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The

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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Bury the blasphemy law!



15. He is run in for Blasphemy.

This month the *Freethinker* focuses on blasphemy – in Britain and abroad – with special reports on pages 2, 3, 4, 8, 9 & 13

As they took him
from the cross
I, the centurion, took
him in my arms –
the tough, lean body
of a man no longer young,
beardless, breathless,
but well hung.

The first verse of James Kirkup's poem *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name*. Following its publication in *Gay News* in 1977, the poem earned the editor, Denis Lemon, a fine and a suspended prison sentence. The prison sentence was later overturned on appeal.

This cartoon was one of a series – “the comic life of Christ” – published in the *Freethinker* which resulted in its first editor and founder, G W Foote, receiving a 12-month jail sentence.

Also in this issue:

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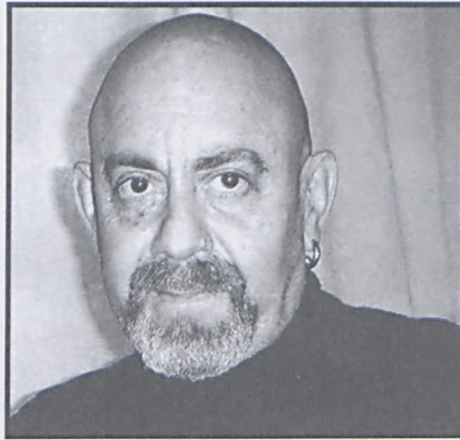
The REAL crime of the Catholic Church – p10

freethinking out loud: Barry Duke

THOUGH it does not possess the same degree of sibilance as, say, "sixty-six sacks of hissing snakes", the word "sodomites", when screamed repeatedly by a frothing Christian fundamentalist, can produce copious quantities of spray. So pity the poor policemen who tried to restrain the zealot who came along to the public reading of the "blasphemous" *The Love that Dares to Speak Its Name* in London last month in the hope of drowning out the readers by shouting "sodomites", over and over again, at everyone involved in the protest.

Pity too the overworked staff at the Crown Prosecution Service who have been handed a videotape of the anti-blasphemy law gathering on the steps of St Martin in the Fields so that they might decide whether or not to bring charges against those who participated in the reading. Given its current huge caseload, the last thing the CPS needs to do is spend time considering how to deal with a bunch of "blasphemers".

It fell to me to read the first verse (repro-



duced on the cover), and the moment was captured for the media, here and abroad, by a surprisingly large number of photographers, TV camera people and radio journalists.

Now, if anyone had suggested to me six months ago that, in the summer of 2002, I would be standing on the steps of a central London church and reading the first verse of what is essentially a *religious* poem – and a pretty awful one to boot – I would have retorted: "yeah, right, and this summer will also see London being invaded of herds of brightly painted, life-size plastic cows".

Well, the cows *did* materialise – they are all over the capital (for what reason I have yet to discover) – and I *did* deliver the opening verse of Kirkup's poem. The fact that I and fellow readers were all but drowned out by hysterical Christians made the occasion all the more worthwhile. Without all the baying and the

shouting and the personal abuse (We were, among other things, called "god-hating dead-beats"), the protest would have been practically ignored, but, thanks to a fruit-and-nut assortment of Bible-waving, cross-bearing, steam driven Christians, the protest drew a large number of curious bystanders (many of whom gleefully accepted copies of the July issue of the *Freethinker*), and the gathering received an enormous amount of press coverage.

So, what was it all about? Essentially, it was to mark the 25th anniversary of the infamous *Gay News* blasphemy trial. As a result of a private prosecution brought by Mary Whitehouse, the paper's editor, Denis Lemon, became the last person in 20th-century Britain to be convicted of the crime of blasphemous libel. That was in July 1977.

But the gathering had a far deeper purpose than simply marking a terrible injustice – it served to focus attention on Britain's ridiculous and outmoded blasphemy law and to warn of the possibility that, should blasphemy be abolished, it might be replaced with something that could turn out to be a hell of a lot worse – namely an incitement-to-religious-hatred law similar to the one which Home Secretary tried recently to include in his Anti-Terrorism Bill.

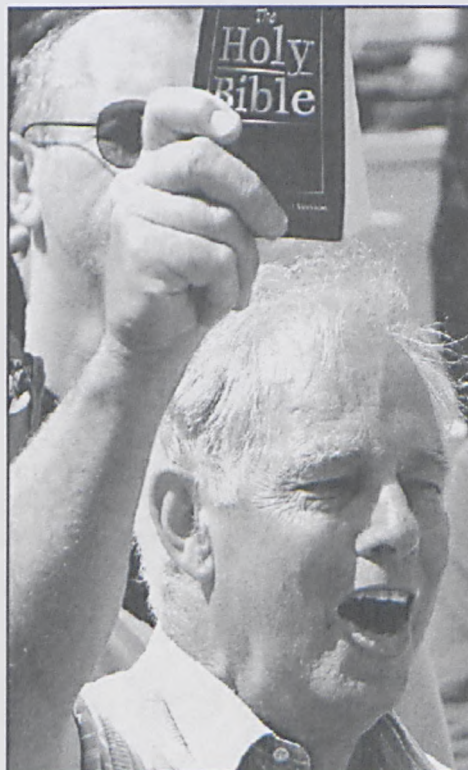
Despite his dogged defence of this provision, he was forced to drop it in the face of almost unprecedented opposition from an extremely hostile cross-party alliance of MPs and peers.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Religious Offences is now considering whether to scrap or extend the common law of blasphemy, and whether to replace it with something similar to the one proposed by David Blunkett. It is being helped in its deliberations by evidence given by both the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association (*see Keith Porteous Wood's report on page 4*).

It has been said time and again in the pages of this magazine as well as in numerous other publications that there are more than enough laws in this country to protect the religious, and to add another would be sheer foolishness. The Select Committee on Religious Offences should take this message on board, recommend the abolition of blasphemous libel and be done with the matter.

The alternative is to create a situation where just about anyone with a religious axe to grind will want to drag opposing religious (or anti-religious) groups through the courts.

However entertaining this prospect might seem, it is not the job of a mature, secular democracy to provide the religious with a state-supported legal arena in which to exercise their infantile temper tantrums.



Spitting mad: one of the Christian counter-demonstrators

The Free thinker

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Editor Barry Duke

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Caterwauling Christians ensure success of blasphemy law demo

DESPITE vociferous demands from Christian zealots, police refused to arrest any of the activists who last month marked the 25th anniversary of the *Gay News* blasphemy trial by reading out loud the "blasphemous" poem *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name*, by James Kirkup.

The demonstration, on the steps of St Martin in the Fields, Trafalgar Square, was organised by the National Secular Society, the British Humanist Association, the Rationalist Press Association and the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. When it became clear that the police would not arrest any of those taking part in the demonstration, the far larger crowd of counter-demonstrators began cater-

wauling in the hope of drowning out the readers. Several brought loudhailers to increase the din. This served only to attract larger crowds of interested bystanders, who were handed a leaflet explaining the purpose of the demo. It included a copy of the "blasphemous" poem.

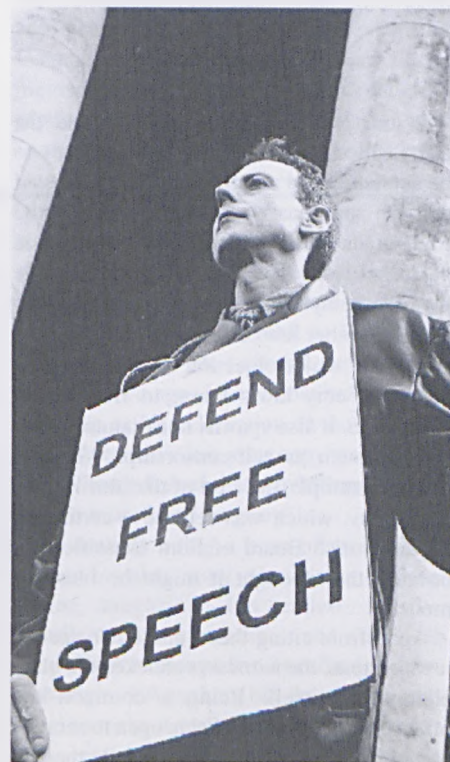
Among those supporting the demonstration were jazz singer George Melly (who read part of the poem on Radio 4's *Today* programme that morning), Jonathan Meades, the author and broadcaster, AC Grayling, the philosopher, and MPs Brian Sedgemore, Evan Harris and Alice Mahon. Also present were Tony Reeves, the artist who drew the original illustration for the poem, the poet Alan Brownjohn, and Peter Tatchell (pictured right).

Among the readers were Barry Duke, editor of the *Freethinker*, Hanne Stinson, Executive Director of the BHA, Keith Porteous Wood of the NSS and Jim Herrick and Shirley Dent of the RPA. Claire Rayner was, in the end, too ill to attend, but sent a strong letter of support saying: "It is an offence to any intelligent and thoughtful modern person that anyone who objects verbally to another's religious beliefs can actually be sent to prison. What is freedom of speech and thought if it is not the freedom to disagree vigorously with other people's views? As an atheist, I am insulted and offended every day by some of the stupid views I hear expressed all around me, but I would not want those who make these comments to be sent to jail!"

Writing in the NSS web magazine, *Newsline*, Terry Sanderson revealed that, according to the vicar of St Martin in the Fields, an unsuccessful attempt had been made in court to take out an injunction to stop the reading.

"Later it was revealed that the police had sent a video recording of the reading to the Director of Public Prosecutions to consider whether there should be any further action.

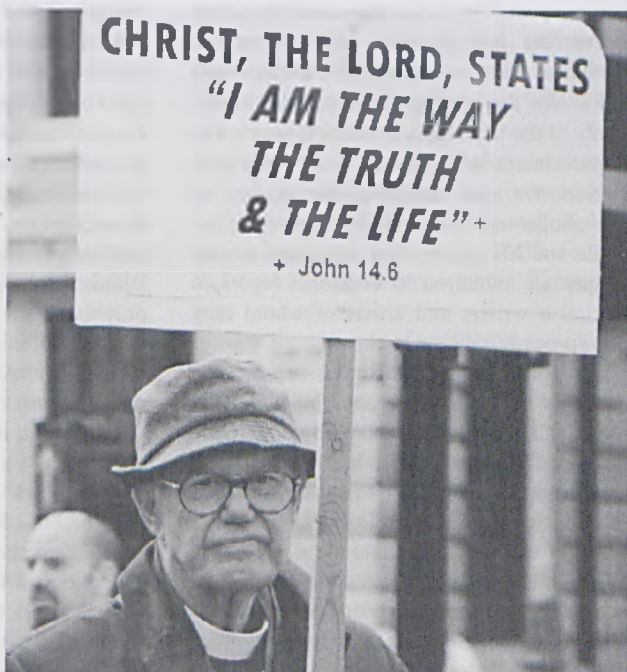
"The Evangelical Alliance put out a press statement saying that the reading amounted to 'religious hatred' and said it



'hopes and prays that the full force of the law will ensure no repetition', Sanderson reported.



This American duo, in red and white suits, looked more like snake oil salesmen than street corner preachers



Not a happy bunny: one of the Christians who formed part of the counter-demonstration

Blasphemy law under review, but could it be

THE National Secular Society, together with the British Humanist Association, were called to give evidence as witnesses on July 18 to the Select Committee on Religious Offences in the House of Lords. The Committee's task is to make recommendations as to whether the law of blasphemy should be abolished, or even extended to other religions.

Blasphemy

In our evidence, both the NSS and the BHA called for the offence of blasphemy to be abolished and not extended. We protested that the state has no business asserting the truth of one religion, and in any case, one person's blasphemy is another's truth. Nor is the blasphemy law necessary to protect public order; other laws already do that.

Another major objection we made was of the blasphemy law's threat to freedom of expression. It also spawns non-statutory censorship, such as self-censorship. We gave another example, the case of the film *Visions of Ecstasy*, which was refused a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification because they thought it might be blasphemous.

Apart from citing these, and other, specific objections, the witnesses attacked the blasphemy law itself. Being a common-law offence, blasphemous libel is open to reinterpretation by judges at every case. At the last major case, the *Gay News* trial in the 1970s, the judge had reinterpreted the law in a much harsher way than previously. In some important respects, such as the need to prove intent, the law therefore reverted to the harshness that had been the case up until 1883. We therefore pointed out the uncertainty of the law and how unfair it was not to require intent to be proved to secure a conviction. We also warned of the inequity of not abolishing such rarely used offences; while the blasphemy law remained it was simply an invitation to eccentric bigots to victimise writers and artists of whom they disapproved.

We drew attention to the discriminatory nature of blasphemy law applying as it does only to Christianity – and broadly only to the doctrines of the established church. We urged that the way to end this discrimination was to abolish the law entirely, rather than to seek to extend it to and embrace all religions. What of freedom of expression then? And without a definition of religion, which has eluded parliament so far, which religions should be included and which (if any) excluded.

At the hearing, one of the peers seemed to

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, poses the question

me to make light of this "dead letter" law that had not resulted in a prison sentence for over eighty years. I told him that the lives of a number of our forefathers in the freethought movement – such as G W Foote, founder of the *Freethinker* – had been foreshortened by the harsh prison sentences with hard labour for "blasphemy". Even the latest person to be convicted of blasphemy, the editor of *Gay News*, also died prematurely as a result of the case. Although the editor's prison sentence was suspended, the psychological, physical and financial strain of the prosecution took a toll on his life. Despite the enormous time commitment of the trial, he had been determined to keep the paper running, if for no other reason than to frustrate one of Mary Whitehouse's objectives in seeking the prosecution, to close the paper down.

Incitement to Religious Hatred

Last Autumn, Home Secretary David Blunkett introduced Religious Hatred provisions in the post-September 11 emergency Anti-Terrorism Bill. In essence, these provisions were a quick fix; they simply added "religion" to the references to "race" in the Race Relations provisions that are now contained in the Public Order Act 1986. These hasty and ill-considered amendments came in for near universal condemnation from newspaper columnists, secularists, religionists, civil liberties campaigners, legal experts and even comedians. In his final attempt to convince parliamentarians to adopt these measures, Mr Blunkett assured them that prosecutions would only be made if approved by the Attorney General. Blunkett even published draft guidelines for the Attorney General, but these were non-statutory.

In the end, it was the almost unprecedented cross-party hostility in both Houses of Parliament to both the Bill and the guidelines that forced a furious Home Secretary to concede defeat after several refusals to back down. The criticism was not limited to the content of the proposals; many also objected in principle to the unnecessarily hasty nature of the measures which would have impinged on fundamental freedoms.

Lord Avebury, who sits on the Select

Committee, has since produced a new draft bill which proposes to reintroduce the very provisions that Mr Blunkett was forced to withdraw.

A further and more taxing remit of the Select Committee is to consider in a more thorough fashion the feasibility of introducing this offence of Incitement to Religious Hatred. (A more accurate, albeit more cumbersome, description would be "incitement to hatred against a group defined by their religion, belief or lack of it".) A prime objective of any new legislation is, we understand, to prevent extremist groups circumventing the Race Relations law by purporting that any hatred that they are fomenting is directed towards religious groups (currently not included in the Race Relations provisions) rather than race



Keith Porteous Wood, right, pictured at the blasphemy law demonstration with Dr Evan Harris, Liberal Democrat MP who also read a verse of Kirkup's "blasphemous" poem

groups (which are). The Committee's starting point has been to examine the extent to which Lord Avebury's Bill serves its purpose and to identify what safeguards are needed to protect freedom of expression.

We drew attention to the "acres of newsprint" that had been devoted to criticising the Home Secretary's proposals, and we could see no reason why this condemnation no longer applied. We were adamant that the fundamentally different nature of race and religion preclude their being treated identically, as the Bill seeks to do.

Whether or not this Bill is capable of fulfilling its prime objective (and there is consider-

replaced by something worse?

able doubt about this), the NSS is convinced that the Bill is potentially a far greater threat to freedom of speech than the blasphemy law. No guidelines (however good and even if made statutory) could acceptably overcome this objection. The NSS urged the Select Committee to abandon the Bill and declined to discuss the many shortfalls in the guidelines, on the basis that they were non-statutory and therefore could be changed at will.

The BHA took a slightly different approach. Their Executive Director, Hanne Stinson, said that her experience in the Red Cross had shown her that religious hatred could be

whipped up very quickly, and soon degenerate into armed conflict. She pointed to the example of former Yugoslavia. The BHA's acceptance of the need for such a law was tempered by a catalogue of reservations that it hoped would be possible, but would be extremely difficult, to satisfy.

A summing up

At the end of the hearing, which had lasted around an hour and a half, the chair of the Committee (Viscount Colville of Culross) said that the committee had taken account of our

evidence about the proposed legislation and recognised that a satisfactory way to proceed had still to be found. He surprised us all by asking the BHA and NSS to make further submissions over the summer singly or jointly with specific alternative legislative proposals.

While only too well aware that it will be the Government that has the final word on any changes made, we all felt that the Committee had taken on board many of the points that we had made and was genuinely seeking our views as to a workable way forward.

IF I were a fundamentalist Christian writing a webwatch column, I'd know exactly who to blame for the multitude of problems my internet connection has been afflicted with over the past couple of weeks. I'd put it down to the satanic machinations of the evil atheistic secularists. I'd "reason" that these tools of the devil had been begging their master god to clog up my system in an attempt to bewilder and incapacitate me.

Could it be that the boot's been on the other foot? Is it possible that a caucus of Christians in relentless prayer have been trying to silence me?

This really is how these people think! Analyse the mindset and it becomes clear that it's a mere breath away from out-and-out psychosis. And some people wonder why it's still important to fight religion!

I won't bore you with the ins and outs except to say that I've learned a few hints that I'd like to pass on about improving your connectivity. The experts among you will I hope forgive me if the next bit is rather obvious and old hat. And maybe if they have any good ideas in addition to those I'm going to suggest, they'd contact and share them. Any extra information would be very welcome. And if I've got anything wrong, please tell me.

First, my connection slowed down. Swimming in treacle best describes the experience. What should have been a 56k connection was running at about 4k! This was accompanied by frequent (and I mean frequent) disconnection. Then odd things began to happen to my desktop – arbitrary minor but irritating changes would be accompanied by frequent crashes. After fumbling about in the darkness of deep ignorance, I contacted an intelligent friend. After following his advice my system is running like a Ferrari. Here's what I did: I checked every physical connection. A slight loosening of wires had been the first problem. This was easily and cheaply rectified.

Then I moved the telephone connecting

Webwatch with Norman Pridmore

cable. It had been running alongside a mains extension lead for quite some distance. This, it seems, not an ideal set-up – something to do with magnetic fields messing with data transmission. I'm told. A few feet of separation did the trick.

Then I visited <http://www.grisoft.com> and downloaded their free anti-virus software. It's quick, and updates on a regular basis – and it's very easy to use. This immediately found and dealt with a nasty little bug. It has also intercepted another with the last couple of days and has locked it away safely out of harms way.

Since doing these few things, my connection is now running constantly at 50k minimum. I know it's not broad band, but it's good enough for this pauper. After all the problems were sorted one of the first sites I visited was that of the South African anthropologist Mikey Brass. It's called the Antiquity of Man and it's at <http://www.antiquityofman.com/> He's a young university-based secularist and free-thinker and it really is a very rich site indeed. One of his special interests is in combating pseudoscientific archaeology – and not only that of the fundamentalist Christians but also the new Hindu version as (mis)taught by Michael Cremo and other fanatics.

When *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name* blasphemy trial began all those years ago I duplicated hundreds of copies of the poem and handed them out in Aylesbury as my

modest protest at the farce. A fat lot of good it did, but it made me feel better. I looked for my copy recently and found I'd not one left. Then on a visit to Worldings Christian Poetry site (which I mentioned a month or two ago) I found that he'd put the poem up as his celebration of the anniversary. If you have lost your copy go again to <http://home.freeuk.net/worldling/> to see it once more in all its glory!

As well as being a hero of mine, Tom Paine is also now the name of an online magazine. It's called, wittily, TomPaine.commonsense, and it's at <http://www.tompaine.com/index.cfm> The angle is American but there is enough there to make it well worth a mouse click.

A reader recommended <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A730522> as a link worth checking for anyone interested in the evolution/creation debate. I can only agree – it's excellent stuff.

Apologies if anyone had problems accessing the Jesus Puzzle with the link I gave in a previous column, and thanks to the reader who alerted me. Try <http://www.magi.com/~oblio/jesus.html> instead (a couple of clicks may be needed).

On the subject of problems with links, please e-mail me. I can often fiddle around and find an alternative, which I'll then e-mail back to you.

Now for a couple of wonderful and utterly barking sites. You thought the earth was spinning in space and went round the sun? Think again, folks. Visit <http://www.fixedearth.com/> and enjoy the breathless excitement of discovering it just ain't so! Then fly off to the biblical astronomer at <http://www.geocentricity.com/> and wonder why you weren't taught this stuff at school. Then have a lie down...

Thanks for all the links and help.

More, as always, to: norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk

Shreds of evidence: Kevin Ferguson

If you've been reading the big serious newspapers recently you will have noticed a kerfuffle involving a previously assumed well-performing company by the name of Enron. Enron was a multinational, multi-billion-dollar power company which expanded into all sorts of areas of business and cooked its books by burying losses over a number of years. Then discovered, senior executives cashed in their shares while encouraging workers and shareholders to buy more stock in full knowledge the company was going down the pan. A more shocking aspect to this frightful scam is that the board were aided and abetted in the deception by the connivance of the agency responsible for making sure the books remained uncorrupted: the auditors. The appointed auditors, Arthur Andersen, have been found guilty of the shredding of documentary evidence, forcing the Bush administration into reviewing regulatory standards and authorities.

Auditors are responsible for ensuring that the accounts presented are "fair and accurate". However, a number of golden rules in the audit world were broken and the "grown-up" press and audit profession journals and magazines are having a field day. Internal Auditing have published a number of articles on the debacle, highlighting sloppy regulation and the culpability of the board. Commentators¹ in the audit business suspect that Andersen as "in other corporate failures, was not doing the right work and/or providing the creative tension necessary to challenge management, alert the board and – if necessary – the regulator to the nature and extent of real risks on the table". It is also noted that the same agency acted as internal and external audit functions, became a good news agency, and did not "champion transparency and integrity". Basically, Andersen used their audit work as a foot in the door for "more lucrative consulting business".

I have worked in audit now for several years. It's perceived as a backroom function, a necessary evil, and has a low public profile. In fact I'd never even heard of audit until I was audited while working as a System Manager at a health board from which I was poached to become a gamekeeper, if you like. It's a very peculiar experience to see your own profession in the headlines – especially one with all the appeal of a test-card collectors convention.

But, I have noticed, it's not just the national and trade press that has got sanctimonious over the affair. Disapprobation and ridicule of Andersen's shenanigans have become the order of the day in the profession itself. We've become adept and inventive in slipping in gags involving shredding machines at any opportunity.

Audit is a funny old game. The auditor or audit team attempts to establish what an organisation or department is doing or how well it does it – sufficiently, legally, efficiently, securely, etc. It is a profession based on gathering evidence and testing the controls in place in order to mitigate risks. This is achieved through a process of verifying the systems and measures in place through compliance and substantive testing with legislation, industry standards, company requirements, etc. This kind of work suits someone like myself with a scientific background based on establishing empirical truths and scepticism. Lastly, auditors like to feel that they contribute something positive and/or helpful to the audited body – to add value.

However, in contrast to the derision being heaped upon Enron's senior executives and auditors, I have been constantly astonished to discover throughout my audit career that a not insignificant number of my colleagues have demonstrated an equally sloppy attitude in being committed Christians or avowed Muslims (for some reason I have not chanced upon members of the Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu faiths). While going about their day-to-day professional life gathering evidence to establish the *réalité* of a business function(s) and challenging accepted wisdom, they continue to cling to their religious delusions and fail to challenge the orthodoxy laid out before them in their personal life.

How does your religious auditor assess how well religious institutions meet their stated objectives? Or how do they go about challenging and verifying and contenting themselves with the intention of their chosen ideology? And, of course, how do they objectively assess the contribution of their religion to the spiritual and material well-being of the human race?

It is pretty disconcerting to find able and effective colleagues singularly unaware of and untroubled by the difficulty they'd find themselves in if they applied their religious practice of blind faith in their workplace.

What would their attitude be to a government finance department that carried out its duties according to a set of ethics, standards, guidance (a bible if you will) of which nobody is quite sure from where it came, or prove its authorship or agree which bits are to be taken literally? And what if the department adopted standards different to the guidance that the auditors believe should be followed? Would we have bowler-hatted, pin-stripe-suited CIPFA and ACCA certified accountants burning one another at the stake or raging Holy War and *jihad* in the name of effective financial controls? Let their battle cry be: In only God and fiscal propriety we trust!

Would the following statement in the review of the accounts appease shareholders and those

reliant on pension funds: "The auditor is pleased to report that while the executive board of directors acknowledge that the company is presently critically under-performing they restate their belief that no-one is here to make lots of money. The auditor is also happy to report that in the next enterprise the executive require you to invest in, shareholder dreams of untold wealth, health, happiness and luxury will be realised – following the demise of the present one." If only Enron had thought of presenting that to our god-fearing stateside brothers and sisters perhaps there wouldn't be such stooshy.

Of course, if strict audit principles are applied, the executive agency of any enterprise must ultimately bear the responsibility and pay the price for failures as well as successes. But do our credal auditors identify their God as ultimately responsible for things gone awry in his Universal Worship of Me venture? Ah, no. That would be the Devil or the apostate or the atheist.

Readers of the *Freethinker* will neither be surprised at humanity's contradictory behaviour nor at its ability to put faith in absurd and unfounded notions such as God and organised religion. But one can have creeping doubts if those whose professional business revolves around being convinced by demonstrable evidence can invest their lives in unfounded assertion and unverifiable and fantastical tales. But there is hope ...

In the March edition of *History Today*² Professor Harold Perkin identifies "three major means by which surplus income and resources are extracted" by ruling elites from the societies they preside over: military, commercial and cultural where he includes religious institutions.

He contrasts how "conquerors and profit-makers are often resented [but] priests and bureaucrats operate by persuasion" and specifically states his belief that the Papacy was given "the keys of Heaven and Hell" so that it was possible sell eternal life to believers". Selling nirvana should be considered more as gentle coercion than logical "persuasion", and Professor Perkins calmly ignores other more persuasive means used by state and religious institutions such as the application of blasphemy laws in the Christian and Muslim worlds.

He lists, among other things, the Lamas' ability to maintain loyalty and voluntary contributions through repeated Chinese occupations. Communities holding together in the face of "extraction rates that amount to exploitation or predation ... Aztecs taking their daily human sacrifices ... the medieval papal crusades against internal heretics like the Cathars in France" are also noted, which

"show how the most oppressive societies can survive for long periods". It also demonstrates humanity's ignorance or inability to identify the cause of their misery.

He goes on to recount how, for instance, the Mughal emperors and the Papacy's lavish lifestyle were the cause of the major social upheavals which threatened, lessened or destroyed their own power. By comparing the destiny of numerous examples of the three different types of elites in securing and then losing positions of power and influence in their society or empires, Perkins presents us with an interesting picture of how the social forces of reality ultimately catch up with the hard sell. Anyone thinking Enron again?

IMAGINE a country which passes laws requiring its schoolchildren to participate in regular acts of patriotism, where they have been suspended or even beaten for non-compliance or protest. Imagine a country where opposition to such state-endorsed rituals, or the religious taint of national mottoes, can lead to victimisation, ostracism, and even death threats. We are not talking about, as one might imagine, somewhere such as Iran or North Korea, but the USA.

The US Constitution continues to be demeaned by a significant number of Americans who revere it almost as a totem, yet fail to observe the protection for individual rights it contains. The reaction of many Americans to matters of individual conscience or freedom reveals a mentality that requires absolute conformism to popularly accepted norms of patriotic and religious belief. This ideological climate has been heightened since September 11, with over 1,200 laws being enacted around the country mandating display of patriotic mottoes and recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools.

Interestingly, "God" is not mentioned in the Constitution, which maintains that it and not God is the supreme law of the land. Indeed, the first four presidents were at pains to prevent the Christianisation of America. The First Amendment prohibits Congress from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion"; however, this "wall of separation" has endured unrelenting attack, with Bush now promoting "faith-based" programmes and public funding of religious schools.

The US is constituted, through the Bill of Rights, as a democratically limited republic, where Thomas Jefferson's feared "tyranny of the many" cannot ride roughshod over minorities at will, and where the inalienable rights of the individual to freedom of con-

He concludes that "the larger the society, the greater the opportunity to extract surplus ... that's why great empires decline and fall faster and further the more they exploit". Even the greatest, most productive empire to exist yet, the US economy, cannot "bring itself, it seems, to rein in the multinational corporations that now manipulate the global economy for their own profit".

It would seem then, that through an inability of elites to account for or control and extract what Professor Perkin refers to as a "reasonable share of available resources" – whether it be the greed of Rome, Enron directors or the Soviet *nomenklatura* – empires have sown the seeds of their own doom.

One Nation under God?

science and expression are (theoretically) protected against arbitrary infringement.

As presently construed, all levels of government must be completely neutral, aiding neither a particular religion nor all religions. However, given the almost universal belief in God, this has been interpreted solely as prohibiting aid to specific religious creeds; the very idea that a reference to "God", such as in the Pledge or in the national motto, should be construed as "respecting an establishment of religion" is at such variance with public orthodoxy that it has never been seriously entertained in court.

By Moray C Grant

At least that was until June 26, when the US Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit upheld a suit brought by Michael Newdow against the inclusion of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance regularly recited in his eight-year-old daughter's school. It should be obvious that "one nation under God" is a statement of religious affirmation, demonstrated trivially by its intrinsic monotheism. Yet, to most Americans, the existence of God is unquestioned, atheists are regarded with suspicion, and to oppose reference to God in patriotic expressions is perverse. Thus "In God We Trust" is emblazoned on currency, politicians cry "God Bless America!" at every opportunity, and publicly funded chaplains say prayers in legislatures across the land: these and other practices are defended by the courts on the grounds of being merely "ceremonial deism".

The common conclusion from these commentaries is that inability or unwillingness to foster a safe environment for effective, critical and challenging commentary on the prevailing wisdom ultimately leads to unsustainable empires and inevitable implosion. In terms of religious empires, here's hoping. Oh, and let's hear it for audit ...

References:

1) Paul Shantz, "Learning from Enron's Errors" and Neil Hodge, "The Great Divide", *Internal Auditing*, March 2002.

2) "The Rise and Fall of Empires", Harold Perkin, Professor Emeritus, Northwestern and Lancaster Universities, *History Today* Vol. 52(4).

Even the Supreme Court simply chooses in such instances to completely ignore the tests ordinarily used to indicate state endorsement of religion in less politically sensitive cases, supporting practices that dissenting justices have described as obviously unconstitutional even to "a group of law students".

Without a common culture that helps mould a sense of national identity such as in Europe, much of American identity revolves around rituals of patriotic observance, such as the Pledge of Allegiance. Originally penned by a socialist ex-Baptist minister in 1892, it was increasingly required in schools and codified into law in 1942.

In 1940 Jehovah's Witnesses in West Virginia objected to enforced recitation of the Pledge in school under penalty of expulsion, on the grounds that the US flag was held as an idol and their religion required allegiance to God alone. Their case was dismissed initially, on the grounds that their freedom of religion had to be subordinated to a national need for unity and patriotism. But in the months following the decision there were more than 300 physical attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, including an assault in Richwood, West Virginia, where the sheriff had nine Witnesses tied together in front of a flagpole. A mob surrounded them, recited the Pledge, spat on the victims, then drove them out of town. This led the Supreme Court in 1943 to admit that they had reached the wrong conclusion, declaring that students could not be forced to recite the Pledge.

In practice, however, this right to opt out means that students are placed in the situation, in the words of the Newdow court's decision, of having to "make an unacceptable choice between participating and protesting". Such a protest by two 18-year-

(Continued on p13)

"CHRISTIANITY is a parcel of the Laws of England: and therefore to reproach the Christian religion is to speak in subversion of the law". These words, spoken by the learned seventeenth-century judge Sir Matthew Hale, shaped how the crime of blasphemy in Britain would be treated in the era of the Enlightenment. By linking religion and the state the blasphemy laws could henceforth be used as a political and moral tool to enforce conformity and to regulate religious opinions that the state considered dangerous. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the law of blasphemous libel trapped a number of individuals who had sold Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*. The systematic nature of these attacks led another regular victim of these laws, Richard Carlile, to declare that the Church-State link made the priesthood into a standing army intended to keep the mind in check just as the real soldiery policed the body.

What broke this mould was the celebrated case against the founder and first editor of the *Freethinker*.

This paper was the brainchild of George William Foote, a Westcountryman with an enquiringly sharp mind and a promising literary career ahead of him. The *Freethinker* was punchy and forthright, using a combination of ridicule and comic representation as an antidote to the serious-minded writing of Christianity. Religious hypocrisy was exposed through a series of "Profane Jokes" and short satires on biblical absurdities and immorality,

A law that made of free speech



Dr David Nash, right, with Peter Tatchell at the reading of Kirkup's "blasphemous" poem

in a manner reminiscent of the modern tabloid press. From its earliest issues the paper was closely watched by the police, and Home Office files testify to the fear it generated amongst some members of polite Victorian society.

However, it was Foote's cartoons that increased the *Freethinker's* appeal and the apparent dangers it posed. These focused on the ridiculous or the macabre side of biblical literalism. Whilst Foote was testing the waters about just how far he could go, these comic representations were also small, weekly, attacks upon the unquestioning reverence in

Dr David S Nash, Senior Lecturer in Law at Oxford Brookes University, on the changing shape of blasphemy

which the Bible and established religion were held. Eventually Foote's enemies cracked and he was prosecuted alongside William James Ramsey and Henry Kemp for publishing the *Freethinker's* Christmas number for 1882. This contained an article portraying its author as, revolted by Christianity, asking "What shall

Blasphemy makes for a good evening of drama

THE regular date of the monthly meeting of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association for July happened to be the evening after the 25th anniversary of the end of the *Gay News* trial – the last blasphemy trial to have succeeded in this country so far, and hopefully for ever. GALHA therefore marked the occasion by presenting an entertainment – well attended and well received – comprising three linked playlets, each portraying a blasphemy trial.

Though hard-hitting and historically accurate, they were not lacking in humour, and were well presented as rehearsed readings, augmented with sound effects (prepared by Malcolm Barnes) and even with costume, to the extent of a judge's wig.

The five actors – Terry Sanderson, Steve Woods, Derek Lennard, Marios Hajipanayi, and Gillian Spratt – each played two or three parts, and the standard of acting was high. Terry Sanderson, in par-

Report by Barbara Smoker

ticular, managed a convincing American accent in his first role and the portentous intonation of English judges in his other two. The first two plays followed historical blasphemy trials and their aftermath, keeping largely to the published words of the protagonists: the 1887 trial of Charles B Reynolds in New Jersey, and the 1883 trial of G W Foote, editor of the *Freethinker*, in London.

When Reynolds, an ex-preacher, publicly expounded the absurd and immoral story of the Deluge, showing that it could not possibly be the work of a merciful God, the charge of blasphemy was brought against him by an American busy-body, Mrs Brown, almost a 19th-century American version of the 20th-century British Mrs Whitehouse, who instigated the *Gay News* case. Defending counsel for Reynolds was the great atheist ora-

tor Robert G Ingersoll. Though the accused was found guilty, he was not given a custodial sentence, only a fine – which Ingersoll paid for him.

In Britain, on the other hand, G W Foote was sentenced to a vicious twelve months in prison with hard labour for publishing the satirical cartoons that appeared in the Christmas 1882 edition of the *Freethinker*. [One of them – the most appropriate – is reproduced on the front cover.]

The essence of Foote's defence was that opponents of any criticism of Christianity by means of argument or art should respond by means of argument or art, not hide behind the criminal law; but this cut no ice with the judge, to whom Foote famously retorted that the sentence was worthy of his creed.

The third play depicted an imaginative and amusing indictment of the Holy Trinity, based on Bible quotations, and an enjoyable evening was rounded off with wine and soft drinks.

akes a mockery th and justice

I do to be Damned". The same edition of the paper offered an irreverent comic strip life of Christ and a cartoon depiction of a text from Exodus entitled "Moses getting a back view" (the last of these was especially singled out in court).

Foote's defence covered some rather interesting territory. He argued, first of all, that numer-

Senior Lecturer in History University charts the asphehy law in Britain

ous advances in the realm of religious tolerance had eroded the status of the Church and State link so far that it had now become meaningless. He also effectively pleaded guilty to the charge of vulgarity in his portrayal of Christianity. However, Foote argued that he had embraced this in answer to the strident vulgarity of evangelical Christianity. A number of his more serious-minded cartoons demonstrated this by lam-

pooning of the Salvation Army, which Foote portrayed as a cynically "Sham Business". He asked, rhetorically, whether the law was prepared to protect him and other freethinkers from the street corner evangelising tactics of coarsened Christianity.

The presiding judge, Justice Ford North, made plain his contempt for the defendants, and expressed considerable surprise when the first jury failed to convict. A re-trial was ordered. This time Foote, Ramsey and Kemp were not so lucky and a conviction duly ensued. The judge thereafter pronounced a sentence of twelve months on Foote and lesser sentences on the others.

The conviction and sentences provoked an unprecedented widespread agitation which proved increasingly embarrassing for the Home Office and the Home Secretary Sir William Harcourt. Petitions arrived at the Home Office from all corners of the land, signed from politicians, lawyers, members of the literary and artistic communities, and indeed from prominent religious leaders. Whilst these were not instrumental in reducing

the sentences they did provoke considerable discomfort in government circles worried about the power and scale of public opinion motivated against the law. A belated penny had also dropped with the realisation that prosecution had provided George William Foote and the *Freethinker* with all the publicity their causes had ever craved. Thereafter the *Freethinker* may still have been regularly scrutinised, but successive Home Secretaries refused to take the matter any further.

When a subsequent trial against Foote and the other defendants fizzled out, Justice Coleridge took the opportunity to pronounce upon the Common Law of blasphemous libel. Since this law is substantially judge-made law, opinions offered at the end of court cases can and do shape how the law is interpreted and applied. Coleridge unravelled the words of Sir Matthew Hale and declared that Christianity was no longer "part and parcel of the laws of the land". Instead Coleridge argued that it was perfectly permissible to criticise Christianity providing it was done with a legitimate intention to engage in debate. Irreverence or wounding and scoffing words were still punishable but sober discussion was not. The key to the Coleridge judgement was that the "manner" in which something had been said was now the test of blasphemy – no longer would the content of what had been said be the subject of prosecution.

Although this judgement was imperfect, and certainly it had its critics, it pointed the way in a half-hearted manner to more liberal discussion of religious matters. Its "decency test" ensured that it dealt with cases that strayed into public order areas where the Home Office has always felt much more comfortable. This judgement was itself effectively unravelled by the *Gay News* case of 1977 and 1978. In this case Justice King Hamilton denied the defence of artistic merit and refused to admit expert evidence to this effect. He also declared the poem to be "blasphemous on its face" and argued that the jury would be capable of deciding only this matter.

This had the effect of ignoring the intention of the publishers or the manner in which they had expressed their opinions or beliefs. Henceforth, and in fact to this day, a prosecution need only prove the fact of publication of something deemed to be blasphemous – motive simply does not come into it. Arguably the impact of Coleridge and his move forwards had been dealt a fatal blow nearly a century after its inception. Were he alive today, George William Foote, the founder of this admirable paper, would almost certainly permit himself something of a wry smile!



George Melly (right) pictured chatting at the St Martin in the Fields demonstration to Andrew Lumsden who took over the editorship of *Gay News* from Denis Lemon. Andrew's miniature long-haired dachshund is Netta.

The REAL crime of the Catholic Church

A GREAT deal has been written in the last few months about the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests and about the cover-up of these crimes by the Church hierarchy. However, it should be pointed out that the abuse of children by clergy is only a small fraction of the crimes involving incest and child sexual abuse for which the Catholic Church should admit responsibility.

The Catholic Church has *always* known how widespread incest and child sexual abuse is: sexual abuse of children not just by priests, but by fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, grandfathers, sisters, mothers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, bakers, shopkeepers, neighbours, youth leaders, and so on. When I say "has always known", I mean for hundreds of years. And the Church is the **ONLY** institution which has had this knowledge. Yet it never felt that anything needed to be done about it. It was only children after all.

The statistics regarding child sexual abuse only became known in the late 1970s, first through the Women's Movement in America, and the Rape Crisis Centres. The Rape Crisis Centres advertised that they were available to support any woman who had experienced any kind of sexual assault, whether recent or in the past. Nevertheless, the Centres were surprised when, after a few months, it became apparent that half their calls were about assaults which had occurred when the woman was a child. Confidential surveys then undertaken showed that one in five women had experienced sexual abuse as children, and maybe the figure was not very different for boys. And it became known at this time also that the abuser was usually someone known and trusted by the child, not a stranger as had been the accepted teaching till then. The figure of one in five was the same across all socio-economic groups. By 1991, it was recognised to be one in two.

Until the 1980s in Britain, and a bit earlier in America, most survivors thought that they were the only person in the world that this had happened to. Indeed, a text-book still in use in the 1980s said that incest was very rare, and happened to only one in a million. Sigmund Freud, too, claimed that incest did not happen. Almost all his female patients told him they had been sexually abused as children, and Freud had at first believed them, and thought he had "discovered" the cause of female "hysteria". This "discovery", he was sure, would make him famous. This was in 1896. But his psychoanalyst colleagues did not like this theory at all. So after a few years Freud retracted it, and said instead that, of course, nice men do not have sex with their daughters, rather the little girls are so in love with their fathers that they fan-

tasise that they have had sex with him, and being female, they cannot tell the difference between fact and fantasy. Freud's colleagues liked this much better, and for most of the 20th century this is what progressive people believed. Or pretended to believe.

When Freud made this announcement, in the early twentieth century, where was the Catholic Church? Why did they not go public and say, "Well, actually, we in the Church have

By Rasjidah St John, a woman who has worked in the field of child sex abuse for more than 20 years

any amount of evidence that incest and child sexual abuse ARE very common". After all, they had evidence to the contrary from several different sources:

1) From the confessional. Abusers would confess, be given some penance and told not to do it again. Recent research shows that one in ten men sexually abuse children. Whether Catholic or Protestant or Muslim or atheist makes no difference. Nor does socio-economic background and culture. The statistics are the same for all countries where surveys have been done: Australia, UK, Germany, USA, Egypt, India, Nicaragua, Switzerland, Sweden.

2) From children, who would sometimes come to the priest looking for help, when they were being sexually abused at home, or in some other situation. From the survivors who have talked to me, I understand that the children usually did not get any help. If it was their own father they were complaining about, they might be told not to tell such wicked lies, and the child might even be given a penance herself. Sometimes a priest did help. But I've heard of one child who was thrown with great force across some pews for "daring to tell such lies". How many children tried to get help is impossible for an outsider to know. The Church knows. Many children, whether Catholic or not, seemed to sense that the best thing to do was say nothing about it to anyone.

3) Mothers, neighbours and others would sometimes come to the church knowing their child was being abused, at home or elsewhere, hoping the priest would help.

4) Parents sometimes came to the church complaining about sexual abuse by priests. When there were too many complaints, the priest might be moved to another parish. Catholic priests are not much more likely to abuse children than Protestant lawyers, or Muslim soldiers, but priests do have more access to children, and so paedophiles might choose the religious life with this in mind. But whereas the church is an organisation which is well aware of what its priests and its parish-

ioners are doing, there is no similar body concerned with lawyers' sexual behaviour. With soldiers, there is a certain amount of supervision, but when they are stationed abroad, soldiers are allowed to get away with, for example, sex with child prostitutes. Complaints to superior officers by military wives that the husband is sexually abusing his daughter, are also likely to be briskly silenced. But there is nothing for soldiers comparable to the Catholic system. No confessional.

5) Plenty of incidents and observations of sexual abuse of children would have come from Catholic schools and orphanages to those in authority.

It used to be said that there was a taboo against incest, but we have learnt that the taboo has only been against talking about it.

Some of the Catholic Church hierarchy have recently pleaded that they had not understood how severe the trauma of sexual abuse was for children. If they had not understood that, one wonders what they *did* understand.

Some of the Catholic authorities are also saying that they did not know how widespread child sexual abuse was until just now. Well, the Women's Movement in America have been telling everyone since the 1970s. The Church, especially in America, should have been listening. And should have been reading some of the books that have been published in these last two-and-a-half decades. But as I have explained above, the Church did not need to be told by anyone, they already knew. And as the only institution in the world which did have this knowledge, they were under a moral obligation to publicise it.

Before 1980, when a mother, any mother, not necessarily Catholic, began to suspect that her child was being abused, she was in a wretched position. She would not know to whom to turn for help. She was completely isolated. She would hardly be able to believe her own suspicions. She would think she must be an unnatural woman to even imagine such a thing. Society told her she must stick by her husband whatever happened. That was her first duty. If she told a friend, or a doctor, they would probably say, "Of course your husband wouldn't do that. He is a nice man. There must be some misunderstanding. Little girls make up stories, you know." Centuries of agony of this sort, when the Church could have intervened and said, "Yes, it happens. It happens a lot, in all sorts of families. And it should not."

Even the police have been aware for twenty years that child sexual abuse was widespread, though they took some persuading.

The Catholic Church comes trailing last, and when its spokesmen say sorry for the past abuse of children by clergy they are simply continuing the cover-up.

"Itineraries of Sanctity"

I HAVE just returned from a holiday in Tuscany and Umbria, the latter region for the first time. And as requested in a brochure titled as above I opened myself to receive the message flowing from its basilicas and the "sanctuaries of its sweet protective Madonnas". Whether, as promised, this experience has enriched my "soul", I do not know, but it has certainly "enriched my culture", which the brochure also told me it would.

On a trip to Assisi, for instance, I spent my time admiring Giotto's frescoes on the life of St Francis, rather than hearing about the life itself, which our official guide spent nearly half an hour narrating to my companions in a temperature of 40 deg C or more before allowing them to enter the massive three-tier basilica. Joseph McCabe, who was for 12 years a Franciscan, records a tradition in the Order that Francis died (1226) of a broken heart at the sight of the speedy corruption of his followers. Four years later, Brother Elias, who "loved wealth and luxury", was nominated General, and within 20 years of its founding, the Order had forsaken all pretence of asceticism.

McCabe describes Francis as "a man of mediocre intelligence" and "Itineraries" has him calling himself "simple and idiotic", which certainly applies to some of his actions, like sermonising the birds. He called animals "brother" and "sister"; water was "humble" and "chaste"; and he declared himself "lover and husband" of the Madonna.

The surprisingly numerous "sainted women of Umbria" were, of course, in love with Christ and wanted "nothing less than to unite themselves with him as wives prepared to partake of the chalice of his passion". One Franciscan, we are informed, Blessed Angela of Foligno, earned the title "teacher of theologians" and "powerfully described the vision of the unfathomable mystery of God".

Some vision!

Jewish wrath I

MIDDLE East reporters and broadcasters have to consider their words carefully for fear of offending one side or the other; and even when they make a seemingly defensible remark it can cause a storm. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Ted Turner, founder of America's CNN, said that both the Israelis and Palestinians were engaged in "terrorism" which, in an updated report in the paper (July 1), earned his station the wrath of the worldwide Israeli lobby and led to a "full-scale fall-out" that executives were still attempting to contain.

Turner apologised for what he presumably

thought "fair comment"; but in the highly charged situation, any attempt at justification would only have increased CNN's problems.

Jewish wrath II

HERE in Britain, the *Journalist*, organ of the National Union of Journalists, has likewise incurred the wrath of its Jewish readers for a criticism of Israeli policy. "As both a Jewess and a journalist", one expressed her "disgust at the anti-Jewish diatribe"; another was "breathless" at reading the "vicious diatribe against Israel and Ariel Sharon"; and a third, who attributed the "incredible diatribe" to the gullible swallowing of "poisonous propaganda pumped out by the Palestinians", was waiting to see if there was "a balancing article" before cancelling her membership of the union. All three, you will notice, regard criticism of Israel's policy as a "diatribe" ("a bitter or abusive attack"); support for that policy (in the words of the third writer) would only require an "article".

We can turn to sport for a more wholesome attitude. An Israeli Jew and a Pakistani Muslim were doubles partners at Wimbledon and intended to continue playing together despite condemnation by Islamic militants and the Pakistan government.

Lament for a bee

ONE of the *Observer's* nuttier contributors calls himself the Barefoot Doctor. "I killed a bee today" he confessed in his column in the paper's magazine (June 30), "and I can't get it out of my mind".

There were extenuating circumstances: it was hovering over his son while he slept, but it was dozy and he could just have easily herded it out of the window. Instead he crushed it. End of story? Unfortunately no.

"Sure, I spoke to its spirit and prayed that by releasing it from its mortal coil it would find rebirth as a higher life form, but still it was murder of a living thing by someone whose identity is based on being a healer." And this destructive act cost him his "spiritual equilibrium". Which in turn led to his wondering how many of us feel cut off from our spiritual source ...

I spare you the rest of his mystical musing on the dead or (perhaps now reborn) bee. Even more unbelievable was his suggested "healing". You have to visualise a tiny being in the centre of your chest; with every breath it grows larger and larger, larger and larger, larger and larger until it "outgrows the town, county, country and planet, until like a pregnant mother loving the baby in her womb, you allow yourself to love each and every creature on this

earth as if it were your own child."

The Barefoot Doctor admits that you may think this a "load of twaddle", and he's dead right. It's a pity the paper's editor doesn't think so too. He should tell the Doctor to put on his shoes and shuffle off home to muse at his heart's content.

Bush cuts aid programme

GEORGE Bush has surrendered to intense pressure from anti-abortion groups and religious fundamentalists and is slashing millions of dollars from a United Nations family planning programme, according to a report in the *Washington Post* (June 29). In January the President withheld \$34 million in payments from the UN's population fund after conservatives accused the UN of tacitly supporting China's "one child per family" abortion policy, which family planning groups deny.

What is threatened is a far larger global programme that not only helps women with family planning but promotes HIV and Aids prevention, health and education in 142 countries.

Susan Cohen of the pro-choice Alan Guttmacher Institute told the *Post* that it was the women in those developing countries including Afghanistan "which the White House purports to care about so much, who are going to suffer".

The Democrats have said they will fight the issue and by the time you read this you will know if they have succeeded. My guess is that they won't.

One witness not enough

IT seems that the Roman Catholic Church is not the only American church to harbour sexual abusers. Barbara Anderson, a former employee of Jehovah's Witnesses, has been expelled after saying she had seen "hundreds of suppressed files of accusations"; and a Kentucky elder, Bill Bowen, described the church as a paedophiles' paradise. He was so alarmed that he set up a website (www.silentlambs.org) to investigate the scale of the problem, and the result was staggering. When I visited it early in July there were 23,720 alleged child molesters on file in Patterson, NY.

But while the Witnesses' headquarters abhors the sexual abuse of children and "will not protect any perpetrator of such repugnant acts", it invokes Deuteronomy 19:15 and refuses to accept the testimony of a single witness or presumably Witness. The "mouth" of two or three will be required in accordance with the good book.

Book review

RELIGIOUS tension is growing dangerously in India and the BJP Hindu fundamentalist party is doing little if anything to restrain it. In Gujarat in February, Muslim homes and businesses were burnt to the ground by such a highly organised and well-armed mob that observers found it hard to believe the authorities did not have a hand in it. And the government, with its religious agenda, is magnifying the myth of the holy cow in an attempt to have the animal declared sacred and its slaughter banned. The connection may not be immediately apparent, but it is widely believed by Hindus that beef-eating was Islam's "baneful bequeathal" to India.

As a leading Indian historian, Professor D N Jha refutes this view, and shows convincingly that beef formed an important part of the dietary tradition of ancient India, long before the birth of Islam. By demolishing the religious justification for banning beef, he exposes what he regards as the real purpose of the government, the further marginalisation of the Muslim population. Professor Jha's opponents have been vociferous in their condemnation. The fundamentalist groups which back the BJP have demanded that the book should be ritually burnt in public; it has already been banned by the Hyderabad Civil Court, and the author's life has been threatened.

In a preface to this Verso edition, he explains the vicissitudes that the Indian edition had to face on account of "the increasing weight of Hindu fundamentalism in our country". Its original publisher "suddenly" discovered "excessive *sang-de-beuf* in the manuscript in the final stages of printing and recanted from his professional commitment under pressure". Soon afterwards Professor Jha began to get threats from unidentified callers, asking him not to go ahead with the publication. Fortunately, Matrix Books, a new and enterprising Delhi publisher, had the courage to issue the book in August 2001.

In the time-honoured fanatical fashion, some Hindus and Jainists denounced it as blasphemous without reading it, demanded Jha's arrest and obtained a court order restraining its circulation. There are no fatwas in the Hindu religion, says Jha, but "a self-appointed custodian of Hinduism sentenced me to death". And Jha expresses his thanks to Tariq Ali and Verso for bringing out a world edition of the book, protecting the rights of academic freedom and defeating the attempts at censorship.

Jha starts with a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi setting out the importance of the cow in an agrarian society, whose members derive a substantial part of their sustenance from its milk and dairy products. Alas, though, Gandhi was not content with the factual

description. "The central fact of Hinduism is cow protection", he said elsewhere, and called it an "ideal" essentially different from the "dairy ideal" of the West, transcending it, "laying stress on the spiritual aspect" rather than the economic; and he spoke of "the idea of penance and self-sacrifice for the martyred innocence which it embodies..."

When Gandhi could write blather like that, it is not surprising that the average Indian "rooted in what appears to him as his traditional Hindu religious heritage", should treat the cow as a sacred animal, a symbol of the communal identity of the Hindus, a cultural identity threatened by Muslims who are thought of as

Colin McCall reviews *The Myth of the Holy Cow* by D N Jha.
Verso Hardback, £16.00

foreigners and beef eaters. What the Hindus do not realise is that their Vedic ancestors were also foreigners who ate the flesh of the cow and other animals. It is clear, says Jha that the early Aryans, who migrated to India around the middle of the second millennium BC brought with them nomadic pastoralism, incipient agriculture and religious beliefs and practices, including animal sacrifice; and these remained characteristic features of their life for several centuries. The Vedic gods, he tells us, "had no marked dietary preferences". Milk, butter, barley, oxen, goats and sheep were the usual food, although some had special fancies.

Jailed for not taking the biscuit

A COURT in eastern Indonesia has sentenced a woman to four years' imprisonment for spitting out a biscuit – or, as they claim, "degrading the host" during a Mass at Easter. The court of justice in Ende on the island of Flores found Esteriana Nonna Eni guilty of "humiliating the most sacred object in Catholicism" (ie a wafer biscuit) under Article 156 of the Criminal Law, which bans the "humiliation" of a recognised religion in Indonesia.

Eni, a Protestant, attended a mass with a Catholic friend at Christ the King Cathedral. She went up to receive the "holy communion" but later put the biscuit under her seat. She admitted in court that she had heard the announcement that it was only Catholics could take the biscuit or, as they call it, "communion."

Catholics were jubilant to see her jailed. Michael Hongkoda Djawa, a lay Catholic, told *UCA News* "Anyone who is found guilty must be punished, and the law must be enforced."

Indra particularly liked bulls; Agni was fond of the flesh of horses, bulls and cows; and so on. "The Vedas mention about 250 animals out of which at least 50 were deemed fit for sacrifice, by implication for divine as well as human consumption"; and the subsequent Brahmanical texts provide "ample evidence of the eating of flesh, including beef". The slaughter of animals also formed a part of the cult of the dead in Vedic and post-Vedic texts, and in cremation the skin and thick fat of the cow were used to cover the dead body. Later Vedic texts contain detailed descriptions of sacrifice and frequently refer to cattle slaughter and, says Jha, in the predominantly nomadic pastoral society it was natural to eat the food produced by the kill. However, animals were not only killed sacrificially but in ordinary domestic rites. Jha also shows that despite the Buddha's opposition to the killing of animals for sacrifice or food, there are numerous references to cow slaughter in early texts and a couple of passages on his eating of pork. Indeed, he is said to have died after a meal of pork.

With the passage of time, though, efforts were made to find substitutes for the killing of animals for sacrifice, which might be replaced with "a devout offering of praise or of a fuel stick of cooked food". This growing tendency towards ritual substitution gained ground from the later Vedic period onwards and should, says Jha, be seen against the background of the gradual weakening of pastoralism and the development of stable agrarian settlements. Cattle now become valuable for various agricultural operations, and several later Vedic texts recommend offering animal effigies instead of livestock.

While the practice of beef eating continued, notably on special occasions, "the lawgivers had already begun to discourage it around the middle of the first millennium when society began to be gradually feudalised". Brahmanical religious texts forbade many earlier practices, but "almost all the prescriptive texts enumerate cow killing as a minor sin, not a major offence. And it is fitting to end with another quote from Gandhi, who spoke in his autobiography of the hypocrisy of orthodox Hindus who "do not so much as hesitate or inquire when during illness the doctor ... prescribes them beef tea".

Obviously *The Myth of the Holy Cow* is particularly directed at an India threatened to its secular foundations. It is hard to see how Hindus and their BJP government can answer it; they may have condemned it, but Professor Jha supports every stage of his argument with copious notes, and supplies a 24-page bibliography. The impartial reader must declare the case proven. The holy cow is a myth.

old students in Alabama led to a beating for refusing to recite the Pledge, according to a case being argued only days after the Newdow ruling.

It was during the dark days of the Cold War in the 1950s that Congress added the phrase "under God" to the Pledge, specifically to distinguish the USA from "atheistic communism". The secular, inclusive national motto "E Pluribus Unum" ("Out of many, One") was replaced by "In God We Trust", and public profession of religious faith became a litmus test for patriotism.

Many have denounced the court's ruling on the grounds that the reference is innocuous, or merely a recognition of "common Judeo-Christian heritage", yet an examination of the circumstances in which "under God" was added reveals that it was clearly religiously-inspired, a fundamental consideration for any legal ruling. President Eisenhower, on signing the act into law, proclaimed that "millions of our school-children will daily proclaim the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty".

Summarising the Newdow decision, Judge Goodwin wrote that "one nation under God" is as objectionable as "under Vishnu, Zeus or no god", because "none of these professions can be neutral with respect to religion". The Pledge could be seen by atheists as enforcing "a religious orthodoxy of monotheism" and conveying a message to unbelievers "that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community".

(Continued from p7)

The Appellate Court's decision resulted in outrage and derision across the nation. Congresspersons appeared on the steps of the Capitol to recite the Pledge, both the House and Senate unanimously passed motions supporting it, and even more state legislatures have been mandating it in schools. Eschewing the legal technicalities of the case, President Bush, Senate Majority leader Daschle and others have resorted to epithets such as "ridiculous", "just nuts" and "junk justice" in an attempt to strangle the heresy at birth. Christian groups have mobilised, with some demanding impeachment of the judges, and Bush has vowed to appoint only "common sense judges who understand that our rights were derived from God". The dissenting judge denounced the ruling not on firm legal grounds, but rather that since its logic could equally apply against "In God We Trust" and "God Bless America" it must therefore be inadmissible.

Polls reveal, though, that up to 20% of the population agree with the court's verdict, and some brave individuals publicly voiced their concern. *Washington Post* journalist Richard Cohen, who knows many politicians privately to be agnostic or even atheist, opined: "Not a single member of the House or Senate had the courage to suggest even that the court had a point. Not one questioned the consensus. If these men and women, adults with immense

influence, were cowed into acting like eight-year-olds in the classroom, then how can we expect real eight-year-olds to assert their constitutional right to delete the phrase or not recite the Pledge at all? What kid could stand up to that kind of pressure? Certainly no member of Congress could."

Bucking the national trend, Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura vetoed a bill mandating the Pledge in schools, comparing it to the indoctrination practised by the Nazis and Taleban. "Patriotism must come from the heart", he said, and not be dictated by the state.

Just one day later, though, Judge Goodwin buckled under the outcry and stayed his decision, meaning that the case has to be reheard by a full panel of 11 judges. It is doubtful, since precedent shows that courts tend to follow the climate of current political opinion rather than opt for a correct, yet controversial and politically unpalatable decision, that Newdow's suit will survive the full force of opposition now ranged against it. That indeed will be a sad day for American justice. Perhaps in such an eventuality the Pledge should still be edited, but in this instance the excised phrase should not be "under God", but "with liberty and justice for all".

• The court's decision itself is well worth reading, and can be found at: <http://news.findlaw.com/usatoday/docs/conlaw/newdowus62602opn.pdf>. Michael Newdow's site is at: www.restorethepledge.com.

AN angry mob has killed a Pakistani Muslim for allegedly committing blasphemy. Zahid Mehmood, 48, was beaten and stabbed to death in the village of Barna.

Residents said Mehmood visited a village mosque and claimed that he was "the last prophet of God".

Muslims believe the Prophet Mohammad was the last of a line of prophets that extended back to Abraham. Several villagers were taking Mehmood to the local police station to have him charged with blasphemy when the mob attacked and killed him, according to witnesses.

Mehmood was previously arrested for blasphemy in 1994, but released when the court adjudged him mentally ill. Mehmood's relatives declined to press charges against the attackers, lest they meet the same fate themselves.

A MAN has asked a Sharia court in northern Nigeria to give him the death penalty for blaspheming against the prophet Muhammad. Aliyu Ibrahim, 20, from Adamawa State in north-eastern Nigeria trav-

Blasphemy round-up

elled to Sokoto and asked the Upper Sharia Court Two there to prosecute him.

"I blasphemed against the prophet in my mind," he told the News Agency of Nigeria.

"I want to be sentenced to death, because my blasphemy still irritates me and if I died without prosecution under Islamic law, I will die as an infidel," he said.

THE Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church of Pakistan has called for the repeal of the death sentence for blasphemy after a man was sentenced to hang for claiming to be Jesus Christ. Bishop Samuel Azariah said he knew the man, Anwar Kenneth, a Pakistani Christian, and believed he should have been given medical treatment. Kenneth was found guilty of writing hundreds of letters claiming to be a reincarna-

tion of Jesus Christ, and making sacrilegious remarks about Islam.

He pleaded guilty to the charges, and refused to accept the help of a lawyer to defend him. Social workers have said Anwar Kenneth had a history of psychiatric problems, and should have been examined by doctors before standing trial.

THE chief prosecutor in the trial of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, 28, from Wanstead, east London, who was sentenced to death in Pakistan last month for his role in the murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl along with three accomplices, has been accused by a defence lawyer of blasphemy.

Defence lawyer Rai Bashir said prosecutor Raja Quereshi had made "derogatory remarks against Islam".

"He ridiculed Islamic laws and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad and he did not show any respect in mentioning his name," Bashir said outside the makeshift courtroom in Hyderabad jail.

Getting past the censors

JIM Ross ("Secularism is not Enough", July) says that "we should observe that the world which the disintegration of religion is bringing into being has very little connection with the world that organised secular humanists would like to see."

First, looking round the world or the UK, come to that, I see no reason to think that the proposed "folding" of the Church of Scotland heralds any such disintegration of religion!

Second, there is no automatic unity of purpose between secularists and humanists (BHA style); many of the latter appear to have little commitment to atheism or secularism, even to the extent of defending religion in some cases. (The BHA and NSS already exist to perform the two functions he calls for in his article and the NSS has clear aims and objectives towards which it works).

Third, there is no political consensus to which all secularists and humanists would sign up, nor should there be.

What people do with their lives in a secular society within the law is up to them, and our contribution to such debates should be in our respective political organisations or pressure groups. I do not think that secular humanism should aim to be a proto-religion.

I agree that our aims at government level are unlikely to be successful unless we can raise public awareness of the issues, but the national organisation has to go through the motions and the quality of this lobbying does matter.

Ways must be found to bypass the censorship of the media, and politicians who are frightened of the organised religions, if we are to raise public awareness of the issues and the meaning of, and need for, secularism.

SE LORD
Westerham

Proving a negative

PETER Lancaster (*Points of View*, July) misses the point about proving a negative. Mathematical negative proofs relate to hypothetical aspects of known qualities: they require a basis in fact.

Numerous opinions have been expressed about God but facts are lacking. Without a factual basis as to what God implies, how could an appropriate mathematical argument be formulated? How might it be proved that God could not exist? Lacking this proof, we cannot, logically, claim that God does not exist.

On the other hand, the continuing failure by all religions, after thousands of years, to validate their claim raises serious doubts

about the existence of this proposed supernatural force. If God really exists, it should be possible to prove it

R G SILSON
Tring, Herts

Correcting history

IT IS tiresome to have to correct the history of your correspondent Derek Wilkes (*Points of View*, July) once again.

Wilkes asks when Jews drove Palestinians from their "ancestral properties". Let's start with the events of 1948-9 when thousands of Palestinians fled from their homes in what is now the state of Israel and became refugees in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Old Jerusalem. While Israel has tried to argue that these Arabs left voluntarily, it is naive to imagine that the activities of Jewish terrorist groups like Irgun and the Stern Gang, and massacres of Arabs at places such as Kafr Kassem, Deir Yassin and Jaffa, had nothing at all to do with their flight.

The exodus of these refugees is as indisputable as the Holocaust. In 1961 I worked with many of them in Old (Arab) Jerusalem and was for a time a close colleague in Tel-Aviv of an eye witness of the Jaffa massacre.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

'Don't call me Islamophobic'

TERRY Sanderson is so right in denouncing the cowardice of Europe's politicians and media as regards the Islamists' shameless attempts at imposing Islamic mores on Western society. For one brave Pim Fortuyn, how many cowering traitors to the heritage of the Enlightenment!

However, I must take exception to Mr Sanderson calling himself and, presumably, his likes (including myself) Islamophobic. According to my Concise Oxford Dictionary, a phobia is a morbid fear or aversion, and morbid means unwholesome, sickly, in this case irrational.

As anti-Islamists (and anti-religionists, generally speaking) have perfectly sound, valid, rational reasons why they fear Islam (and the influence of religions generally), it is plain wrong for them to use the term Islamophobia. Leave that insult to the Islamists, please!

Regarding the use of dictionaries, let me add this: a race is not a religion. So next time someone utters the silly word "racist", when critics of Islam are criticising Islam (a religion), tell them to look up the two words (race and religion). Islam is not a race. That should suffice as a reply.

By the way, I do not just fear Islam, I loathe it - as a woman, an atheist and

an animal liberationist.

NELLY MOIA
Luxembourg.

Tying fundamentalists in knots

IN Webwatch (July) Norman Pridmore suggests that we join in discussion groups on the Internet and he comments that fundamentalists "seem to lurk especially thickly" in certain areas. This is my experience and debate with many fundamentalists can be tedious, as they "know" already and their opinions are impervious to facts or reason. They will sometimes either end the discussion or become abusive when they discover you are an atheist - or indeed anyone who does not share their crazy beliefs. However, much fun can be had by posing as a confused believer. One approach is to begin by saying "As a keen student of the Bible I find my faith has been shaken by reading"

To the fundamentalist this is an irresistible challenge. Help will often be offered from the vantage of their "superior" knowledge and immutable faith. You can then be appreciative of the advice but move in with another question. This can go on for a long time, and the contortions of fundamentalists are wondrous to read and, if you stay detached, entertaining.

I recently asked with whom Cain and Abel had children in order to produce the human race. After going round the biblical mulberry bush a few times I was told they married and bred with their mother. When I suggested, in puzzlement not ridicule, that this must have been incest I was told that "incest had not been invented then".

This game is entertaining because fundamentalists, unlike more temperate Christians, will not say that they do not know. They always have to provide an explanation. The Americans are the best opponents because they are the most outrageous. As long as you couch your comments as coming from someone in search of religious guidance they will keep trying to persuade you. The attraction of this approach is that others can see fundamentalist nonsense exposed and in a way which just might encourage other believers to consider the arguments. My hope is eventually to come across a fundamentalist who says either "I just don't know" or (the jackpot) "I see your problem. I have been believing nonsense." However, I am not holding my breath.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Creationism

WHEN creationists say that "Evolution is only a theory" they wish to imply that it is a false



theory. When Colin McCall says it is a fact, he means to imply that it is a proven theory. I would say rather that it is a theory which is so overwhelmingly confirmed by the evidence as to be accepted as accurate by all who have the knowledge to judge it and hence by those of us who don't have sufficient expert knowledge. As Russell says "the opinion of experts, when it is unanimous, must be accepted by non-experts as more likely to be right than the opposite opinion."

All scientific theories are falsifiable. When Einstein propounded the Theory of General Relativity, he devised various tests which could falsify or confirm his theory. These tests all confirmed the theory so experts feel confident about accepting it.

The theory (or theorem) that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides has been proved logically from the postulates, but the reason that most people feel confident about accepting it as a fact is that it is confirmed by the evidence of all right-angled triangles encountered so far.

As regards the origin of species, Darwin put forward one theory to explain the observed facts. Wallace came up with an almost identical theory about the same time. Lamarck had a different theory, that of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which was easily shown to be false by the experiment of docking the tails of hundreds of generations of mice which still continued to produce progeny with long tails. ("There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.")

On the other hand, subsequent discoveries in biology have all tended to confirm the correctness of Darwin's theory. In spite of the fact that he didn't know of Mendel's work on inheritance, much less the structure of DNA (discovered 100 years after he wrote *On The Origin of Species*) modern discoveries have necessitated only a little fine-tuning of Darwin's theory and no major revision at all.

To quote Russell again: "opinions that are held with passion are those for which no good ground exists; indeed the passion is the measure of the holder's lack of rational conviction." There may not be a need to defend Darwin's theory when the facts all confirm it, but as long as there are people who feel threatened by the facts of evolution and attack the theory with irrational passion, we may have to fight to ensure that the facts are not deliberately withheld from pupils.

PENELOPE FORREST
South Africa

PART of the creationist assault on the truth of evolution is based on an ambiguity in the English language. The words theory and

hypothesis tend to be interchangeable, even though they have different meanings. A hypothesis is a suggestion as how the universe may operate, a theory provides a coherent and rational explanation of how the universe actually does work.

I may hypothesise that human affairs are controlled by an infinitely good, all-powerful god, who rewards virtue and punishes wickedness. If I observe that the world is actually full of pain, cruelty, suffering, and injustice, I must conclude that the god hypothesis is not a fact. If I observe that the planets orbit the sun, and that apples fall out of trees, I can formulate a Theory of Gravity to connect both phenomena. The simplest answer to a creationist who denies the fact of the Theory of Evolution is to suggest that they jump out of a tenth floor window to prove that the Theory of Gravity is not a fact.

MR D M BENNETT
London

WHAT a good July feature by Norman Pridmore on how to deal with creationists! For clarification I would value a brief summary of the Old/New Earth and Intelligent Design dogmas. Since creationism is crazy I have difficulty in distinguishing one set of nonsense from another ... help!

By the way, I've always noticed a third type of ignorance: wilful ignorance. Unlike compound ignoramuses, wilful ones do know that they are ignorant and, usually, they are proud to tell you. Christianity certainly encourages this (becoming like sheep/children).

PETER LANCASTER
Essex

Editor's note: The following letter should be of help.

NORMAN Pridmore ("Forget civilised discourse, just go for the jugular" July 2002) does not seem to have studied Old Earth creationism very closely. Old Earth creationists, when asked why New Earth creationism is false, will reply that belief that the world is only a few thousand years old is incompatible with the evidence of geology; the same argument that Norman Pridmore himself would advance against New Earth creationism. Old Earth creationists accept the fossil succession, but reject the theory that newer species are descended from older species, attributing the sequence to a continuous creative process which did not cease until after the creation of humans. In this, their opinions coincide with those of many eminent scientists contemporary with Darwin, such as Owen, Sedgwick and Agassiz.

They are outnumbered and overshadowed by New Earth creationists in the (US) Institute of Creation Research and the (UK) Creation

Science Movement. But they have their own scholarly institute, the Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute (of Hatfield, Pennsylvania), and an able British advocate in Dr Alan Hayward, author of *Does God Exist? Science says Yes!* and *Creation and Evolution: The Facts and the Fallacies*. Hayward writes "It is a pity the term 'creation science' was ever invented. Creation is not a branch of science, and never can be. Creation is a matter of faith."

They do not reject scientific data which contradict Genesis, but re-interpret Genesis to fit the data. For instance, they reconcile geological time with the creation of the world in six days by proposing: either that God destroyed the early world and recycled the debris to form a new world in six days; or that God, having created the world, spent six days revealing the process to Moses or someone else; or that the six days were not contiguous, but separated by millions of years; or that God gave his orders in six days, after which their implementation took millions of years. The alternatives are the subject of scholarly discussion, not "bitter disputes".

DONALD ROOMM
London

Please note change of address

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all e-mails to:
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atheist & humanist contacts & events

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, September 1, 4pm. Madeleine Pym: *The Human Rights Act*.

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.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

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. No meeting in August. Next meeting, Friday September 13, 7.30pm.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power. Tel 0161 2865349. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or Rita Manton 01708 762575.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710. Website: www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: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.

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. Summer programme available.

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, July 18, 7.15pm. Rabbi Moeshe Vehidai-Rimner: *The Middle East from the Viewpoint of a Humanist Rabbi*

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.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, September 4, 8pm. Public meeting. Speaker Madeleine Pym.

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. Wednesday, September 11, 8pm. Public meeting. Subject: *Applying Humanist Ethics*.

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: Maggie Fraser. Tel: 01892 523858. E-mail: melgin@waitrose.com.

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

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