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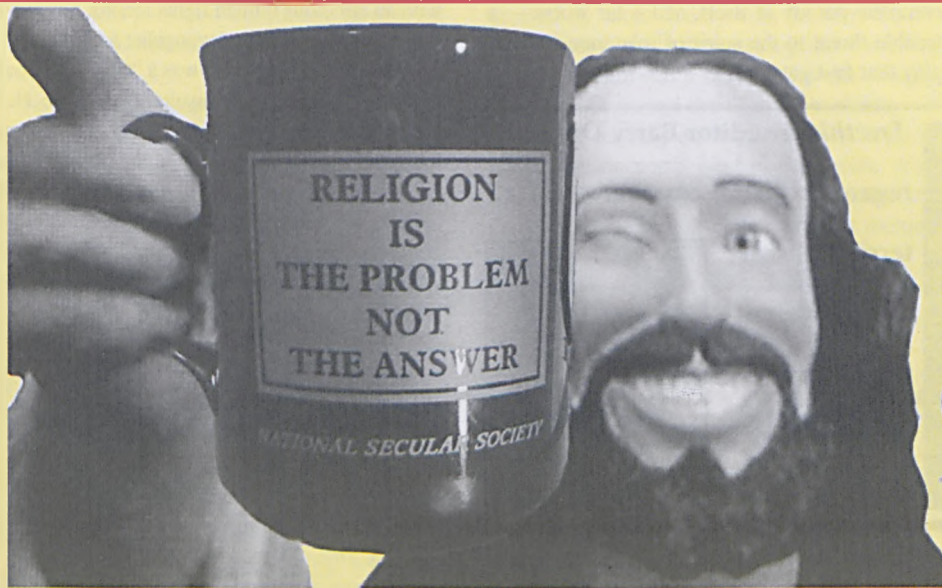
The

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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881



And the guy with the beard should know, given the spot of bother he once had with blasphemy and crucifixion. The mug he is giving the thumbs-up to is one of a range launched by the National Secular Society just in time for the Winter Solstice
— See p11

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The European Union signals its entry into the realm of the spiritual with a new Religious Affairs Directorate — p4



Beating children for God: ex-nun Lucille Poulin, 78, is jailed for eight months
— page 10

The Pope, 82, with very little else of importance to do, finds new ways to fiddle with the Rosary

— page 13



Freethinking allowed

WHEN I was growing up in South Africa, I was taught from an early age not to use certain terms which my family thought rude or demeaning or vulgar. So, for example, Africans were never referred to as niggers or kaffirs in my home – although these derogatory words were commonly used by others just about everywhere else.

My family's refusal to deploy the coarse, racist terms which peppered the language of the white Christian supremacists who ruled the land, made my parents guilty of politically *incorrectness*. Several times I heard my dad being referred to a "kaffir boetie" (nigger lover) by the local police and others. Later, that charming term was frequently directed at *me*.

Although the phrase "political correctness" had not even been coined then, the notion that certain words could be hurtful, or were ugly, had begun to take root, and educationists and people working in the media worked hard to replace them with kinder, more humane ones. And that is how I learned not to call people with Down's Syndrome "mongols" nor apply the word "dumb" to those who were mute. By the time I got my first job in journalism, I had

a fair number of alternative words and phrases at my command, and was more than happy to promote them and take new ones on board. So I guess that made me one of the earliest proponents of political correctness.

But somewhere between that time in the 60s, when we were trying to construct vocabularies that were free of bigotry, male bias, and racial or sexual prejudice, and the present, the perfectly noble idea of political correctness turned into a complete parody of itself, and – far worse – a terrible threat to the spirit of tolerance and fair play that first gave it life.

Freethinker editor Barry Duke

regards political correctness as 'a terrible threat to the spirit of tolerance and fair play that first gave it life'



Examples abound. Among the most bizarre was the case of David Howard, an aide to the Mayor of Washington D C, who was forced to resign because he used the word "niggardly" in public to describe what he considered to be a mean little fund.

That same "n" word now looks like ending the career of an American teacher, Stephanie Bell, a fourth-grade teacher in Wilmington, who presented it to her students as a synonym for "stingy." She picked "niggardly" because the children's dictionary offered "self-centred," which she figured the students already knew. This infuriated a parent of one student, who told Bell that the word was barred her house, regardless of its meaning. "Common sense tells you not to put a word like that on the board," she said. Despite apologies from both Bell and the school, the angry parent is still insisting that she be fired.

Commenting on both cases in a newspaper article, a US attorney, David Limbaugh, said "We are so anxious as a society to present ourselves as paragons of tolerance, free of all racial prejudice, that we lose our sense of reasonableness and justice, shamelessly sacrificing innocent people – and our integrity. We can act all high and mighty, but our willingness to punish people for acts of bigotry they didn't commit doesn't demonstrate our virtuousness, but our cowardice.

"In both Washington and Wilmington, people's jobs were placed in jeopardy because they harmlessly and accurately used a word others may not have understood. Instead of erring on the side of factual correctness, we defer to

political correctness. When we succumb to this kind of bullying because we lack the fortitude to stand up for truth and principle, we damage our society and do nothing to abate racism."

His words should be engraved on the desks of everyone who holds high office in every liberal democracy in the world.

And they should be especially writ large in the office of the Home Secretary Jack Straw. On a recent visit to Tehran, a horrid Islamic theocracy with an atrocious human rights record, Straw was asked to comment on televangelist Jerry Falwell's assertion that Muhammad was a "terrorist". Straw replied: "I regard such insults against the Holy Prophet, peace be upon Him, as much as an insult to myself as they are to those of the Islamic faith." *An insult to myself? Holy prophet? Peace Be upon Him?* What the hell was Straw thinking of? In condemning the babblings of a Christian nitwit who only ever opens his mouth to change feet, Straw delivered a slap in the face to the thousands who died in New York and Bali, and the thousands more suffering the after-effects of these attacks by religious maniacs acting in the name of Allah and the "peaceful" Muhammad!

I defy Straw to name one period in the last 1,400 years when Islam was ever "peaceful".

Straw, incidentally, has a rather quaint view of religion. In a recent article in *Prospect* magazine, he wrote: "Religion and democracy can exist side by side, as countries as different as the Republic of Ireland and Japan demonstrate. We in western countries sometimes attribute our political tolerance to secularism, contrasting this with the apparently dominant role of religion in Islamic countries. Here again, we would benefit from a closer look at the reality. Western laws and systems of thought have deep roots in Judaeo-Christian tradition. Though our societies are sometimes described as post-Christian, that is not the same as non-Christian."

What Straw forgets to mention – or perhaps does not know – is that the best of the Judaeo-Christian tradition was borrowed from much earlier civilisations, and that the horrible new bits have served only to muddy (and bloody) the waters of tolerance.

Mr Straw should spend more time reading the likes of Robert G Ingersoll, the 19th-century American orator, who summed up the whole issue thus: "*Take from the church the miraculous, the supernatural, the unreasonable, the impossible, the unknowable and the absurd and nothing but a vacuum remains ... Religion has not civilised man – man has civilised religion.*" Well, in certain parts of the world at any rate.

Now the task is to remove from Islam all of its dangerous and irrational bits, and bring it firmly to heel – but we will never subdue the beast using spineless, politically-correct language as a weapon.

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No more Mr Listening God!

GOD'S apparent utter indifference to their prayers have left Christian fundamentalists in Scotland and England fuming.

On the Isle of Lewis, Scottish Christians got the hump because a Sunday commercial air service between the island and Edinburgh and Inverness was launched last month, despite all their protestations and prayers that the Sabbath be kept special.

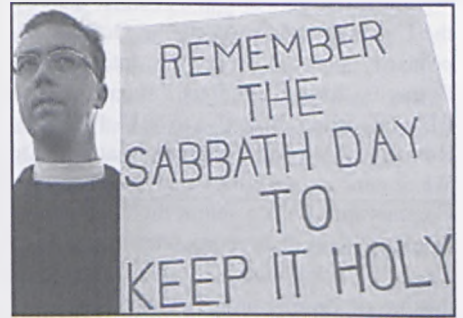
The Creator, who allegedly has the power to direct huge airliners into high buildings, could not even manage to ground a 34-seat propeller

plane before it took off for Stornaway airport from the mainland on October 27, thereby signalling the start of the island's first-ever Sunday commercial passenger flight.

Passengers on the plane, operated by Loganair on behalf of British Airways, were greeted by around sixty sour-faced protesters who handed out leaflets saying that travelling on the Sabbath was a sin which would damage their own souls and the life of the island.

Church leaders on the staunchly religious island (to the north west of Scotland), urged local people to boycott the new service and preserve a traditional way of life that includes strict observance of the Sabbath.

everyone else's amazement, the House of Lords changed its mind second time around and passed the amendment to the Adoption and Children Bill, after having previously thrown it out."



A clergyman protesting on Lewis

Him upstairs gives Christians the deaf-ear treatment

Calum Maclean, local representative of the Lord's Day Observance Society, said: "These Sunday flights are a breach of God's law and will have an adverse effect on the whole community life of this island as we know it. This is only the start." Lewis, with a population of 22,000, is the spiritual home of the Free Church of Scotland. The church allows only work of "necessity and mercy" on Sundays. On Lewis, where most people belong to either the Free Church or other Presbyterian denominations, almost all business and leisure activity stops for the Sabbath. Libraries and sports centres are shut, the mobile cinema does not screen films, and even television viewing is frowned upon. There is no local bus service and no ferries operate to or from the mainland. Attempts to introduce a Sunday ferry were blocked.

Loganair said it is responding to demand from businesses and residents on the island. Another airline, BMI British Midland, plans to start flying between Edinburgh and Stornaway seven days a week.

But the biggest disappointment of the month was reserved for the Christian Institute, which had invested a huge amount of its resources in a campaign to defeat an amendment to the Adoption Bill which would have allowed unmarried and gay couples to adopt children.

Writing in the National Secular Society's on-line magazine, *Newsline*, Terry Sanderson reported that, "to the CI's bewilderment and to

He pointed out that the CI had run an intensive campaign to persuade the Lords to scupper the proposals, publishing books and spending weeks lobbying in Westminster. It had provoked its supporters into writing thousands of letters to peers, demanding that they resist the idea of allowing the pool of potential adopters to be widened.

"After the death of the CI's champion in the Lords, Lady Janet Young, they brought in the substitute, Baroness Decca O'Cathain. She proved to be an inadequate replacement, failing to make an impression on her fellow peers.

But despite its concentrated propaganda campaign, and the issuing of many dubious statistics (that were comprehensively rubbished by the LibDem peer Baroness Walmsley), the CI's campaign failed and the amendment was accepted.

"It was gratifying to see the Christian Institute get such a bloody nose. It has been truly alarming to see the amount of influence it has managed to secure for itself in Parliament, but this shows that MPs and peers are beginning to see through the dogmatic agenda that drives the CI to oppose a whole raft of progressive legislation.

"Another disappointed pressure group is CARE (Christian Action, Research and Education), which has also been working round the clock from its Westminster office to manipulate the issue from a religious perspective. CARE also exhorted its thousands of followers to 'pray hard' for a defeat for the amendment.

So, was God not listening, or did he think they were wrong? Could we have an explanation, please, CARE? – and 'God moves in a mysterious way' just won't do," Sanderson said.



Baroness O'Cathain's championing the cause of the Christian Institute in the House of Lords was bound to end in failure, as the *Pink Paper* so delighted in telling its readers last month. The national gay magazine revealed that the Tory peer "who had adopted the late Baroness Young's mantle of chief gay-botherer in the House of Lords" had connections with several companies whose share prices had plummeted. In the nine years since Lady O'Cathain became a director of British Airways, the company's share price had collapsed 63 per cent, and when she became a director of Thistle Hotels six years ago, that company's shares were trading at £1.70. They now stand at £1.20. "And at the department store, Alders, where Lady O'C also pockets a handsome part-time salary, the share price has just hit a 52-week low after the company issued a profits warning. Is the Good Lord, who moves in so many mysterious ways, trying to tell us something?" ask *The Pink*.

– Cartoon by Stibbs reproduced courtesy of *The Pink*



Religion about to become a major force in the EU

THE European Commission (the EU's civil service) is on the brink of creating a third "super directorate", devoted exclusively to religious affairs. In theory it will be of equal rank to the other two, Economic Affairs and Foreign Affairs, to which all the Commission's current activities will report. How much power it will have in practice remains to be seen.

This information was given by Dr Michael Weninger during a talk at a seminar held by the University of Newcastle on October 29, primarily attended by lawyers interested in furthering formal religious influence in the EU. Reporting directly to EU President Romano Prodi on religious matters, Dr Weninger is a policy advisor at the Commission. He is a senior diplomat with a theology degree and comes from a Roman Catholic background. He assured me that this has no bearing on the way he approaches his job, in which he says he takes seriously the need to be even handed.

Secularists have been watching with growing unease the extent of religious infiltration into the EU, by the RC church in particular. The alarm bells have been ringing since the Pope made clear his determination that the EU's proto-constitution should refer specifically to Europe's 'Christian heritage'. The Pope repeated this appeal on 15 November in the Italian parliament—the first ever address made there by a Pope. But none of this prepared me for what I was to hear from Dr Weninger.

Given the Commission will not be diverted from formally recognising a religious dimension, the next key question must be: to what extent is a non-religious dimension to be recognised? The signs, I'm afraid, are ominous. A phrase Dr Weninger used repeatedly was "churches, religions and humanism" – but, sadly, he did not give the impression that the last was in any way a force to be reckoned with. Only when he was pressed, by NSS member Emeritus Professor Colin Gallagher, did he explain how the EU proposed to relate to the huge number of non-religious citizens who are not affiliated to the humanist movement. His response was that the non-religious, while accorded equal respect by the Treaty of Rome, were far too diverse and fragmented for any organised liaison in the way that is enjoyed by the churches, religions and humanism.

This ethos does not bode well for the interests of European freethinkers, atheists and non-believers generally. This assessment was reinforced when Dr Weninger stated without qualification that "religious exemptions do not constitute privilege". He was presumably referring to the exemptions such as those allowing employers 'with a reli-

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, is alarmed by moves in the EU to create a "super directorate" devoted exclusively to religious affairs, and which aims to develop a "soul" for Europe.



gious ethos" to discriminate against employees, or prospective employees, on religious grounds. Similarly alarming was his statement that EU citizens "do not live in a secular world".

There was at least a recognition that the most severe problems "are backed by religious implications"—presumably a reference to armed conflicts and increasing terrorism. But even this acknowledgment of perhaps the darkest side of religion turned out to be a prelude to yet a further reason why the EU should create an even closer engagement with religion.

Dr Weninger opined that "Institutions have to reflect the beliefs of the population". Ominously, however, there was no suggestion as to any limits on the extent of this "reflection" and what, if any, reflection there should be of non-religious standpoints. Dr Weninger seemed unaware of the long-term decline in support for both Anglican and Catholic churches in the UK. (Mass attendance in the UK was 2.8 million in 1960, 1.7 million in 2000 and is estimated to be 1.6 million in 2005.)

I was disturbed to learn that: "the influence of the church is growing and consequently it wishes to take part in the workings and organisations of the EU". Again, no questioning, and no suggestion of limits. Nor was there any conception that this taking part might amount to unjustifiable privileged representation. Neither was there any hint that this would duplicate the religious agenda which drives many MEPs.

The French Republic's *laïcité* (loosely, secularism) "does not work, nor ever has done", we were told. The French President's nomination of the bishops of Metz and archbishop of Strasbourg was cited as support for this assertion – but aren't these isolated anachronisms simply a historic remnant of the changing borders after the First World War?

Dr Weninger took us through the rationale

behind the development of the EU – the initial objective of which was to frustrate a third World War breaking out as a result of tensions in Europe. It started after WWII with the Iron and Steel community, and has moved through an economic phase; next is the "belonging" and "soul" phase.

"Soul", you ask? Yes, as you know, this is generally regarded as being the preserve of the religious, so are we to back off respectfully and let them plunder our rights, our aspirations and our very identity? It really is starting to seem that Europe is set to belong to the believers in miracles and revealed truth.

It will be a complicated, painful and lengthy process to tackle the chronic EU structural problems which impede citizens from feeling they really *belong* to the EU. I suspect the main reason is that the Parliament is almost powerless while the Commission is all-powerful. Most politicians consider remedying this to be too difficult to even contemplate. On the other hand, the illusion of progress towards recognising Europe's 'soul' can be made with little effort—simply by welcoming in religion with open arms. I am afraid that is what is being contemplated.

As to the organisation of this brave new Europe, the only representative the EU is obliged to receive (except for *bona fide* ambassadors) is the *papal nuncio*. And that "right" is as a result of a treaty, freely entered into. And he (always he) was also singled out for being the "most modern" and "most efficient" of all the religious representatives. Others were also singled out for praise, such as those from the Turkish Orthodox and the European branch of the World Jewish Congress.

Oh, yes – and a department is to be set up to deal with Muslim affairs, to be staffed by both Muslim and non-Muslim experts. That Islam is fragmented and does not have a hierarchical structure has been no obstacle. And this department will even be maintaining liaisons with Muslim countries.

The fact that there are far more people for whom religion has no meaning has been almost completely disregarded.

There are modest signs of a recognition among some MEPs of the scale of this problem. We must all redouble our efforts to ensure that the interests of the non-religious, whether humanist or not, are more robustly represented.

• Like Dr Weninger, Keith Porteous Wood also gave a talk at the seminar *Structured Pluralism: A Practical Legal Framework for Faith in the EU*, and was the sole dissenting speaker. He was invited to do so after making representations to the University that the preliminary programme for the seminar provided for no balancing view.

Woman in hiding after 'backward' Islam jibe

A SOMALI political scientist who immigrated to the Netherlands when she was nine has taken up the late Pim Fortuyn's controversial battle cry that Islam is "backward".

In doing so, according to a report by Andrew Osborn in the *The Observer* (October 6), Ayaan Hirsi Ali has become the Netherlands' very own Salman Rushdie and is now in hiding after receiving a barrage of anonymous death threats, allegedly from extremist Muslims.

The trouble started when she took part in a live debate on Dutch TV. An advisor to the

Dutch opposition Socialist party, she used the opportunity to launch a bitter attack on Islam, taking issue with what she called the shoddy way in which it regarded women. Making a plea for full women's rights including "complete personal freedom and individual choice" she claimed there was a "serious imbalance" in relations between Muslim men and women and borrowed Fortuyn's famous phrase to label Islam "a backward religion". One of her accusations was that conservative Muslim groups cover up widespread domestic violence and

child abuse in their midst.

Yassin Hartog, a spokesman for Islam and Citizenship, the Netherlands' main Muslim lobby group, says he believes the death threats against Hirsi Ali may have been fabricated to blacken the Muslim community. "We're getting more and more signs that these death threats are bogus," he told *The Observer*.

In an effort to distance themselves from the affair, 17 Muslim organisations have signed a declaration condemning the death threats.

Death –and jail – for Muslim critics

PROTESTS have taken place in Iran over the bizarre sentence imposed by the Islamic state's hard-line judiciary on Hashem Aghajeri, a university professor and a close ally of President Mohammad Khatami. Last month Aghajeri was sentenced to death, eight years in jail, 74 lashes and a 10-year ban from teaching, for "insulting" the Prophet Muhammad in a speech in August in which he said that Muslims should not follow religious leaders "blindly".

His sentence is the harshest a court has issued for a reform politician in recent years. Aghajeri, one of the country's most outspoken activists, had criticised Iran's leadership and called for the separation of state and religion.

Meanwhile, a district court in Bangladesh has sentenced exiled writer Taslima Nasrin to a year in jail for criticising Islam in her 1994 novel *Lajja* (Shame). The sentence will take effect the day the feminist writer, who resides in Europe, is arrested.

Nasrin fled Bangladesh in 1994 after Islamic extremists threatened to kill her. She never appeared in court to answer the charges and had no lawyer. The court's ruling came three years after an Islamic cleric accusing her of "making critical remarks" about Islam.

Muslims make up 88 percent of Bangladesh's 130 million residents. Although Bangladesh is governed by secular laws, criticism of Islam is illegal.

Nasrin's troubles began when an Indian newspaper quoted her as demanding changes in Koranic law to give women more rights. Muslim fundamentalists offered \$5,000 to anyone who would kill her.

Mobile phones are killing off ghosts, says a British expert who has spent years researching the occult. Tony Cornell, of the Society for Psychical Research, said that reports of ghost sightings had started to decline when mobile phones were introduced 15 years ago. He said ghost sightings had remained consistent for centuries, but there has been a steady drop in sightings as more and more mobile phones are put to use in Britain.

THREE lawsuits have been filed against a Lutheran church school in Nebraska, USA, for alleged sexual abuse by former officials, including a minister who served as principal. The lawsuits against St John Lutheran Church in Seward seek millions of dollars for the alleged abuse. Two of the lawsuits were filed in Lancaster County District Court last month by unnamed plaintiffs who alleged they were abused by long-time principal David Mannigel, a Lutheran minister who died last year, apparently by his own hand. The other lawsuit was filed in US District

Muslims deface posters

FOUR young members of the fanatical British-based *Al-Muhajiroun* group, which sympathises with Osama bin Laden and demands that Britain becomes an Islamic state, were arrested in Luton last month for defacing posters advertising the BBC2 series *Baby Father*. In a statement issued after the arrest, *Al-Muhajiroun* said they were "trying to carry out their Islamic responsibilities". The statement went on to say "Muslims everywhere have been shocked at the explicitness of the advertising campaign showing naked men on public bill-boards across the UK." The Muslim community in Luton decided "to forbid this *munkar* (evil)", and used *sharia* (Islamic law) to justify painting over the posters "which are an affront to all decent-minded people".

News in brief

Court in Lincoln by T Mark Kraft, a Colorado man, who claims to have been abused by a retired teacher. This lawsuit seeks \$1 million.

Members of the African Christian Democratic Party in South Africa are demanding that the famous Devil's Peak mountain in the Cape be renamed Dove's Peak. The group has approached Arts and Culture Minister Ben Ngubane to get the name changed. ACDP councillor Ivann Kirsten says the proposal is "a reminder of the Christian heritage of the Dutch founding fathers of Cape Town".

AN American member of the Church of Body Modification, sacked last year for wearing an eyebrow ring at work, has brought a \$2-million law suit against the Springfield, Oregon, branch of Costco. Kimberly M Cloutier main-

tains that her piercings, which include several earrings in each ear and a recently-acquired lip ring, are worn as a sign of faith and help to unite her mind, body and soul. The Church of Body Modification is describea itself as "an interfaith church whose members practice an assortment of ancient body modification rites, which we believe are essential to our spiritual salvation."

AN "Act of God" in the South American state of Ecuador last month knocked out a missionary-run radio station. HCJB World Radio went off air when the Reventador volcano began erupting on November 3. Two of the Christian station's 100,000 watt transmitters, as well as its antenna, were damaged.

Golden Wonder has been forced to withdraw a batch of crisps after complaints from Muslims who discovered that, as a result of a mix-up, cheese and onion packets contained smoky bacon flavour.

Oh, the crazy things they say!

THE religious don't half spout a lot of rubbish, but sometimes their sentiments and pronouncements stray from the plain witless into the realm of the utterly barking. Which is why we have created the *Freethinker* Tosh Pot, into which – every month we hope – readers will tip examples of the truly insane things believers are prone to utter. The best contribution in each issue will earn a reader a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*.

To launch the Tosh Pot, we reproduce the words of Radheshyam Gupta, spokesman for The Uttar Pradesh Cow Protection Commission in India; our old friend, the American televangelist Jerry Falwell, and Major Nigel Bovey, editor of the Salvation Army's *War Cry*.

Radheshyam Gupta: "Even if the enemy [Pakistan] carries out its threat to bomb us with nukes, we don't have to panic, because we have sacred cows to help us. You can fully protect yourself from nuclear fallout by covering the roof of your house with cow dung. And applying sacred cow dung paste to your body from head to toe will serve as an extra shield. ... we also promote sacred cow products like urine and dung, which have powerful medicinal properties. Ordinary people cannot afford expensive protective clothing against radiation, so they need to be informed that sacred cow

dung will protect them against nuclear fallout, and also from radiation burns." He was speaking at a press conference in Lucknow on June 24. (*Why, I wonder, wasn't this vital information included in Protect and Survive, published by the Tories in 1980 to prepare the UK for a possible nuclear attack? True, the handbook was full of shit, but not of the magical bovine variety.*)

Jerry Falwell: "You ask what's going to happen on this earth when the Rapture occurs? You'll be riding along in an automobile; you'll be the driver, perhaps; you're a Christian; there'll be several people in the automobile with you, maybe someone who is not a Christian. When the trumpet sounds, you and the other born-again Christians in that automobile will be instantly caught away, you'll disappear, leaving behind only your clothing and physical things that cannot inherit eternal life. That unsaved person or persons in the automobile will suddenly be startled to find that the car is moving along without a driver, and suddenly somewhere crashes. Those saved people in the car have disappeared. Other cars on the highway driven by believers will suddenly be out of control. Stark pandemonium will occur on that highway and on every highway in the world where Christians are caught away from the world." (*Hmmm. Sounds a bit like the M25 on most Friday afternoons.*)

Nigel Bovey (asking where God was on September 11): "Last September spokesmen for the suicide hijackers claimed they had God on their side – that it was the will of God. Wrong. God was not on the side of the misguided terrorists ... but he was by the side of the passengers as they frantically called friends and family with last-gasp messages of love. He was alongside the office workers who knew they would never make it out of the World Trade Centre. He sided with the heroic firefighters as they entered the towering infernos in full and certain knowledge their lives were in peril." (*So there you have it: an omnipotent, omniscient, all-powerful deity that's as much use in a crisis as a chocolate tea cosy ... or as Ian Duncan Smith.*)

– Barry Duke

• If you stumble upon a quote you'd like to contribute, please send it to the Tosh Pot, *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4ND. Each month the star item will earn its sender a year's free subscription to the FT.

EVEN if we don't know all the answers concerning Life and the Universe, we can still say with total confidence that certain propositions do not make sense and cannot be true. The biblical view of the world is one such proposition. The Islamic system of beliefs is another. It ought to be a matter of course that teaching, in particular teaching in state-funded schools, should be based on truth as far as we know it. That can clearly not be the case in schools based on religious faith. Teaching *about* the various religions in appropriate sociological, historical and geographical contexts is of course right and proper. Indoctrination of unsubstantiated beliefs is not. State support for the propagation of one set of superstitions and prejudices is bad enough. Government support for the indoctrination of conflicting beliefs is not only ridiculous; it is a very effective way of undermining social cohesion and harmony. We know from Northern Ireland and from the part-Muslim towns in England how that tends to create and maintain split societies where the different groups get used to seeing each other as hostile aliens. British governments ought to have realised this decades ago and stopped the funding of sectarian schools in Northern Ireland. We are told that faith schools produce good results at exams. Some of them do. No wonder, when they have the priceless privilege of being allowed to pick and choose their stu-

Why not faith schools?

dents. The schools they compare themselves with haven't got that privilege. They have to accept and work on whatever society sends their way: the mentally slow, the totally uninterested, the unwilling and the mayhem-makers. It is not easy to move such a collection along to good results.

Yngve Bautz poses the question

It is blatantly unfair to compare results from schools working under such different circumstances; it is cheap, dishonest and utterly disgraceful propaganda to claim that their results, when favourable, are due to a religious ethos and pious faith. Schools like Emmanuel College in Gateshead say that they base their selection on the applicants' faith, not on their academic potential. Don't you believe it! They are much too aware of the propaganda value of good results at the end of the year. And how do they propose to measure the sincerity of the applicants' belief? The present arrangements are grossly unfair and will remain so until the privi-

lege of selection is effectively removed from all state-funded faith schools or selection is accepted as a general principle in all secondary education. The cardinal argument for a faith-based education seems to be that the fear of God is the only possible ethical basis for a civilised society; that without this fear the nation would sink ever deeper into sin, crime and general depravity. The contention is that the rules which make it possible for people to live together in harmonious cooperation are a gift from God and that the entire ethical structure would collapse if it were left without the support of religious belief.

But the more important of these rules are not exclusively Christian or Muslim. They are the common heritage of a variety of cultures. They didn't come on stone tablets from heaven, they developed over time to meet human and social needs and requirements. It is not loss of faith that threatens this system; it is the insistence of the churches that ethics and morality are totally dependent on religious belief. Because if your indoctrination tells you that right is right and wrong is wrong because God says so, then you can easily be tempted to disregard this distinction once you realise that

God is nowhere around. That is why it is so important that the teaching of ethics is given a sound secular basis; that it is made clear that rational ethical behaviour is in the best interest of the individual as well as of society at large.



Down to Earth - Colin McCall

St Escriva

MORE than 500,000 people reportedly turned up for what the Catholic author and ex-priest Gordon Urquart called "the most controversial canonisation of modern times", that of Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, Spanish founder of the powerful, conservative Opus Dei, who died in 1975. Escriva supported Spain's dictator Francisco Franco, and Opus Dei provided many members of El Caudillo's cabinet. Now, according to the *Guardian's* Madrid correspondent, Giles Tremlett, Opus Dei has enjoyed a revival of secular power in Spain since the People's party of the prime minister Jose Maria Aznar was elected six years ago. *El Mundo* newspaper recently listed senior officials in the defence, justice and interior ministries who belong to the organisation, which encourages its followers to seek power. And if the socialist president of the Extremadura region is right, defence, law and order and the judiciary are in its hands.

Gordon Urquart linked the unseemly haste of Escriva's canonisation to Pope John Paul II's similarly "theocratic conception of the social order". On January 28, the Pontiff appealed to Catholic lawyers not to co-operate in divorce proceedings and to find a way of "obtaining the public recognition of the indissolubility of marriage in the civil juridical order". Fortunately, outraged members of the European Parliament organised a petition criticising this unacceptable interference in Italian state affairs.

At a young women's conference in the mid-90s, said Urquart, Opus Dei member Dr Clementina Meregalli Anzilotti stated the order's line on violence against women. Sexual harassment, she said, "comes to those who want it. Some women go around dressed in such a way that they attract that kind of approach". And an Opus Dei priest and judge of the Vatican's marriage tribunal, Cormac Burke, voiced the organisation's opposition to the "unisex mentality". His complaint, mind you, was directed at women who wear "masculine" garb, not men in skirts.

Theatre censorship

AS Peter Hall was directing *Mrs Warren's Profession* in London, he looked back to the days of the Lord Chamberlain, who banned the Shaw play for 30 years, the "profession" of the title being prostitution. And, rather interestingly, what Hall called "perhaps the best play of the early 20th century", Harley Granville-Barker's *Work* was also banned for 20 years because it dealt with a politician's affair outside marriage. I remember, too, joining a theatre "club" to see Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* which couldn't otherwise be performed because of its homosexuality.

One of Hall's own encounters with the censor occurred when he submitted Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. A letter came back with various dele-

tions, including a line describing God as "the bastard! He doesn't exist". And Hall was informed that "The Lord Chamberlain will not countenance doubt being cast on the legitimacy of the Almighty". Obviously he wouldn't countenance the suggestion that politicians can have affairs outside marriage either.

Zola centenary

IT was 100 years since the death of Emile Zola, and the *Church Times* reprinted its obituary of October 3, 1902. Zola was, it acknowledged, a conspicuous figure of whose literary skill there could not be any question. But, it continued, he "misused his singular powers to the deprivation of public morals", sounded "the deepest depths of bestiality" and left behind him an "evil...example". But the paper could not, you will be pleased to hear, "leave unnoticed" Zola's "courageous and noble vindication of Captain Dreyfus".

The *Church Times* was not alone in its fulmination. Zola translator Robin Buss recalled that, in May 1885, the MP Samuel Smith had tabled a motion in the Commons deploring "the rapid spread of demoralising literature", naming Zola and his English publisher Henry Vizetelly. Nothing more "diabolical" had ever been written; the novels were "inartistic garbage", "only fit for swine", and so on. The House agreed the motion and Vizetelly was charged with publishing an obscene libel. He was bound over for 12 months and fined. Later he was tried again and sentenced to three months' imprisonment, despite protests by Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society, Edmund Gosse and others.

A spanking picture

ONE of the striking(!) illustrations in a preview of Anthony Julius' *Transgressions: The Offence of Art* (Thames & Hudson, £24.95) was a Max Ernst picture showing *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child Before Three Witnesses* (1926). Ernst, says Julius, "collapses" the three principal themes of religious art into "a single, anachronistic, mocking image". The three "wise men" looking on are prominent Surrealists, André Breton, Paul Eluard and Ernst himself.

The Virgin, complete with halo, has the young Jesus across her knees and is about to land a blow on the baby's bottom. His own halo is falling to the floor. In what Julius punningly calls "a direct hit", Ernst attacks that "substratum of sentiment beneath the principles of Catholic faith and thereby comprises a considered blasphemy". And a delectable one, too.

The wrath of Roth

"WHAT we've been witnessing since September 11 is an orgy of national narcissism and a gratu-

itous sense of victimisation that is repellent", said the distinguished American author Philip Roth. "Even now it's impossible to watch a baseball game without having to listen to 'God Bless America' beforehand."

We in this country have long had to put up with "God save the Queen", but we have an established church. The USA is a secular state which is constantly being undermined by Christian zealots, at least one of whom may be found alongside George W Bush.

Sacks under fire

THE Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, is in trouble with his fellow Orthodox Jews. In his recent book, *The Dignity of Difference*, he suggested that no one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth and that all faiths might learn from each other. God, he wrote, "has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews, Christianity to the Christians, Islam to the Muslims".

But in an advertisement in the *Jewish Chronicle* (October 18), leaders of the Orthodox communities in London and Gateshead said: "Any implication that Judaism does not contain absolute truth represents a grave deviation from the pathways and traditions of traditional and authentic Judaism". And they urged Dr Sacks "upon reflection" to repudiate the thesis of the book and withdraw it from circulation.

Many non-orthodox Jews, who welcomed the book, fear that the Chief Rabbi may give way under the pressure. But Dr Sacks insisted that he was currently preparing "a clarification, not a retraction to prevent misunderstanding" of his position. It will be interesting to see if he can satisfy orthodox and non-orthodox Jews at the same time. It's a touchy situation.

Not guilty!

ALL praise to the French judges who reached the right decision when they cleared Michel Houellebecq of provoking religious and racial hatred by calling Islam "the most stupid of religions". The remarks, as they said, were neither elegant nor subtle, but they were directed at Islam, not Muslims and therefore not an incitement to discrimination. Writing weeks before the decision, Salman Rushdie, like the judges, emphasised that "criticising people's ideology is not criticising people themselves".

This is a distinction some Muslim leaders find hard to grasp. The head of the Mosque of Lyon, Kamel Kabtane said that the judges had "sided with the ones who want to humiliate Islam...Islam can now be insulted freely". As if one can "insult" a belief.

Thoughts for the

Following recent criticism of *Thought for the Day*, I decided to make my own assessment by listening to five consecutive programmes. As might have been expected, the programmes were deadly dull, highly predictable and as simplistic as two minutes of Postman Pat. But they suffered from two further faults for which even stronger criticism is deserved, for each talk contained either gobbledegook or lies. As intelligent people, the speakers must have been aware of these deficiencies, yet pretended otherwise. Surely such rhetoric is not only paradoxical but inexcusable in a programme devoted to ethical questions. But, judge for yourself. Here is a synopsis of each talk together with my comments.

Day 1: Eric James wonders about the definition of a priest and favours a quotation from Paul which goes "Let people think of us as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God". Eric then claims (wrongly) to be disagreeing with Paul when he (Eric) asserts that we are all stewards of the mysteries of God. Finally, Eric reaches his two-minute climax by telling us we are all priests. So far as I can see, his only reason for arriving at this conclusion is that "ministers" and "stewards" are conjoined in Paul's sentence. Presumably, if Paul had also mentioned donkeys then Eric would have been urging us to trot through Jerusalem or along Blackpool Beach. And what's the Pope going to say when he hears of all these women priests. Amazing stuff!

Day 2: Jonathan Sacks tells us it is the Evangelical Alliance's "Forgiveness Day" and, "Forgiveness is the only way to live with the past without being held captive by the past". I can't help wondering if he voiced this opinion when Eichmann was being tried in 1961!

Then Jonathan unashamedly tells a whopper by claiming that forgiveness comes "from the idea of a God who loves us as a parent loves a child". He chooses to ignore the fact that almost every major event in his holy book contradicts these words. I idly wonder why so many "religious truths" are so demonstrably false!

Day 3: It is Indarjit Singh's turn with his self-opinionated gurus who are reputed to offer memorable messages which just leave me cold. Indarjit wishes to discuss infidelity but thinks women's fashions are relevant because he tells us there are two (yes, only two) attitudes – the middle eastern one where women reveal little of their bodies and the western one where women reveal a lot. Time to call in a Sikh guru who "emphasised a middle way based on restraint and respect". Time also for the gobbledegook with the guru asserting that married couples are not

truly wedded until their bodies have one soul. I long for Indarjit to tell me what a soul is. And doesn't this soul-sharing contradict the Christian claim that we are each dealt one of these things which can never be lost? And, did the guru test his claim? And, how will my wife and I know when we are "truly" wedded? At the age of 76 we still haven't noticed the event.

Day 4: Jim Thomson's deep thought is that, in the event of war with Iraq, there will be casualties. He then wonders on which side God stands in war – any war. A difficult question I would have thought, due to its generality – unless, of course, one mindlessly claims that Yahweh is always for both sides. Sure enough, Jim claims that "God's will is justice" and "He must be for both sides". So, another whopper goes by unnoticed as Jim, like so many others of his kind, ignores the vast biblical evidence against him. Think of Joshua for example!

Day 5: Huw Spanner mourns the death of a zoo hippo that swallowed a tennis ball. He then points out that cruelty and compassion are human attributes. I listen and marvel at the perspicacity of the speaker. Then Huw tells us that "our species was conceived by God, whose very nature is love, to govern our fellow creatures with wisdom and mercy". So it's back to Genesis – can't go even five days without drawing on the old nonsense about us "falling into selfishness and contempt", as Huw puts it. But I am left wondering why Huw chooses to believe one creation story over thousands of others. And, as he well knows, his claim that Yahweh has a loving nature is entirely bogus. I ask myself "What is there to think about in this talk?"

So there you are, a brief but, I think, fair summary of five daily thoughts. Of one thing I'm clear, the religious content only serves to diminish the quality of talks and lets the speakers off the intellectual hook. On this evidence, the case for occasional secular talks is a strong one, it's the continuation of the *other* sort that should be questioned. Thoughts shot through with superstition are of little or no value.

– Gary Suss

Keith Porteous Wood's splendid report on the BBC's slanting of thoughtful comment by excluding those of a secular and humanist bent (*Freethinker*, September) got me thinking about other aspects of the BBC's outrageous behaviour – in particular its coverage of South Africa during the apartheid era.

For instance, it really plumbed the depths on December 12, 1974, when BBC2 TV "informed" its viewers about the race situation in one of apartheid South Africa's so-called black "homelands". The programme, *Black*

Man Alive (in the *Man Alive* slot) was the result of a complaint by the white racist South African Embassy about a quite fair and informative earlier film by Father Cosmos Desmond, on the horrors and high black infant mortality rate awaiting black families dumped in their alleged "homeland" (which most of them hadn't even seen before). This was part of an enormous white racial scam, based on faked early "history" of South Africa, claiming whites arrived first.

The programme, made specially by the SA

Two *Freethinker* readers –

GARY SUSS and JOHN

CLARKE – enter the

fray over the BBC's

refusal to open up

Thought for the Day to

non-religious voices.

Embassy for the BBC, consisted of anti-black lie after lie, including an animation of black and white "historical" settlement so cynically false, that I was joined in my objection by a British academic who later contributed an erudite article to *History Today* (Cambridge University, December 1980) entitled "The Myth of the Empty Land". The BBC's reply to me openly admitted that it had removed the "most misleading impressions" in the original, largely factual film, and specially invited the December 12 film from apartheid's racist Embassy, in order to be "impartial"; thus unwittingly revealing that the Beeb was totally ignorant of apartheid's multi-million-pound propaganda campaigns world-wide.

(This was the Embassy whose Ambassador, in 1964 in *The Diplomatist*, claimed that when the first whites arrived in SA in 1652 AD, South Africa consisted of "totally uninhabited territories". A lie of such enormity that one can almost hear Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels applauding in Hades. But the BBC seems to have swallowed the lot, and made no attempt to apologise for showing apartheid's anti-black calumnies, nor did it ever, as far as I can discern, try to set the record straight over the racist lies at the very heart of apartheid's central fraud. Fraud, indeed. Imagine an "official" history of Britain (by analogy) in which the black minority arrived before the whites, settled a "totally uninhabited" Britain, and so laid historical claim to 85 per cent of the land

and the mineral resources by right of "prior" settlement! Then read UNESCO's *Apartheid – Power and Historical Falsification* – M Cornevin, 1980.

This faked "anti-black" history was at the heart of apartheid's racist division of land and mineral wealth, and it can be argued that this inequality has contributed in large measure to South Africa's huge AIDS infection rate amongst blacks, this in Africa's richest country. Even today, I have yet to see BBC mention these facts, instead of regularly excoriating Robert Mugabe and his "war veterans".

Also excluded is any mention of the pro-Nazi treachery and even terrorism engaged in during World War II by those who later ruled South Africa using race laws mostly copied directly from Hitler's anti-semitic Nuremberg Laws. Now if it had been Black South Africans

or Zimbabweans who had been pro-Nazi traitors during World War II ...?

And if anyone has ever heard of those 125,000 black South Africans who served with the Allies during the War and who, despite being forbidden to carry arms (!) by the South African whites served so courageously as stretcher-bearers etc that their casualty-rate was not far short of the white rate; would they please put their hand up? The facts and figures, by the way, are from the South African Legion of Ex-servicemen and Women (statement, *Rand Daily Mail*, Johannesburg, 22.5.65)

As the architects of apartheid (which the BBC persisted in mispronounce as *apart-hite*, as if it were German, instead of the Afrikaans *apart-hate*) frequently hid behind the cloak of religion to pretend a morality they did not possess, they were frequently able to deceive fool-

ish religionists outside South Africa. Even at the height of apartheid's cruel rule, many of these religionists refused to criticise the regime on the grounds that its leaders were "after all, our brothers in Christ". My first hint of the religiosity of the Afrikaner nationalist rulers came after I arrived in South Africa in the mid-1950s, when I discovered that it was an offence against the law to publicly play dance music on a Sunday. The country's rulers were fond of boasting, for instance, that "Our Afrikaner history is the greatest work of the Architect of the Centuries". They also publicly claimed for their apartheid government that it had "the best record of Cabinet Sunday church attendance of any Christian country in the world."

I doubt that any of this was ever brought to the world's attention by the BBC.

– John Clarke

Let the records show that God hates Baptists

FOLLOWING the deadly storms that hit parts of the US on November 10, killing 35 people, I remembered putting to one side a press cutting which reported one of America's top evangelists, Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, warning Orlando, Florida, that it was courting natural disaster by allowing gay pride flags to be flown along its streets.

"A condition like this will bring about earthquakes, tornadoes, and possibly a meteor," Robertson predicted.

Well, shortly after issuing his warning in 1998, a hurricane named Bonnie *did* come along – but it missed Florida entirely and instead wreaked huge damage in Virginia. And Virginia is where Robertson chose to site his Regent University and the Christian Broadcast Network.

I recall thinking at the time that Robertson, in drawing a correlation between natural disasters and areas where gay populations are at their highest, may have made a huge miscalculation, and that the districts much more likely to be struck are those that harbour large numbers of practising Christians.

It was a silly thought and I immediately dismissed it.

Ah, but was it?

The latest storms affected states with a high concentration of the religious – Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, Mississippi and Pennsylvania – and this prompted me to revisit the subject. To my delight, during my research, I uncovered the following article written four years ago by Janis Walworth, and posted on a site called Technodyke.com:

"Before Robertson and his Christian cronies get too carried away promulgating the idea that

natural disasters are prompted by people who displease God, they should take a hard look at the data. Take tornadoes. Every state (except Alaska) has them – some only one or two a year, dozens in others.

After the recent killer storms in the US, VANESSA PHILLIPS uncovers some startling research

"Gay people are in every state (even Alaska). According to Robertson's hypothesis, there should be more gay people in states that have more tornadoes. But are there? Nope. In fact, there is no correlation at all between the



Tornadoes: A manifestation of God's repugnance for Baptists?

number of gay folk (as estimated by the number of gay political organisations, support groups, bookstores, radio programs, and circuit parties) and the annual tornado count ($\text{R} = .04$, $p = .78$, for the benefit of you statisticians).

"So much for the 'God hates gays' theory.

"God seems almost neutral on the subject of sexual orientation. I say 'almost' because if we look at the density of gay groups relative to the population as a whole, there is a small but statistically significant correlation with the occurrence of tornadoes. And it's a negative correlation ($\text{R} = -.28$).

"For those of you who haven't used statistics since 1973, that means that a high concentration of gay organizations actually protects against tornadoes. A state with the population of, say, Alabama could avert two tornadoes a year merely by doubling the number of gay organizations in the state. (Tough choice for Alabama's civil defence strategists.)

Although God may not care about sexual orientation, the same cannot be said for religious affiliation. If the underlying tenet of Robertson's postulate is true – that God wipes out offensive folk via natural disasters – then perhaps we can find some evidence of who's on God's hit list.

Jews are off the hook here: there's no correlation between numbers of Jews and frequency of tornadoes. Ditto for Catholics. But when it comes to Protestants, there's a highly-significant correlation of .71.

This means that fully half the state-to-state variation in tornado frequency can be

(Continued on next page)

God's hatred (continued from previous page)

accounted for by the presence of Protestants. And the chance that this association is merely coincidental is only one in 10,000.

"Protestants, of course, come in many flavours – we were able to find statistics for Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and Others. Lutherans don't seem to be a problem – no correlation with tornadoes. There's a modest correlation ($R = .52$, $p = .0001$) between Methodists and tornadoes.

"But Baptists and Others share the prize: both groups show a definite correlation with tornado frequency ($R = .68$, $p = .0001$). This means that Texas could cut its average of 139 tornadoes per year in half by sending a few hundred thousand Baptists elsewhere (Alaska maybe?).

"What, you are probably asking yourself, about gay Protestants?

"An examination of the numbers of gay religious groups (mostly Protestant) reveals no significant relationship with tornadoes. Perhaps even Protestants are less repugnant to God if they're gay.

"And that brings up another point – the futility of trying to save the world by getting gay people to accept Jesus. It looks from our numbers as if the frequency of natural disasters might be more effectively reduced by encouraging Protestants to be gay.

"Gay people have been falsely blamed for disasters ever since Sodom was

destroyed by fire and brimstone. (We have been unable to find any statistics on disasters involving brimstone).

"According to a reliable source, the destruction of Sodom was indeed an act of God (see Genesis 19:13). Its destruction was perpetrated because the citizens thereof were, according to the same source (see Ezekiel 16:49-50) 'arrogant, overfed and unconcerned [and] did not help the poor and needy' – not because they were gay.

"Now Robertson would have us believe that gays are the cause of tornadoes (as well as earthquakes, meteors, and even terrorist bombs), in utter disregard for evidence showing that Baptists are much more likely to cause them.

"As any statistician will tell you, of course, correlation doesn't prove causation. Protestants causing tornadoes by angering God isn't the only explanation for these data. It could be that Baptists and Other Protestants purposely flock to states that have lots of tornadoes (no, we haven't checked for a correlation between IQ and religious affiliation).

"But if Robertson and his Christian crew insist that natural disasters are brought on by people who offend God, let the data show just who those people are."

• *Walworth's sources: Tornado Occurrence by State, 1962-1991; Churches and Church Membership; Population by State, 1990 US Census; Gay & Lesbian Political Organizations, Support Groups, and Religious Groups,*

Gayellow Pages, National Edition, 1987.

The latest storms certainly bear out Walworth's findings. Tennessee was the hardest hit, with 17 deaths recorded. According to the United States Census of 2002, which provides details of the number of same-sex couples in each of the American States, this state has a low number of gay and lesbians couples – .36 per cent. The next hardest hit state was Alabama, (also .36 per cent), where 11 people died. By contrast California, which suffers few deadly storms, has a same-sex couple population of .54 per cent.

Natural disasters and terrible accidents also tend to dog the religious in other parts of the world – and Muslims seem to be particularly vulnerable as far as the latter is concerned.

For example, 35 people were crushed to death in a Mecca hajj tragedy in March 2001. They died in a stampede during the Stoning of Satan ritual near the "holy" city of Mecca. It was the third such tragedy in less than a decade, Saudi officials said at the time.

The stampede that marred the start of the Muslim feast of *Al-Adha* (sacrifice), which coincides with the three-day stoning ritual, also left an unspecified number of pilgrims slightly injured.

The 23 women and 12 men of different nationalities who died were part of a huge crowd that rushed toward one of the three giant pillars representing the devil in the Mina valley near the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammad in Mecca. Pilgrims have to approach the pillars so as to hit the mark with their stones.

In April 1998 at least 118 pilgrims died and more than 180 were injured in a stampede during the same Mina ritual. And in May 1994, 270 pilgrims were killed as crowds surged forward during the Stoning of Satan. Authorities blamed the record number of pilgrims.

Commenting on this, Robert Hanan, American physician and atheist, said: "What always puzzles me about events like this is where was Allah while all this was going on? One would think that a merciful Creator, in appreciation of the great hardship and expense undergone by the pilgrims, and their fervent and total devotion to their God, would reciprocate by keeping them safe and whole during their stay in Mecca.

"But Muslims are not alone in these manic types of religious disasters. In the Philippines, Catholic festivals are sometimes occasions for loss of life. Several years ago a floating shrine celebrating some saint's birthday was grossly overloaded (there were people hanging from the rigging) and something like 200 men, women and children drowned when the boat capsized. This has actually happened more than once in the history of that festival."

Ex-nun jailed for child cruelty

LUCILLE Poulin, the 78-year-old spiritual leader of a rural Prince Edward Island religious commune, has been sentenced to eight months in jail followed by a three-year probationary period for child cruelty. In passing sentence, Justice David Jenkins of the PEI Supreme Court said Poulin isolated the children in her care in a "regime of fear and frequent violence".

She was convicted of assaulting five children who lived at the commune by frequently beating them with a wooden paddle she called "the rod of correction". The children ranged in age from seven to 12. Poulin said God told her it was all right to physically punish children in an effort to drive out the devil. But the court ruled she went beyond correction to child abuse.

All of the children have been removed from the commune. Several are receiving counselling for the trauma they suffered. Most of the children said they are still having nightmares about their stay at the commune.

Jenkins noted Poulin's lack of regret in his sentencing decision. "She showed no remorse or acknowledgment of wrongdoing," he said.

Poulin, her voice shaking with emotion during a rambling pre-sentence statement, said she loved Jesus Christ above all else.

She admitted that the beatings resulted in bruising and blue marks, but she insisted she used reasonable force. "I know it's not pleasant for anybody, but it's much better than going to hell," she testified. "I just want to say it is better to obey God than man," Poulin added, saying that no matter what happens to her on earth, she believes her soul has been saved and she will spend eternity in heaven. One day, everyone will face the eternal judge to answer for what they have done," she told the court. "Regardless of what happens to me here, He will keep my soul from hell."

Three adults still living on the commune who supported Poulin testified the children are read out passages from the Old Testament referring to "the rod" and "the blueness of bruises that cleanse away evil".

CHRISTMAS (or whatever) is coming and I've got no idea whether the geese are getting fat, but I do know that, despite the ubiquitous tinny carols being played over the speaker system of every supermarket in the country, more people will visit "Father Christmas" than will sing *Away in a Manger* around a crib in church. Well, that's certainly a start towards secular society, though the Bishop of Oxford, judging by his recent book, *God Outside the Box*, might be inclined to want to convince us that people's fondness for Father Christmas is really a sign of latent spirituality. The church clutches at such straws even though Father Christmas (dressed in red because Coca Cola bought his marketing rights) is a strange character blended from a metamorphosed Arctic Circle shaman so high on something that he thought his reindeer could fly and a Turkish saint who, legend has it, was the epitome of generosity.

Unable to attract their own crowd, the church and other religious advocates are increasingly reduced to pointing towards so-called signs of spirituality somewhere outside their doors in order to provide them with a comfort zone in the face of their own demise. Whilst sermons will be preached to the dwindling faithful on the evils of commercialism and the lamentable takeover of Christmas by card and toy manufacturers, the very same evils will also be re-interpreted as hopeful signs of unfulfilled religious longing and inarticulate spiritual gaps which sooner or later will lead to utopian revival.

As we buy our stocking fillers from the National Secular Society, and sip Christmas drinks from mugs that wisely warn us "Just say no to religion", are we aware of any spiritual gap in our lives? Do we sense some distant internal voice secretly longing for spirituality, but sublimated into shopping and feasting with our friends while an important human part of us goes unfulfilled? I don't think so!

When it comes down to it, the language game of spirituality is just that; a game that people play in the mistaken belief that without it they would have to admit to life being meaningless. Life is not meaningless, but it is here and now – not pie in the sky. Philip Pullman is absolutely right, "...if heaven exists at all it can only exist in the world we live in..." What's more, it isn't rationalists, secularists and humanists who have a gap in their lives, rather it's the other way round; spending time gazing into heaven and waiting for life to start after death is profoundly empty, meaningless and a tragic waste of the only life we have.

When we begin to deconstruct the language that fills the so-called spiritual gap we are left not with God's absence, but with his downright irrelevance. Why do we need to speak of a soul when we can not only readily locate emotions, thoughts

and aesthetics, but also give them actual content? At best the "soul" is what theologian John Hick called a "value word", a shorthand for our morality, feelings, sense of poetry and beauty – certainly not a thing in itself with objective existence or reference to anything other than human.

So, if the absence of religion leaves no gap in our lives, and I certainly concur that it does not, is there a place in our secular lives not only for beauty, poetry and morality, but also for festival and ceremony, even for Christmas (or whatever)?

Christmas, Winterval, the Winter Solstice ... whatever we call it, there is a place in our secular lives not only for beauty, poetry and morality, but also for festival and ceremony, says former vicar Jan Fortune-Wood



This is a question I put to my family this year, since it is our first year of not living in a vicarage for the whole of my children's lives. My children, whose rationalism was established long before the scales fell away from my eyes, were ready for me.

"Christmas" may be a Christian festival, albeit sanitised, but the tradition of a mid-winter festival far pre-dates Christianity. It's antecedents may be full of pagan irrationality, but entrenched within the tradition are ideas that have a claim to rational survival. A mid-winter festival signals that life matters and goes on despite the dark and the cold; that goodness and truth are worth seeking (though with the caution of fallible humans, not the arrogance of supposedly divine authority) and

that love is stronger than hate.

Amongst the more prosaic but equally important points that my children made about persisting with a midwinter festival was that winter "sucks". It's cold and grey and it rains a great deal (we live in North Wales), and by mid-December fun is hard to come by.

Moreover, winter is the best time to feast; dark, cold days invite cooking and comfort eating and, although they were keen to let me know that any excuse for a party was fine by them, they appreciated the idea that we have one major celebration that focuses on family and friends. Then there were the presents, no surprises that four young people enjoy gifts, but it's hardly as though Christmas is the only opportunity we find to meet one another's preferences during the year. What they liked particularly about Christmas presents and what distinguished this time of the year was the sense of preparation, process and anticipation culminating in something altogether more intense than we could normally sustain.

So there we had it: there are meanings buried within the religious overlays that secularists can share, values that humans have been grappling with for millennia and which stand quite apart from religious belief. Additionally, there are practical advantages to celebrating Christmas, but still, I pressed, why should we keep this day on December 25? Because, came the reply, it's cultural and the culture of sharing a midwinter festival is older and wider than the church's little bit.

Not having a religious faith doesn't leave a gap in our lives and neither does it lead to our needing to abandon festivals, rites of passage and human ceremonies. These are human activities. They are not signs of longing for an absent God. They are not covert spiritual behaviour. They are humans making human narrative and human meaning. So, Happy Christmas – or whatever.

NSS launches a Mugs-with-a-Message service

THE National Secular Society has launched a range of black, dishwasher-proof souvenir mugs bearing the following slogans: "**Religion is the Problem, not the answer**", "**Just say no to religion**", "**Faith is believing what you know ain't so**" (Mark Twain) "**Schools are for teaching, not preaching**", "**When one person suffers from delusions it's called insanity. When many people suffer from delusions it's called religion.**"

The mugs are £4.99 each. Please send your order to Mugs Offer, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Don't forget to include your name and address and which mug(s) you want. Cheques and PO's made payable to National Secular Society, or NSS. You can also use a credit card to buy via the internet. Simply go to <http://www.secularism.org.uk/merchant.htm> and fill in a few simple particulars.

• Please note that the NSS has just published its latest annual report. If you would like a copy, please send a first or second-class stamp to the NSS at 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL to cover postage.

Book reviews

LOUIS Menand tells us that when he started on this book he had no idea how huge a mountain he had to climb or how many amazing characters he would be seduced by on the way. Not surprising, because he has given us what is virtually an intellectual history of America from the Civil War to the Cold War, exemplified by the lives and thoughts of four key figures: the jurist and Supreme Court judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, the psychologist William James, the philosopher Charles S Peirce and the philosopher and educationalist John Dewey. Though they didn't always agree with one another, their careers intersected at many points and, Menand argues, they were more responsible than any other group for "moving American thought into the modern world". What above all they had in common was an attitude to ideas: that they are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools, social tools that people devise to cope with the world around them. As Dewey, who founded a Laboratory School, put it: ideas and beliefs are like hands, instruments for coping.

Although they didn't all like the term and Holmes particularly disliked it, they were pragmatists. They taught a kind of scepticism that, Menand suggests, enabled people to get by in a "heterogeneous, industrialised, mass-market society", and they "helped to free thought from thralldom to official ideologues of the church or the state or even the academy".

Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior was the son of the author of the once very popular "Breakfast Table" books. In 1858, when the son was 17 and a freshman at Harvard College, as it then was, his parents gave him a birthday present of five volumes of the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson which, he said, set him "on fire". Nine months after receiving the books, the young man published a tribute to Emerson in the *Harvard Magazine*. In fact, Emerson remained an inspiration to him throughout his long life. Like Emerson, Holmes believed that a scientific view of the world was not incompatible with moral beliefs and that a finer morality was possible outside organised religion than inside it.

Holmes was the only one of the four to fight in the Civil War (Dewey wasn't born until 1859). Holmes was wounded three times, the first time at the age of 20, when he was shot through the chest. "When I thought I was dying", he wrote, "the reflection that the majority vote of the civilised world declared that with my opinions I was *en route* for Hell came up with painful distinctness ... but then I said—by Jove, I die like a soldier anyhow ... afraid? No, I am proud—then I thought I couldn't be guilty of a deathbed recantation—father and I had talked of that and were agreed that it generally meant noth-

ing but a cowardly giving way to fear". Has the approach of death changed my beliefs much? he asked, and answered "no". As Menand says, Holmes had found that he didn't require a religious faith. And it was because he associated pragmatism with a desire to smuggle religion back into modern thought under a pseudo-scientific cover that he never used the term.

COLIN McCALL reviews *The Metaphysical Club*, by Louis Menand Flamingo, £8.99; and **NORMAN PRIDMORE** reviews *Freethoughts*, by Barbara Smoker, G W Foote, paperback, £9.95

That distinguishes him from James and Peirce. The former tried to reconcile religion and science as world views and likened pragmatism to the Protestant Reformation. He experimented with all kinds of drugs, submitted himself to a "mind-cure" therapist, and defended mind-cure practitioners, magnetic healers, Christian Scientists and osteopaths when the Massachusetts Board of Health proposed making it illegal to practise medicine without a licence. James believed that the universe had a "spiritual dimension"; that there was a "continuum of cosmic consciousness". And when he was dying he told his brother Henry, the novelist, that he would try to communicate with him from beyond the grave. If William sent any messages, says Menand, his brother did not receive them. Charles S Peirce believed in a personal God and thought that God's love ("agapism") played an important role in evolution. Physical evolution, he said, "works towards ends in the same way that mental action works towards ends".

Menand hardly mentions John Dewey's attitude to religion, but it is fair to say that he was nearer to Oliver Wendell Holmes than the others. He certainly had no time for supernatural beliefs and (as he said in reply to a critic in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 1939) he looked hopefully to a decay of the sectarian spirit of the churches. "For the greater the insistence by a given church body upon the supernatural, the more insistent is it bound to be upon certain tenets which must be accepted—at the peril of one's immortal soul". He was essentially a naturalist, although he thought that those who have abandoned supernaturalism could "still have within their experience all the elements which give the religious attitude its value". Religious values were, he suggested, "implicit in our common life, especially in the "moral significance of democracy as a way of living together"; and, rather surprisingly, in "the spirit of science as undogmatic reverence for truth in whatever form it presents itself".

Turning with some relief from religion to philosophy, we meet what Louis Menand calls a "minor peculiarity", that none of the principal figures who became identified with pragmatism liked the name, which Peirce took from Kant. William James, who first introduced the term in a lecture, would have preferred "humanism"; while Dewey called his own philosophy "instrumentalism". He wasn't interested in philosophy as a form of mental exercise, but as a guide to living, leading Bertrand Russell to liken him to Marx.

Yet the word pragmatism stuck. It was, says Menand, "a variant of many strands in nineteenth-century thought" but it was "by no means their point of convergence". It fitted in with "the stock of existing ideas in ways that made it seem recognisable and plausible". Its appeal is not hard to understand, he says, at a time (1898-1917) when the "values of corporate management, public oversight and political reform were in ascendance". Everything that James and Dewey wrote as pragmatists boiled down to a single claim, that "people are the agents of their own destinies". They spoke to a generation eager to find scientific solutions to social problems.

Menand sees Holmes, James, Peirce and Dewey as modernists, and considers "the value at the bottom of their thought to be tolerance". They helped to make tolerance an official virtue in modern America. Their ideas were lost during the Cold War, but "re-emerged as suddenly as they had been eclipsed". He was writing before the advent of George W Bush and his Christian cronies.

— Colin McCall

IF YOU lived in the Northampton area in the late sixties or very early seventies you might have met me. I was that earnest teenager in a Jesus T-shirt who knocked on your door with a fistful of tracts asking if you'd been saved. If I disturbed you, I'm sorry. If you were the angry man who shouted 'sod off, there is no god' through his letter box, I'm doubly sorry. You were right, I was wrong. But what was it that changed my mind?

J'accuse - Her Logic, Barbara Smoker. Not only her, of course. Russell and a few others must also stand in the dock. But she played a pretty important part - central, even. Reading her recently published collection *Freethoughts* has reminded me, forcefully, why.

For me religion had by that time become something of a jigsaw. I was sure that I had all the parts, but it was becoming very clear that for some reason they would not fit together as everyone piously assured me they should. I was convinced that the fault must be mine. Thus my energetic application increased. By hook or by crook I was determined to be saved. And I was

going to save the rest of the world, too. Problems with religion? Only one answer, friend – stop thinking about it and go and do it instead. The trouble was, I couldn't stop thinking.

As a paid-up swotty herbert I was an assiduous reader not only of the Bible but of newspapers too, especially of the letters pages. Most were dull. But every now and then there would be printed a letter, usually short, always clear, challenging some widely held belief or another. Each was a little foundation-shaker. These letters discomfited me no end. But they also exhilarated. They were signed by someone called Barbara Smoker.

I'd encountered "proper" thinking before, but nothing so relevant, so urgent and alive. Or, it must be said, brave. My teenage piety, the product of a sincere but unthinking upbringing, had turned into a useful tool of rebellion, a way of standing out against the crowd of my contemporaries and against society in general, and it also met that need for community and acceptance that teenagers seek. But it was not enough. What was lacking? Quite simply the ability to justify my beliefs. My world view was an edifice of mist, built upon water. Here, in contrast, was someone with something solid. I was obliged to contend with her. No contest, of course. She won. But so, of course, did I.

Who was this Barbara Smoker? I had absolutely no idea. But I liked her style.

One of the things I found most attractive was her intolerance of waffle. She expressed herself directly and without ambiguity, and if opponent were vague and woolly then so much the worse for them. A few choice phrases from the Smoker pen would cut machete-like through any verbiage. She was and is a virtuoso of clarity.

The present collection, *Freethoughts*, confirms all my early impressions. But there is much more to it than that. The *Freethinker*, as Jim Herrick pointed out in his history of the magazine *Vision and Realism*, has consistently supported unpopular positions that were later to become accepted as sheer good sense - or at least as ideas worthy of inclusion in the mainstream of debate. The same holds true for the work of Barbara Smoker. Free Will versus Determinism? New Age vapidities? The "sanctity" of Mother Teresa? Gay rights? The swearing of oaths? The dangers of fundamentalism? The Shroud of Turin? The pernicky and devious conservatism of Catholicism? Euthanasia? She was thinking and writing about these matters when discussion of many of them still qualified as a minority sport. What is truly extraordinary is the number of times she managed to cut to the heart of a particular issue and to discuss it in terms that remain urgent and relevant: how she managed

to virtually define whatever debate she was involved in.

In her longer pieces her thorough grasp of facts impresses greatly. Here is someone who knows what she is talking about. This is especially the case in the many pieces about the Catholic Church. Barbara knows her history, and her insights into the psychology of ecclesiastical politicking are often revelatory.

In 1999 Barbara appeared in a highly-watchable TV programme called *Living With The Enemy*. I remember the programme vividly. In the red corner was Barbara, and in the blue the evangelist Gerald Coates. I'd met Gerald before, in the early seventies. He'd arrived at the church I then attended (later to become infamous as the home of the "Jesus People") to offer his particular brand of pep and hellfire. A small man, walled-in with indefensible certainties, he thumped his tub and the sound was hollow. Shortly after listening to him I turned atheist. Clearly not one of his better crusades ...

Barbara's recollections of the programme were intriguing for many reasons; not all of them expected. Her responses to the various theological imbecilities uttered during the week were bracing, but it was her comments concerning how "extraordinarily wasteful" a medium television is, and how it can profoundly limit debate, that was the real revelation. Thirty hours of filming for a 28-minute programme! The consequence of this was (she writes) that "the one head-to-head argument that I would have particularly liked to retain" was not used. This was her "attack on the immoral doctrine of salvation through vicarious atonement". The lesson? That television finds ideas hard to deal with. Still, all was not lost. Included, after all, was the "running

gag" (as Barbara calls it) of the "alleged miracle of the sudden alchemical transmutation of amalgam tooth fillings into gold".

Clever old god, eh?

In these touchy-feely times of mystical archbishops, horoscopes in broadsheet newspapers, Breatharians waxing fat on the sales of their preposterous fatuities, and other related buffooneries and farces, what place reason; what place logic? What, frankly, is the point? This collection, I suggest, IS the point. Whatever progress has been made in liberating individuals from guilt and dogma, in shifting society's attitudes from the small-minded and unimaginative to something open, inclusive and tolerant, has been as a result of the free expression and discussion of ideas. The work of Barbara Smoker, in so many different fields, is a clear and certain demonstration that a commitment to reason and action matters.

One of the things I'd forgotten about Barbara's work (dazzled, perhaps, by its facticity, its rationality) was its frequent sheer humour. Acid one-liners, irony, satire, sarcasm - all are deftly deployed, bringing to what she writes a lightness and humanity that very few seem able to achieve when dealing with similar material.

The first item in this collection dates from September 1966, the last from June 2002. The gadfly of Athens, Socrates, wrote nothing down. We are fortunate that Barbara went and did otherwise: had she not, secularism would have been deprived of one of its truly outstanding voices. Long may she continue, in this at least, to ignore Socrates' example.

– Norman Pridmore

Pope devises new ways to fiddle with the Rosary

POPE John Paul II has marked the 24th anniversary of his papacy by introducing changes to the Rosary – the prayers said using sets of beads.

The 82-year-old pontiff announced the changes in the centuries-old Rosary in his weekly audience, simultaneously issuing a special document. John Paul proclaimed the start of the Year of the Rosary and urged Catholics to take advantage of the new focus on the Rosary to revive their faith and flagging practice of the set of prayers.

"We must rediscover the profound mysticism contained in the simplicity of this prayer, dear to popular tradition," the Pope told thousands of pilgrims and tourists in St. Peter's Square.

New Mysteries proposed

The Rosary is a series of prayers, many dedicated to the Virgin Mary, that are recited over and over again with the help of sets of beads.

Traditionally, Catholics are supposed to contemplate three periods, or mysteries, of Christ's life as they recite the prayers: the joyous mysteries of his birth, the sorrowful mysteries of his crucifixion, and the glorious mysteries of his resurrection.

The Pope proposed adding another set of mysteries: the "mysteries of light", which highlight five different periods of Christ's life: his baptism; the wedding feast at Cana, where according to the Bible, he transformed water into wine; his proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God; the Transfiguration, when God commanded the apostles to listen to Christ; and the institution of the Eucharist.

Webwatch

OOOH! A paradox! We are, as a society, an irreligious bunch – and according to history mostly always have been. Yet a glance at the institutions of society would lead someone who knew no better to conclude that the odour of sanctity (composed mainly of dry rot, body fluids, alcohol and mothballs) permeated every aspect of our lives. Government, the crown, education, law, the military – you name it, it's all oaths and rituals and bibles and blokes in fetish clothing intoning mumbo-jumbo at the drop of a hat.

Still, it could be worse. We could, after all, be living in some bleak fundamentalist theocracy in the middle east; or on some Scottish island where the Presbyterian fiat runs wild and the ghost of Calvin lurks behind each turf-capped windswept byre. We could (whisper it with horror) be marooned in the Bible Belt of the USA ...

As it is, we are not. But that doesn't mean it's easy for those who are free of religious

The heretic

I WAS walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said "Stop! don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well ... are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious." I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian."

I said, "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

He said, "Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off.

– *Emo Phillips, American comedian*

superstition to link up with others of like mind. Unless of course one has a computer and access to the internet. As soon as one does, the situation is transformed.

There has been, and still is, some prejudice against internet groups. For sure there is a vast amount of communication that goes on that is utterly trivial. But there are also groups in which really intelligent discussion takes place – often at very high and demanding levels.

I've mentioned before some sites devoted to matters of religion and ethics where more argumentative freethinkers might join the fray to good effect. Now, though, I'd like to suggest a couple of ways of looking for congenial sites that are less about flaying opponents and more about the development and criticism of serious ideas.

NORMAN PRIDMORE surfs the net for sites of interest to freethinkers

Do you Google? If you do, ignore the next bit. If you don't, go to <http://www.google.com/> and click on either the "Groups" or "Directory" tabs. The menus are clear and easy to navigate and the results can be astounding. When the lists appear just work through them. It's really that simple. It's not only the postings that are interesting, either – posters quite often include other links that are well worth checking out. You can do the same with Yahoo, too. Just go to <http://www.yahoo.com/> and click on "Groups" there. Type "Atheism" (for example) into the search box and hit "go". At the last count there were over 150 groups in this category alone. Years ago the freethinking Lunatics met monthly on the night of the full moon. This was in order to avoid hazards like falling into ditches on the way home. Be a modern Lunatic and avoid ditches – use the net.

Like the poor, bishops seem always to be with us. They are generally not especially newsworthy and it's usually a sound policy to ignore them. However, Catholic bishops have over recent months been bucking the trend and have become for a change rather interesting – for some pretty grim reasons too, mainly to do with child abuse. Take a look at <http://www.bishopswatch.org/> for an insider view of the current situation. OK, so it's a church-run site: but with friends like these ...

How about a rummage around the attic? The "Atheist Attic", I mean. It's at <http://www.bec.net/cardigan/attic/attic.htm> and is a pleasant and distracting site. So too is that of "The Amicable Atheist" at <http://www.geocities.com/meretricula/> It proclaims itself "A source of ecstasy for the whole family! Introducing refined atheism, with 80% less cynicism for a healthier outlook on life. A

mentally balanced way to start your day!". Certainly a damn sight healthier than starting one's day on one's knees spouting bunkum into the ear of a non-existent Nobodaddy!

Talking of Jehovah, take a look at the site called *Jolly Jehovah's Bedtime Atrocities* at <http://www.geocities.com/jollyjehovah/index.html> And tell your christian friends (ha ha) to visit it too ...

Fancy an "insider view" of fundamentalist logic? If you do, go to <http://www.geocities.com/rightsman1/fundylogic.html> and check it out. Near the bottom of the (long) first page you'll find a suggestion – "Now Do The Logical Thing and Click Here". Go ahead – there's some good stuff to read.

Another good site is one called, simply, *Atheism*. It says of itself – "This site is partly to explain atheism but mainly to see why it's really SILLY to believe in God". Fair enough. And it's the only site I know of where one gets to smack God's arse (warning – when you do, he's not best pleased).

It's at <http://turn.to/atheism>

Most of the above sites have a few irritating pop-ups. Fortunately, there are none that don't go away quickly with just a couple of mouse-clicks.

More on the wacky world of religion? Then point your electrons in the direction of <http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/rnb/> It's the site of the "Religion News Blog" (that's "blog" as in "Weblog" – clever, eh?) The fact that it's a Christian site should not deter the interested – it's a good piece of work. Amongst much other stuff, there's some good updates on that true man of God, the hideous pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro, Topeka, creator of the notorious Godhatesfags.com. In fact, with this and the excellent NSS online weekly newslines service you will know more than you will ever need to about the wonders of faith in these strange times.

As ever, thanks for all the links. Anyone interested in Dennis McKinsey's Bible quotes (which I wrote about last month) can still get them by emailing me. They are now also available, thanks to a reader, in PDF format, as well as Lotus and Word. More links, please, to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

Scott update

ALISTAIR Scott, the Exeter man convicted of "religiously-aggravated, threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour", has narrowly avoided being jailed for the offence.

Instead, Scott was sentenced to 200 hours of community service and ordered to pay £100 to each of his supposed "victims". The case was reported in full in last month's issue of the *Freethinker*.



Dangers in amalgamation

THE letters from Albert Adler and originator Jim Ross in September's *Points of View* continue the debate about consolidation of the secularist and humanist organisations for the purpose of having more influence on public thinking. I would like to point out the possible danger involved in coalescing into a larger, more powerful organisation, and also the fact that there already exists an alternative body of moral guidance that has triumphed over the religious one in the minds of all but the cranky few, through which we can (and do) work indirectly.

Both organisations are at least currently consulted, in their present form. It is quite possible that a consolidated body would be seen as too threatening to deal with by the establishment, which sees the disappearance of mainstream Christianity as a harbinger of the complete breakdown of its intricate system of privilege and control, and (paternalistically) of the public's capacity for moral thinking. The more our heavily Christian-informed government panics, the more it facilitates the religious penetration of education and even broadcasting – especially if it capitulates to the evangelical satellite-aimers. The country isn't in very good moral shape after three decades of de-education and consumerisation, and the centre of our centralised system is finding it very hard to hold. However, contemporary with the rise of Christianity there began to be developed a secular body of law designed primarily to protect property and property-owners' lives, in the first place. This alternative code of conduct was followed with much more devotion by such people because it dealt with the real here-and-now of their welfare. The dominance of the law over the Decalogue in people's thinking today about right conduct is one answer to our correspondents' quest for a secular institution for moral guidance. Moreover, it is adjusted to accommodate each sociological and psychological advance: like science, it has to be empirical and testable, and calcifies if allowed to become dogmatic. It is imperfect, and the selection of judges is still made from a narrow social stratum, but in itself and in its practice it is essentially secular, practical and even international in its ultimate scope.

Should we really be seeking to create yet another alternative body of moral precepts? It is, after all, only through the law that challenges can be made (and have been made) to the legal manoeuvres of the latest evangelists and education-subverters. Shouldn't we stay as wasps wielding the law as our sting, rather than become bees in an all-accommodating but hierarchical hive – possibly one owned by the establishment eventually?

Now, to another issue, if I may. It is frankly

incredible that Colin McCall, in his review of *About Anarchism* in the last issue, bemoans the banishment (oh, if only it were true!) of progressive education from the curriculum. He seems shamefully unaware that this romantic-Marxist ideology so severely deprived the people's children of literacy and numeracy over four decades that the present government had to re-impose these essential skills on the teaching profession.

Without them our kids don't stand a chance of acquiring Walter's "knowledge and consciousness" that provide the only antidote to the seductions of authoritarians of left, right or religious complexions.

This ignorance is on a par with his apparent belief that state ownership is equivalent to community ownership, as if we had any more say over what nationalised organisations did than we did, say, over what these ideologically driven pedagogues (still in position, largely) taught, and are still trying to teach, our trainee teachers.

BRIAN KING
Cornwall

Oo-er missus, it's that word again

MY dictionary (*The Modern University Dictionary*) from about 1960 gives the definition of "gay" as lively; merry; light-hearted (etc). I fail to understand what anal sex with another man has to do with the meaning of "gay".

But just as the church hijacked the word "father" to mean men in dresses who are not married and have no children, you homos hijacked the word gay, and like the church, your use of the word has no reflection on its original meaning. So David "Tripe" is wrong!

MICHAEL HILL
Kent

I CANNOT believe that, in the 21st century, there are still asinine old grumps firing off missives over the "hijacking" of the word "gay". Will they ever realise that no matter how hard they complain about it being linked to homosexuality, it can never be used in its old-fashioned sense ever again.

Philip Howard, quoted by the editor in his footnote to Jack Wilson's letter (*Points of View*, November), tried to put the lid on the whole foolish debate when, in *New Words for Old*, he demonstrated how the battle to save "gay" had, by the 1970s, already been irretrievably lost: "It would be difficult today to use the 19th-century nursery rhyme as it was used in the House of Lords in 1948 to congratulate Princess Elizabeth, as the Queen then was, on the birth of the Prince of Wales:

*The child that is born on the Sabbath day,
Is fair and wise, and good and gay."*

Some 50 years on we know that Prince

Charles is most certainly not gay – in any sense of the word. As to being fair and wise ... well, I'll leave that for the readers to decide.

I doubt that those who get in a lather about "gay" are ever likely to demand the restoration of words such as "faggot" and "queer". And who could ever speak innocently nowadays of sticking one's finger in a dyke?

LINDA VAN DAM
London

Criticising Islam

IT SEEMS to me that any law that protects religious sensibilities is striking at the very roots of free speech and democracy. One reason for this is that the main religions all have political agendas, or have political organisations associated with them.

It is ironical that the freedoms we have recently lost in order to protect Muslims are ones that they themselves do not value in Islamic society.

The Koran, which Muslims believe to be Allah's own words, gives instructions on laws, business and government. To argue that any of these are sheer bunkum is to automatically criticise Allah (God) and become liable to the accusation of "religiously abusive and insulting behaviour" (section 39 of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001)! Christian "democrats" may well soon learn that they too can hide behind the bible to protect anti-gay, anti-abortion, or creationist education policies, whilst venomously attacking opponents with impunity.

Why can't I criticise the stupidity and wickedness of ideas that encourage suicide bombers to kill and maim other human beings? Is it not time to examine the Koran and Muhammad's *hadiths* and see if their encouragement of hatred towards Christians, Jews and others is in itself still legal in this country in the 21st century?

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atheist & humanist contacts & events

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. 01772 686816.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, January 5, 4pm. Public Meeting.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 904 9490.

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 020 8777 1680. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

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. Worcester House, Pitville Circus Road, Cheltenham. Friday, Dec 6, 7.30pm Yuletide party.

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. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, December 13, 7.30pm. Mansell Stimson: *Anthony Asquith, Gay Film Director Extraordinary*.

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.

Dundee Group: Information: Terry Martin. Tel: 01250 874742. E-mail: terrymartin@dalcrue.fsnet.co.uk.

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Hennes. 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. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds.

Tuesday, December 10, 7.30pm. Gerald Jackman: *The Kibbutz – Does it Work?*

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. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, December 19, 8pm. Winter Solstice Party.

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

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

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

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: The Secretary on 01434 632936.

North Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693. Newsletter and details of programme available.

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, January 15, 8pm. Frank Abel: *That Was the Year That Was*.

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, December 11, 8pm. Bob Jordan: *Life at No 10*. Wednesday, January 8, 8pm. Hanne Stinsen: *Local Humanism – Moving Forward*.

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,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.**

**Notices must be received by the 15th of the month
preceding publication**