok Kumar and the NSS's own Dr Evan Harris.

Frank Dobson continued: "Some ... would question the very basis of a church-state relationship in which the taxpayer funds religious schools at all. Money taken from taxpayers of all faiths and of none is handed to various groups who knowingly discriminate against certain children and exclude them on the basis

of religion. ... People would agree that if we substituted the words 'race' or 'colour' for the word 'religion', such discrimination would be unacceptable."

He debunked the presumption that religious schools are superior, or that they exclusively promote "the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural well-being of children".

Mr Dobson drew attention to the substantial reduction since 1944 in the contribution required from the churches towards building costs of the schools they control (from 50 percent to 10 percent) and that the amendment was a reasonable *quid pro quo* for this. He concluded by referring to opinion polls critical of faith schools and pointing to religious organisations who state they aim for "inclusivity" but do not achieve that aim. It is only in cases where they do not achieve it that the amendment would make any difference, he noted.

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**'I urge the Prime Minister to listen to this debate and to those of us who have spoken against having more faith schools. Let him, for once, listen to us, especially after September 11. The last thing that we want is more division and segregation in society ... I have come to believe that in 2002 we must try to work towards a secular state education system that is bothered about education and not indoctrination.'**

**– Alice Mahon MP, House of Commons, February 6, 2002**

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Alice Mahon had already played a significant role in the run-up to the debate by sponsoring an Early Day Motion critical of faith schools.

When it came to the debate itself, she intervened during a speech being made by the Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris, to contradict her, despite both women sitting on the Labour benches: "My right hon Friend knows that the admissions policy in most church schools is built on a lie. She talks about the commonality between the church and the school. Why, then, do only about 8 percent of adults in this country attend church, whereas in America, where there is a separation of church and state education, the churches are full?"



# 5: Government Dissenting Voices

real life

Mrs Mahon's intervention provoked Estelle Morris into a candid declaration of her own beliefs: "People do not have to go to church to say that they belong to a particular faith. For the record, I am a confirmed member of the Church of England but, to be open about it, I do not attend church regularly: I go only at Christmas—and [to laughter]—for constituency carol services."

Ms Morris's tone was far from strident, and at times she turned to directly address her own back-benchers. What an extraordinary debate this was: the "enemy" was behind her and the Conservatives opposite, her friends. The two most religiophilic speeches were delivered from the Conservative benches by RC convert John Selwyn Gummer and Andrew Turner.

When Mrs Mahon got her own turn she really let rip: "The most important thing we can do is to help [pupils] to live together in understanding—not segregated and attending different schools. We shall then have a more cohesive and decent society.

"I also want to speak up for the 40 percent of people who admit to no religion. By and large, they have been excluded from the debate until now – and possibly from [Labour's] manifesto." (Frank Dobson had also bemoaned earlier the "rejection and exclusion" from religious schools of the children from non-religious families.)

"I am the child of humanist, socialist parents", Mrs Mahon continued. "I went to a church primary school because it was the only school in the village, so I had early experience of how it feels to be treated differently in school—because my parents were different.

"Like [Estelle Morris], I want a level playing field, but perhaps mine would be different: I want all our schools to be secular. Newfoundland has just got rid of its church schools. That is a good thing and will enhance integration. I realise that that course is not possible for us, but [the amendment] will help us to progress to greater integration.

"I challenge the notion that religion is a precondition for morality. It is not. A child brought up without religion can be a moral human being who knows the difference between right and wrong. We must challenge the notion that religion and morality are necessarily the same.

"My experience of life shows me that many agnostics, atheists and humanists are often more tolerant than religious people. Many of

my non-believer friends do not believe in capital punishment and do not want to drop bombs on civilians. However, I have many friends who are Christian or Muslim or from other faiths who hold the opposite view. We should not assume that just because people are religious they are superior to us. If we extend the number of faith schools, we are making the assumption that their religion makes them superior.

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## 'Does one need a working knowledge of Genesis to teach geology?'

– Dr Evan Harris MP

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"I want to sing the praises of teachers in community schools. Their moral values are no less than those of someone who opts to teach in a religious school. We should praise those teachers for their teaching about humanity and human values. When they talk about inclusivity, we should praise them—not denigrate them."

She also attributed church schools' better results to their creaming off the best pupils. Frank Dobson had been even more pointed: "They take less than their share of deprived children and more than their share of children from middle-class backgrounds".

They both expressed concern about the adverse implications of faith schools for race and religious relations, citing the north-west England riots and Northern Ireland. Asian MPs Piara Khabra and Dr Ashok Kumar also hammered home during the debate the dangers of single-faith schools impeding racial integration.

"I recognise that I am in a minority in the House", Alice Mahon went on, "in saying that I want secular education in all our schools. Obviously, we will not get it with the new clauses and the amendment. Faith schools are about division and I have had personal experience of that. They are also about selection. They encourage parents to lie about attendance at church. Only 8 percent of adults attend church in this country.

"People who do not agree with faith schools and do not want any more of them often ask me why the rest of us should pay to indoctrinate children in only one religion when our churches are empty. They ask why the churches are not doing their job. If their religion is so

good, let them fill the churches ... Religious schools discriminate against everyone who is not of their faith.

"I urge the Prime Minister to listen to this debate and to those of us who have spoken against having more faith schools. Let him, for once, listen to us, especially after 11 September. The last thing that we want is more division and segregation in society."

Mrs Mahon concluded: "I have come to believe that in 2002 we must try to work towards a secular state education system that is bothered about education and not indoctrination."

When the National Secular Society first brought to Dr Evan Harris's attention Sections 58 and 60 of the Schools Standards & Framework Act 1998, which licenses discrimination against teachers in publicly funded faith schools, he resolved then to move the amendment to repeal them. He was most gracious about the help the NSS had given the LibDems in making these amendments, although we made clear that they did not go nearly far enough since they do not abolish faith schools, an objective which Dr Harris also supports. (I should note here that the Society will work with any party if it seeks to progress our agenda.)

Dr Harris opened by referring to one of his constituents, Professor Richard Dawkins, whose excellent open letter to the Prime Minister on faith schools had been referred to earlier. "He is, like me, an honorary associate of the National Secular Society, which I want to declare as an interest. I am grateful to the NSS for advice on the issues covered by [the amendment he was moving]."

This prompted a question from the Conservative benches: "As a member of the National Secular Society, does the hon. Gentleman find it odd that he secured his place for today's debate by using a prayer card?" Dr Harris responded with a wry smile: "I am not sure that I am guilty of that, because the prayer card is in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey). I have views on the use of Prayers to obtain a seat, but I do not want to try the patience of the Chair, so I shall stick to new clause 2."

He tore the offending sections of the Schools Standards & Framework Act apart: "The provisions are ... discriminatory in that teachers of faith can teach anywhere. They can apply for any job in any school—religious and non-religious—but a secular or atheist teacher cannot teach in some schools and is therefore deprived of certain opportu-

(Continued on page 10)

# Intelligent people 'less likely to hold religious beliefs'

THE levels of non-believers in this country, and the world, may be surprising to some, even unbelievers themselves. The world is simply not divided up into the five or six major religions. Yet again, no one country in the world is simply a block population of just one religion. All countries are a mix of religions and non-belief, each a different mix, although some do get close to being a block religion.

Roughly speaking, the world's population, at best present estimates, is some one quarter unbelieving. That's about 1.4 billion people. There is some evidence to show that if polls and surveys could be taken throughout the world, without normative coercions and penalties upon opinion, or national pressures of any form, then the unbelief figure above might well double.

Of course, the literacy and education levels in the world being only around 30 percent adds greatly to the levels of superstition and ignorance.

More than a century ago, the philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) wrote: "The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments – of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue – are complete sceptics in religion."

These comments are just as relevant today, indeed more so – and were relevant before Mills' time, if a little less so.

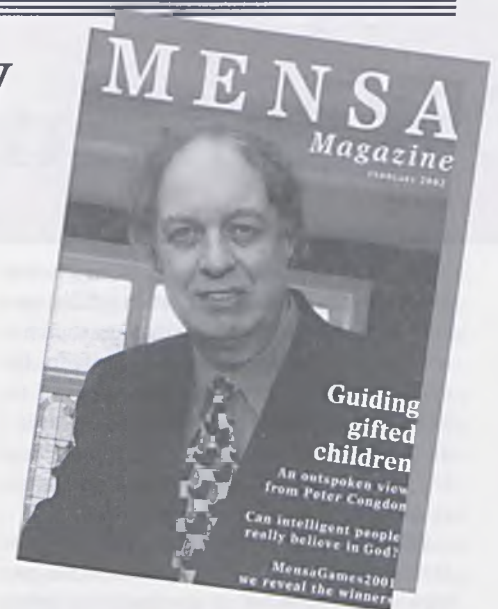
Of 42 studies carried out since 1927 on the relationship between religious belief and one's intelligence and/or education level, all but four found an inverse connection. That is the higher one's intelligence or education level, the less one is likely to be religious or hold "beliefs" of any kind.

A very detailed study was carried out in the US some 13 years ago by American Mensa and later published in the US Mensa Bulletin. There is a lot of food for thought in this study, which measured many different attitudes and beliefs in samples of individuals from three different IQ levels; non-Mensans', Mensans' and super-Mensans' respective IQs of 65 percentile, 98 percentile, and 99.9 percentile.

Belief in Christianity among non-Mensans was as high as 83 percent. In Mensans this was down to 56 percent, and in super-Mensans it was down to 47 percent. This from a country unusually high in mass-media conformity and indoctrination in favour of religion.

Paul Bell, "an unbeliever and humanist", stirred up a hornet's nest with an article published in the religiously-themed "Faith in the Future" section of Mensa's main magazine. In it he set out to show that intelligent people are more likely to reject religious belief. This is an extract from a much lengthier article.

It would be interesting to see the results from a UK study of the same three levels. Informed extrapolation from general UK levels tends to suggest results between 15 and 30 percent lower. In 1996 and 1998, a major poll of the beliefs of scientists in the US was undertaken by psychologists Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham. This survey took a random sample of biological and



physical scientists listed in the reference work *American Men and Women of Science*. Only 40 percent responded "yes" to having a belief in God. This, of course, leaving 60 percent being atheists or agnostics.

This poll was undertaken in two distinct parts: the second stage being taken only from more distinguished scientists – all members of the elite National Academy of Science of the US. Disbelief among NAS members exceeded 90 percent. A breakdown of this poll shows that NAS biologists, in particular, are non-believers – with 95 percent saying they were atheist or agnostic. Mathematicians in the NAS were 83 percent atheist/agnostic.

## Government deaf to dissidents

(Continued from centre pages)

nities. The legislation in effect gives the small number of teachers who teach from a religious perspective privileged access to a large number—100,000-odd—of publicly funded jobs. That number would become even larger if more faith schools emerged from the Government's proposals.

"That amounts to institutionalised discrimination, as there is no counterbalancing body of community schools where teachers who are not committed to some faith are favoured over teachers who are religious. ... It is possible that teachers in some localities, especially rural ones, will have difficulty in obtaining employment unless they are or claim to be of the requisite faith.

"The provisions militate against the best interests of pupils because what matters to the education of our children is having the best teacher at that subject and not the church attendance of a teacher.

"How religious in any school does one need

to be to teach mathematics, French or science? Does one need a working knowledge of Genesis to teach geology?

"Given that there is ... a specific shortage of faith-based teachers, given the small proportion of the population who are members of the Church of England, for example—there is a worry that teachers who are not as good as others will be appointed, especially if the number of faith schools increases.

Despite Evan Harris's moving and excellent speech, there was no Division on his amendment because, sadly, it had no prospect of success.

The debate was guillotined just before 10pm (deliberately?) – precluding the Government from having to address the points made by those supporting the amendments. There was, however, a division on the amendment on selection; it was lost by 87 to 405 votes.

It may have been a walkover, but it was also the largest Labour Commons rebellion in this Parliament.

## Anti-semitism

"LET'S have a sense of proportion" ran the headline for a very welcome article by Dr David Goldberg, senior rabbi of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, London, reprimanding those Jews who accuse newspapers or television of anti-semitism whenever the media criticises Israel, however legitimately. "We Jews do ourselves a disservice if we cry 'anti-semitism' with the same stridency at a liberal commentator who criticises the Israeli army's disproportionate response to terrorist outrages and the National Front lout who asserts that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is a genuine document", said Goldberg.

He instanced writers who have been shocked by the anti-semitic "hostility" they have encountered at London dinner parties; Lord Janner, former president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, who sees a two-track surge of anti-semitism among "the viciously and often notoriously anti-Israel" left liberal media and traditional anti-semites of "the aristocratic far right"; and the Orthodox Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, who goes so far as to call Muslims the archetypal anti-semites of the new millennium (*Guardian*, January 26).

As I have written before in these columns, the Jews have quite unjustifiably adopted the word "anti-semitic" as synonymous with "anti-Jewish" or even "anti-Zionist". But Semitic is a linguistic term "pertaining to or designating the language family, including especially Hebrew and Arabic" (the *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*). If it is to be used it can be applied to both Jews and Arabs. For the Chief Rabbi to call Muslim Arabs anti-semites is therefore absurd. Anti-Jewish they may be, but they are not anti-semites.

## The ghost hunter

TELEVISION, like the tabloids, is fascinated by the occult, but rarely critical. So, on January 16, BBC2 blandly followed the Rev Tom Willis, exorcist in the diocese of York, on two of his cases.

Mandy and her mother Rosebud have had quite a number of trivial troubles: mysterious sickness, a dog dying (which sadly all dogs do) and a cage bird that wouldn't come out for its flutter across the room, for which, for some obscure reason, Mandy blamed an iron-age warrior whose skull had been dug up locally. Willis, who is called out about 25 times a year to "quieten the restless dead", visited a museum to examine the skull, which showed no signs of violence and presumably no reason to be restless. However, by baptising Mandy and then splashing holy water about the house, he seemed to satisfy both the ladies and the bird.

No such luck in Willis' second case in Hull, where Harry and Tracy believed their house had been used for black magic rituals. We were told there was a poltergeist around and taps were turned on and off. I reckon Willis' failure here was to ignore the presence of no fewer than ten children. He should know that poltergeists are often (real) children. Suspiciously, too, another example of the "haunting" was a "Get out" message on the wall in child's writing. That's what the parents did: they got out.

Neither Willis nor the programme expressed one word of doubt in either case.

## Terror videos

WHILE it would be stupid to condemn all Muslims for the crimes of extremists, it would be equally stupid to ignore the *Observer's* exposure of recruiting videos circulating among worshippers at the Finsbury Park mosque in north London (January 29).

One video called *The Mirror of the Jihad*, distributed by an Islamic organisation based in Paddington, showed Taliban forces in Afghanistan decapitating Northern Alliance soldiers. Another video, shot in Bosnia, advocated a "jihad to wipe out atheism". But the most shocking was one on Algeria, prepared by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Fighting (GSPC). It started with an injunction to "Fight them until the sentence of God is carried out on Earth"; it continued with commands to "kill in the name of Allah until you are killed ... Then you will win your place forever in Paradise ... The flag of Jihad will be forever held high". The *Observer* then described the "clear, bright image" of carnage, throat cutting and the like.

Of course the majority of British Muslims would be as horrified as any other *Observer* reader by this illustrated account. For free-thinkers, however, it is yet another proof of Richard Dawkins' remark quoted last month: "Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense ..."

## Depressed Mormons

THE Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints is "not a religion that offers its members much opportunity for theological debate", wrote *Guardian* columnist Matthew Engel, who visited Utah when it was preparing to host the Winter Olympics. He found Mormonism authoritarian, gerontocratic and male dominated. It was explained that "men have the priesthood and women have motherhood". And motherhood would seem to be women's main occupation, judging by the "incredible number of children". Utah, in fact, has the highest birthrate in the United States, and is due to

double its 2.2 million population in 20 years. It also leads the US "and probably the world" in use of anti-depressants.

I don't think Mormon missionaries mention that.

## Limited damage

ANOTHER *Guardian* columnist, Simon Hoggart, described (on January 12) a circular letter sent from America about the World Trade Center, headed "Where was God?". "I know where MY god was on the morning of September 11", it began, "and he was very busy! He was trying to discourage anyone from taking those ill-fated flights. Those four planes could have carried more than a thousand people. There were only 266 on board."

At the Pentagon, it continued, God "made sure" that only 123 people from the 23,000 employees died. Only 20,000 workers out of 50,000 were in the WTC when the planes hit because of "unusual traffic and other delays". The letter ended: "while this is without doubt the worst thing I have ever seen in my life. I can see God's miracles in every bit of it"

It would be hard to beat that for perverted reasoning.

## PE and RE in one

ON January 27, the Rev John Hall of St George's, Newbury, introduced the latest Christian gimmick to counter falling Sunday attendances. Realising that people were going to the gym instead of listening to his sermons, he decided to cater for their physical as well as their spiritual needs. So he got in touch with Slendertone, manufacturers of the Flex range of body toning products, who agreed to donate equipment that would allow worshippers "to get in shape while praying".

I'm not sure what form this equipment took, and I wasn't able to get to Newbury for the experiment, so I don't know how successful it was. Or whether Mr Wall has development plans for further PE equipment to go with his RE.

## Nicolas Walter Memorial Lecture

SPONSORED jointly by the Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society, the Nicolas Walter Memorial Lecture 2002 will be given at 3 pm on May 19 at the Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn WC1 by David Goodway, of the University of Leeds. Refreshments will follow.

## recommended reading

IT seems that I am a rarity. Bill Cooke thinks that everyone who saw Joseph McCabe lecture and most who were inspired by his books are now dead. Yet, thanks to an appendix on McCabe's lectures and debates, I can date the occasion on which I heard him speak to the Manchester branch of the National Secular Society on "God and the War" as February 18, 1940. As for his books, I still turn to them regularly, knowing, as Bill Cooke shows conclusively, that McCabe was a meticulous scholar. He was also prolific, writing over 200 books, many of them published in America by E Haldeman-Julius. While I have seen some of these Little and Big Blue books, I am naturally more acquainted with those published in England, mainly by Watts & Co. Amazingly, his biographer, who is a lecturer at the Manukau Institute of Technology in New Zealand, seems to have read virtually all of his subject's immense output in both countries.

I remember the 72-year-old Joseph McCabe, like a picture in this book, as a small tight-lipped man who still complained about his treatment by the Rationalist Press Association, whose dominant figure during the twenties had been John M Robertson (1856-1933), a great admirer of Charles Bradlaugh. McCabe thought more of George Jacob Holyoake's contribution to secularism and freethought, and clashed with Robertson on this and other issues, notably the mythical Christ. Robertson and McCabe were "essentially combative"; certainly the latter was his own worst enemy. Dependent on writing and lecturing for a not-very-affluent living, McCabe seemed to fall out with everyone. H J Blackham, another who knew him in the flesh, thought him "lonely and embittered", but "fighting". Yet, as Bill Cooke emphasises, McCabe was always a fair controversialist, no matter how abusive his Christian opponents; and he had to endure some vicious attacks. Indeed, when lecturing in Australia in 1910, he had to have a police escort into a debate with Cardinal Moran in Sydney, because of a threat to his life. Moran, by the way, described McCabe as "the emissary of an international society for the propagation of atheism and anarchy [and that] no decent person would touch him with a pair of tongs".

Joseph Martin McCabe was born in Macclesfield, Cheshire on November 11, 1867, the second of eight children of Roman Catholic parents. He left school at 13 and, after a short time in warehousing, began to study for the priesthood. As most readers probably know, he went on to spend *Twelve Years in a Monastery*, to cite the title of one of the first books he wrote after leaving the

### Colin McCall reviews *A Rebel to His Last Breath: Joseph McCabe and Rationalism*, by Bill Cooke. Prometheus Books, \$32.00

Church on Ash Wednesday 1896.

It was Sir Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf) who encouraged McCabe to write that book and recommended the manuscript to the publisher Smith Elder; then Stephen urged his friend Herbert Duckworth to publish McCabe's *Peter Abélard and St Augustine and His Age*. Later, a friend of McCabe's was to remark that Stephen's help was critical in "winning McCabe to rationalism". McCabe never wavered in his rationalism, although he criticised the RPA for not being atheist enough. As he grew older he was happy to use that term along with the equally unpopular "materialist". He did at one time give credence to telepathy but, fortunately, he was persuaded otherwise by the distinguished zoologist Sir E Ray Lankester and came to regard it as a "thin shade of mysticism". Lankester's influence on the subject of Piltown Man was less helpful however. Originally sceptical himself, Lankester joined his fellow RPA associate Sir Arthur Keith in falling for the hoax. Cooke suggests that McCabe remained dubious and cites the *Rationalist Encyclopedia* of 1948, as giving "hardly a ringing endorsement" of Keith's sadly mistaken support for the composite skull.

There was no love lost between Joseph McCabe and Chapman Cohen, president of the National Secular Society, who, for instance, criticised McCabe's view that spiritualism was based on fraud, arguing that this line played right into the hands of the spiritualists. If fraud couldn't be established, wrote Cohen, "there was nothing left but to accept the explanation which spiritualists favour." Cooke finds Cohen's criticism unfair, especially as McCabe's debate with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had the specific title "Is Spiritualism based on fraud?" Doyle, as I learnt from the book, had been an RPA member between 1908 and 1916, but left when he embraced spiritualism, not to mention belief in Fairyland.

McCabe's protracted written controversy with that other prominent spiritualist Sir Oliver Lodge began when Lodge set out to defend religion against the attacks of the German monist Ernst Haeckel, whose *Riddle of the Universe* had been translated by

McCabe and had sold both widely and well. In the *Hibbert Journal* Lodge portrayed Haeckel as "a lone materialist washed up on the farthest shores, far from the scientific mainstream" and posited what he called "a completer science". He followed this with a book-length treatment of the subject. McCabe replied to both criticisms, and Lodge retired from the fray. In fact, McCabe was to spend many years defending Haeckel and the *Riddle*. "No book in my lifetime", he declared, "has had a wider influence in liberating the modern mind from superstition". Bill Cooke also quotes from McCabe's fine tribute to his mentor on Haeckel's death in 1919.

A testimony to McCabe's own inspiring popularisation of science came from the mathematician Hyman Levy, who had been warned against the "Bad Man", but slipped into a meeting in Edinburgh when a boy, and "listened enraptured to a discourse on the Evolution of the Universe". And if I may add an experience of my own: it was reading McCabe's *The Splendour of Moorish Spain* that first opened my eyes to that notable period of European history. McCabe also admired ancient Stoicism as a guide to unpretentious living, emphasising that "this most austere and (in its more sober Roman form) most effective of moral systems was a dogmatic materialism". The Stoics "ridiculed the very idea of spirit and free will", he said, "which we are asked to regard as the indispensable basis of any moral conduct".

But, says Cooke, even more fundamental than McCabe's Stoicism was a "staunch Prometheism". And Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* "remained a source of inspiration for McCabe throughout his life". It provided not only the programme for his life but an explanation for the spirit with which his life would be conducted. His "creed" could be called "a Promethean humanism".

McCabe was a brilliant scholar, fluent in Latin, Greek, German, French, Spanish and Italian, but he never paraded his scholarship. As he himself put it, he left the serene world of the academy "and went down to the market places of the world". Writing was a means to an end and that end, as Cooke says, was "the propagation of ideas". He hated verbiage and padding but he also abhorred coarseness, and actually supported some prosecutions for blasphemy against "soap-box atheists". He held that the last genuine prosecution for atheism was that of George Jacob Holyoake, whose biography he wrote. Of his contemporaries he most admired H G Wells; he had little time for Shaw's superficialities and none for those two Catholic apologists Hilaire Belloc and G K Chesterton, whose fallacies he easily exposed. But then, Joseph McCabe's knowledge of the Church he had left was second to none.

Bill Cooke assiduously discusses all aspects of McCabe's works and assesses them in their time and in the light of subsequent developments. He also contrasts them with today's postmodernists who sneer at the optimism of people like McCabe. "Safely distant from the general citizen in their university sinecures", they "shrug their shoulders and declare it

impossible to educate, improve, reason or believe".

With his essentially scientific outlook, McCabe was ahead of his time, as he was in his support of women's suffrage. And, like his fellow rationalist Bertrand Russell, he rose above the anti-German hysteria during the First World War. McCabe was not a pacifist; he

supported the war, but he courageously campaigned against making it a war driven by national hatred.

*A Rebel to His Last Breath* is a well titled, splendidly researched and carefully reasoned biography of an outstanding rationalist. We had to wait a long time for a life of Joseph McCabe, but now we have a worthy one.

READERS of the *Freethinker* might like to know that a book entitled *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* by Tariq Ali is scheduled for publication by Verso in April. The author was president of the students' union at Oxford University in the 1960s and has long campaigned against obscurantism. Although born and schooled in Pakistan, he is from a secular, political family and has never believed in any god. His inside knowledge of Islamic culture and history and his personal associations with the likes of the late president of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir Bhutto have given him valuable insights into the symbiotic relations between political parties and religious movements such as the Taliban.

The chapter on the history of US imperialism and how it has allied itself with the most backward religious zealots in the interests of big business, funding and arming them for crassly opportunistic reasons and then washing its hands of the "blowback" consequences, is alone worth the price of this book. The similarities between the two confessional states Israel and Pakistan, brought into being by secular leaders very much against the wishes of rabbis and mullahs respectively, afford lessons in cynicism that will broaden the horizons of all one-eyed atheists.

Well-documented throughout and written in an accessible style, this book analyses the ways in which Hindu and Muslim chauvinisms have torn to shreds the peace that once filled the beautiful valleys of Kashmir, deploying poetry from past ages to make some of its points. Tariq Ali shows that today's tensions and endemic violence in Kashmir are "the unfinished business" of Britain's partition of India in 1947 when Pakistan, "land of the pure", was conceived as a religious state. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs slaughtered one another in droves as they fled the cities and villages where their families had lived together for centuries; train-loads of blood-bespattered corpses used to pull into the station at Lahore, the author's beloved home town.

The seemingly endless tit-for-tat killings in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also have their roots in an earlier ethnic cleansing when Jews who'd survived the Nazi concentration camps in Europe made believe that Palestine was "an empty land" and proceeded to drive the inhab-

**Enver Carim  
previews *The Clash  
of Fundamentalisms:  
Crusades, Jihads and  
Modernity* by Tariq  
Ali, scheduled for  
publication by Verso  
in April.**

itants from their ancestral properties. Although no Arab was ever associated with *Deutschland uber alles*, "the final solution" or any of the gas chambers which Western governments pretended they knew nothing about, Arabs have been made to pay bitterly for the guilt which Europeans and Americans feel for that systematic mass-murder called the Holocaust.

The Palestinians are labelled "terrorists" for struggling to save their families and national identity by fighting against an overwhelmingly better-armed enemy, yet no one describes Americans as terrorists when they fight back against al-Qaeda and rain down the most awful destruction with 1000-pound bombs on impoverished peasants in Afghanistan, many of whom have never heard of America.

The late historian Isaac Deutscher, himself a Jew who lost his family in the Nazi death-camps and who had relatives in Tel Aviv, described Israelis as "the Prussians of the Middle East" in an interview he gave Tariq Ali soon after the six-day war in 1967.

This mind-opening interview is reprinted as the appendix of this book. In it Deutscher likens the Israeli Jew to a man who jumps from a burning building where members of his household have already perished, and lands on a Palestinian walking on the pavement below. The Palestinian, in breaking the Jew's fall, suffers a broken leg.

But, instead of thanking him for saving his life, and offering the Palestinian his friendship, the Israeli attacks the pedestrian, breaks his

arm and hurls a stream of abuse at him.

This book also provides an anatomy of the all-powerful, all-enveloping fundamentalism of US capital which former president Eisenhower warned against when he referred to the dangers of the "military-industrial complex" in his farewell speech to the American people.

All of Eisenhower's fears have been vindicated. From his perspective, the good guys, who fought against fascist tyranny so generously, have become the bad guys. Read this book to understand why America has been involved in well over a hundred wars since 1945, why new enemies continually have to be found and incredibly expensive ordnance used against people all over the planet.

Iraq has now been bombed steadily for ten years. Who pays for the weapons and munitions? Who reaps the phenomenal profits? Far more feet are blown off by landmines and anti-personnel cluster-bombs than all the amputations carried out by agents of *shariah*. The saddest thing about this book is how far corporate interests have dragged the US from its heartening anti-colonial, anti-imperialist antecedents.

In calm, controlled prose that cannot conceal his compassion for humanity, the author shows the secular fundamentalism in all its rampant triumphalism, penetrating markets everywhere, overthrowing with the CIA elected governments who follow independent policies, defending feudal monarchies, supporting dictatorships, destroying traditional livelihoods, undermining health and education systems in poor countries by means of punitive conditions for "aid" from the IMF, reducing populations to abject dependency, its clergy in Washington all the while crying "God bless America!" and spouting mantras about "democracy", its media, including Hollywood, moulding the public, even "educated" individuals, into gullible conformists waving the stars-and-stripes and willingly shutting their eyes to the enormities being committed in their name. In so doing, Tariq Ali offers an explanation for the pent-up furies and frustrations that exploded so unpardonably into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

## Delusional beliefs

IN reply to Graham Newberry's "why worshippers of an external god hold to their delusions", I pose this question: What better evolutionary advantage could there be, for certain individuals of a species, than believing that contraceptives are sinful?

I'm being a little flippant here, but just because a facet of human nature is harmful, idiotic, self-loathing, irrational – whatever – it doesn't follow that there is/was no evolutionary advantage in adhering to it. A few million years ago, the sun-worshipping tribe would have a quick prayer, kill an antelope and then shag like rabbits.

The rationalist tribe just sat around all day worrying about where the big-yellow-thing-in-the-sky went each night, became listless and died out trying make lab-coats out of grass. I would bet my God Is A Twat t-shirt that atheists produce fewer offspring than theists.

That doesn't mean that theism is good! If it was once useful, it has now outlived that usefulness.

With the world human population at six billion, evolutionary effects are currently minimal but believing in bullshit is now far more dangerous than it ever has been. Social intolerance, environmental disaster, economic inequality etc are very often due to irrationality in one form or another – that's why we need the *Freethinker*! We need to fight the sun-worshippers whenever we can.

Ian Andrews  
Oldham

READER Graham Newbury asks why people hold on to beliefs that are delusional. The best short answer I know is contained in an article published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* Vol 24 No 6 (Nov/Dec 2000). Written by Gregory W Lester, a psychologist. It isn't a complete answer by any means, but it does address the question at a level of explanation that is quite interesting by applying ideas from evolutionary psychology. It's available online at <http://www.csicop.org/si/2000-11/beliefs.html>. If Mr Newbury has no access to the Internet I'd be happy to send him a copy of the article for the price of a couple of stamps. (I'm always skint ...)

Other explanations would focus on the process of rationality itself, and upon how (and on what grounds) we select the premises or axioms from which we reason. These are not as simple as they look!

Richard Dawkins' suggestion of "memes" might also be fruitful as an explanatory principle – the ways in which ideas replicate and

survive according to principles other than their own strict veracity or rationality. A good place to start would be with those parts of his books that deal with "memes". A visit to <http://www.world-of-dawkins.com/> would also be useful – there is a whole section there on "memes and memetics", by Dawkins and various others.

Of course, it might just be that people have never learned to think properly: another strong reason, if any were needed, for teaching philosophy in schools ...

Still, must get back to greasing the pigs' wings...

NORMAN PRIDMORE

Sleaford

• **Editor's note: Graham Newbury's query prompted no fewer than three subscribers, including Norman Pridmore, to pen articles on the subject. These will published in the April issue.**

## Keep things in perspective

THE February issue of the *Freethinker* contained seven separate references to the association of Christianity and Islam with persecution of homosexuals. It is not in dispute that such persecution has been and in some places still is barbaric, but these religions are to be condemned on far more comprehensive grounds.

Consider the degradation of women (50 percent of the human race) under Islam and to a lesser extent Catholicism; the inhibition of straight sex by Catholicism together with its dark-age teachings on contraception, divorce, abortion and euthanasia; the brutal punishments inflicted under *shariah* by contemporary Muslims; the long history of the torture and burning alive of those of whom they disapproved by Catholics and Protestants alike; the equally long, and still continuing history of Muslim assassinations and *jihads*; the abject ideological slavery demanded by both religions; and the threat posed by both to civil liberties and human rights.

If I were a cosmic public prosecutor wishing to emphasise the enormity of the indictment, where would I begin?

The *Freethinker* should keep things in perspective.

JACK HASTIE

Kilbarchan.

## Scorcese film "a travesty of the Gospel"

MARTIN Scorcese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* was said to be based on a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. The script of the film by Paul Schrader, which Mrs Whitehouse had

read before making any public remarks, confirmed that almost every incident in the film was a travesty of the Gospel accounts. At the time of the film's release in 1988 there were also ample accounts of its content published to form a reliable judgement.

Having established previously that Blasphemous Libel was still a Common Law offence there was sufficient cause to seek counsel's advice as to whether the film was likely to break the law.

If a film producer were to make libellous assertions about H J Blackham, for example, would these depend on whether or not humanists saw the film?

I am pleased to agree with Mr Clarke (*Freethinker* February) that discriminatory race laws are "evil" and it is good that they have been swept away in South Africa. The question is whether the protests were really the clinching factor?

JOHN C BEYER

Director

Mediawatch -uk

## Freewill does not exist

THERE are not many humans left in the world that believe that the Earth is flat and/or at the centre of the Universe. There are a worryingly large number of people who still believe in god(s). But there is a ridiculously large majority of people that believe that humans have "freewill", and not that our entire lives are going the way that they are from "Big Bang" and whatever proceeded it.

Unless the most basic axiom of science is incorrect, "freewill" is a figment of our imagination. Science relies on the notion that experiments are repeatable; that if all the ingredients and conditions of experiment A are the same as those in B, the results will be identical.

If it were possible to repeat the Big Bang using exactly the same ingredients and conditions the same results would occur. Therefore everything that you have ever done or "thought" was unavoidable, and the same applies to everything that you will do or "think" in the future.

You cannot predict what that will be with certainty, but you cannot avoid what has been set in motion since the "dawn of time", whenever that may have been.

"Freewill" is as much of a "virus of the mind" as religion, but it is even more prolific. If you believe that you have 'freewill', you may as well believe in god(s), fairies, souls and afterlives. After all, it is just a matter of faith over logical evidence.

W TIERNAN

Surrey.



**Offensive headline**

I HAVE to take issue with Colin McCall's article "Jews don't like the truth" (Down to Earth, January), and especially with its headline, which was offensive as it was inaccurate. No doubt *some* Jews don't like what others allege to be the truth (personally I find myself inclined to doubt that the whole truth of the matter dealt with is to be found in the article) but the same could no doubt be predicated of any group, including atheists (or rationalists, my own preferred description).

In my opinion, what Jews (whether believers or atheists) as all other groups don't like is to be the subject of slanderous or libellous generalisations such as I complain of.

May I add that I was somewhat uneasy about the headline "Jehovah's Witnesses beat the 12-year-old daughter to death" and the accompanying article. Surely it isn't being implied that this is routine behaviour for JWs – or is it?

I urge the *Freethinker* to avoid such dubious practices.

ALBERT ADLER  
London

**Clash of belief systems**

RICHARD DAWKINS ("Time to Stand Up", *Freethinker*, January 2002) posits the idea that, if there had been no religion, there would not have been a Jewish state, would not have been pogroms, the concept of Islamic lands and so on. I suspect, though, that an adherence to something else would have had the same effect – ethnicity, or culture for instance. A belief system does not have to hold the idea of non-corporeal beings, supreme or otherwise, to be divisive. It's just that religion seems to have got there first.

However, given that beliefs in higher powers were once the only way of explaining natural phenomena; given that people (and peoples) who came to share those beliefs would eventually formalise them into structured belief systems; and given that the systems informed all societal structures – which organised themselves into hierarchies based upon, among other things, those beliefs – the fact that we have religion now was inevitable.

My superficial analysis does not make us feel any better about our having these ridiculous ideas in our midst (moreover, ideas that don't want to go away in a hurry), but it enables us to see – notwithstanding that it is simply put for the sake of brevity – why they are with us at all.

Dawkins is right to point out that, as hate-labelling goes, religion takes the biscuit.

However, the hatred of some Islamists for the West – especially a West as exemplified all too visibly and volubly by the United States of America – is not one of Muslim against Christian, but one of a particular value system against another. The events of 11 September cannot be excused, except by the fanatics who organised them, but they must be set into a context, and that is not an entirely religious one.

American imperialism is to be seen worldwide, along with that other imperialism so beloved of America and other Western nations: global corporatism. Put this alongside America's hubris, the arrogance that oozes from its leaders, the mawkish, God-bless-America, this-is-the-greatest-country-in-the-world hot air and baloney, and you get a powder keg waiting for a flame.

This is not to deride Americans – but this impression floats to us across the Pond, and it's an impression that ordinary Americans ought to be very wary of.

ANDREW ARMITAGE  
West Wales

**O'Hair defamed**

IN HIS letter (*Freethinker*, January), John Rush follows Fred Woodworth in a similarly brutal defamation of the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair. (I wonder what makes Americans so vindictive?)

On August 27, 1995, just when Madalyn was completing production of an issue of her beloved journal *American Atheist* and eagerly awaiting delivery of new state-of-the-art printing equipment, as well as planning an imaginative picket of the Pope's imminent visit to New York, she, her son Jon, and her granddaughter Robin suddenly disappeared from their home.

They had apparently been taken by surprise, as they were in the middle of breakfast – and left behind their personal possessions, their pet dogs, and even Madalyn's life-sustaining insulin and other medication. Criminal duress is surely the only feasible explanation; yet Mr Rush perversely insists that "it's pretty obvious no kidnapping was involved".

There are certainly some unanswered mysteries in the circumstances of this horrific quadruple murder – at least partly as a consequence of the FBI letting the clues go cold for almost five years before being forced to take an interest in the case.

But since the description given of the vendor of Jon's Mercedes on September 5, 1995 (at \$5,000 below its value), did not fit Jon at all, can we be sure it was Jon who, more than three weeks later, collected the gold coins? Even if it

was, the family may have come to a deal with Waters in a bid to save their lives.

As for Mr Rush's reliance on Gary Karr's trial defence, it is worth reminding ourselves of what his attorney actually said in court before the skeletons were discovered; he suggested that as retribution for "30 years cursing and deploring God ... perhaps no human was responsible for their disappearance from the earth"!

I am well aware of Madalyn's many faults – not her "cursing and deploring God", but her economy with the truth, bragging, coarse language, litigious fury, and some sharp practice – but she had great courage, and, even when her health was failing, she continued working like a beaver in "the best of causes". For that, I think, we can forgive her much. Anyway, she and her family could never deserve such an end.

BARBARA SMOKER  
Bromley

**Help sought**

CAN any reader perhaps direct me to a partially-remembered passage in Bertrand Russell's writings?

He points out that innovations are often labelled as "unnatural" in a way which makes this sound synonymous with "wrong", while other unnatural practices, such as wearing clothes, are not similarly attacked because time has made them acceptable. I have hunted through all my books of Russell's works without success, but would so like to re-read this passage and be able to quote it accurately.

PENELOPE FORREST  
South Africa

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

## atheist & humanist contacts &

**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, April 7, 4.30pm. 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. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com).

**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. Friday, March 8, 7.30pm. Brian Robinson previews the 2002 London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival.

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

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or Rita Manton 01708 762575. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent (off Balgores Lane), Gidea Park. Thursday, March 7, 8pm. Jeremy Workman: *Small Bodies of the Solar System*.

**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. Website: [www.humanism-scotland.org.uk](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: [alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**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, March 12, 8pm. Arsam Hanif: *Community Relations – Calm or Crisis?*

**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. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, March 28, 8pm. Shirley Dent: *Blake and Freethought*.

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

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

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

**North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):** Information: The Secretary on 01434 632936. The Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Thursday, March 21, 7.15pm. Madeleine Pym: *Humanism and the Media*.

**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, April 3, 8 pm. Hilary Cave: *Ethical Stances and World Views in Some Well-Known Writings*.

**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. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Wednesday, March 13, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

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

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

**Ulster Humanist Association.** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: (028) 9267 7264. E-mail: [brian@mcclinton.to](mailto:brian@mcclinton.to) website: [www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com](http://www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com)

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