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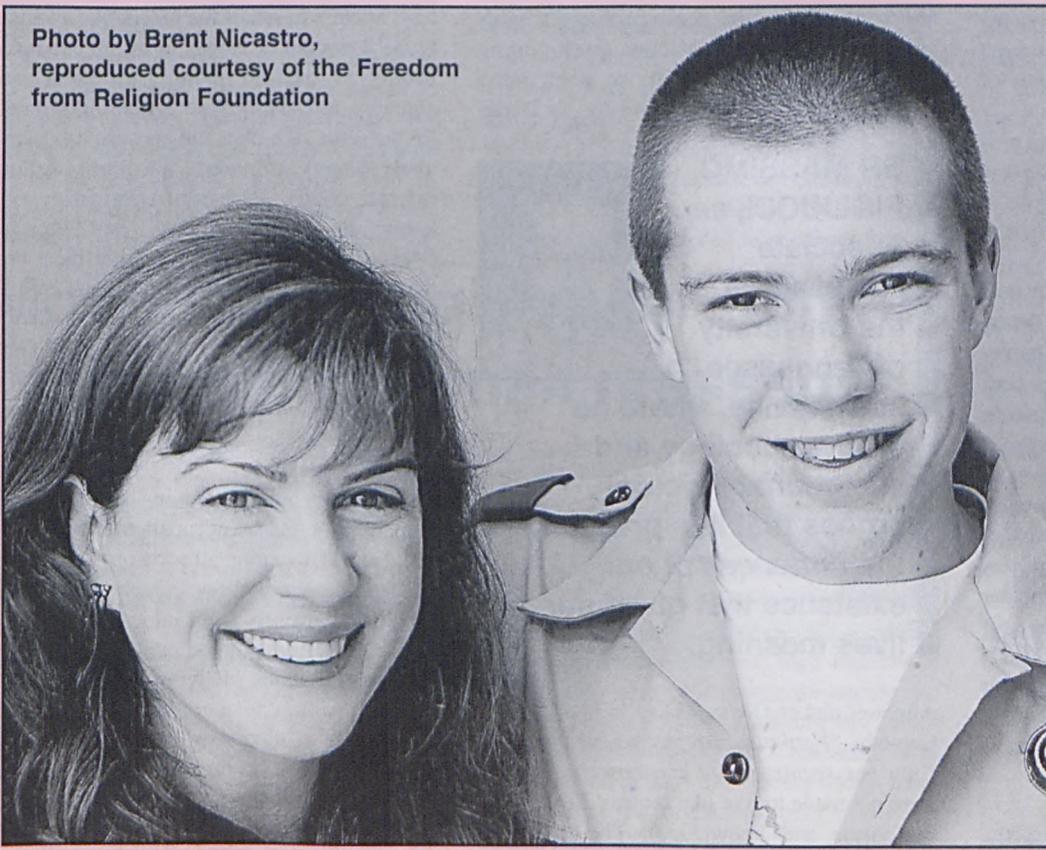


Photo by Brent Nicastro, reproduced courtesy of the Freedom from Religion Foundation

American Eagle Scout Darrell Lambert ruffles feathers with his 'I am an atheist' declaration

– see report on page 5

Darrell is pictured last year at the 25th annual national convention of the Freedom from Religion Foundation with TV personality Julia Sweeney

Coming soon to a cinema near you!

He's Big! He's Brash! He's the self-styled Bishop who was once (briefly) behind bars in Brazil – and he wants to sell you the secret of eternal salvation!

– see centre-page feature



This man, on the other hand, is cashing in on anti-American sentiment with a new soft drink called Mecca Cola (Slogan: 'Think Muslim, Drink Muslim'.) It will go down a bomb in certain quarters. But will it do any lasting damage to that symbol of evil American imperialism, Coca-Cola?

– full report on p3

SUPPOSE you are watching a very entertaining movie. Whatever movie it is that you might think of that way, it doesn't matter. If your juices are set in motion by an "intellectual" film like *My Dinner with André*, so be it; if you go for romance or special effects and such, like *Titanic*, that would do, too. Chances are that, when the movie is over (let's say, when the credits start rolling), you will feel both a sense of satisfaction and one of regret.

It's great that you managed to see such a good movie, but did it have to finish this soon? Couldn't the director have given us an extra half hour of dialogue, or action, or simply of screen presence of the actors?

Well, the director possibly tried, and the producer cut out the extra scenes to keep the movie to a manageable length (and, if you're lucky, you'll get to see the "uncut" version in DVD anyway).

Now, imagine that the movie is your life, and the closing credits are announcing your departure from this world. If you're lucky, this particular movie (which at least in part you both directed and starred in) gave you the same sense of satisfaction. And, I bet, you are also very saddened to see the credits scroll by, regardless of your opinion regarding an afterlife. I suggest that the reason for both these feelings (satisfaction and regret) is precisely because, very likely, there is no afterlife. Contrary to popular understanding, it is precisely the finiteness of our existence that gives meaning to our life. If we truly lived forever (in this or in any other world), we would be bored stiff and continually looking for a way to commit suicide (which, of course, would be impossible).

Now, *that* is my definition of Hell.

How can this be? Well, think back to the movie we started with.

Sure, you could have used another twenty minutes of *André*, and possibly were curious to

see in a bit more detail what happened to some of the characters in *Titanic* after the ship went down (I mean those who survived). But, could you stomach a never-ending version of it? I mean, even soap operas, after a while, become redundant and boring (OK, maybe right after they begin, but that's another story).

Human beings are simply not made for ever-afters, happy or not. On the contrary, what we thrive on is continuous challenge: always new problems to solve, new "finish lines" to pass. We contemplate our accomplishments with satisfaction; but the satisfaction quickly turns into unbearable boredom if we don't have something else to look forward to. As Dante

DR MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI, an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he teaches ecology and evolutionary biology, argues that it is precisely the finiteness of our existence that gives our lives meaning.



Alighieri makes Odysseus say in his (Divine) Comedy, "*Fatti non foste per viver come bruti / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza*" (You were not made to live like brutes / But to pursue virtue and knowledge). The operative word here is "*seguir*," to pursue. Odysseus is explaining to Dante (who is visiting Hell) why he kept wandering the world in search of adventures, even though he had a home, a lovely wife and a devoted son, and people to take care of (he was king of the Greek city of Ithaca).

Now, I'm not suggesting that we are all driven by Odysseus' mania for new experiences, but isn't this the same basic drive which we find at the root of so much depression, drug abuse, and even conflicts in the world? When human beings don't have something to look forward to (either because they have too little, and no hope to achieve anything worth achieving; or because they have too much, and don't have any distant finish-line to look forward to), they turn into themselves with invariably dark consequences. But that is exactly the problem with eternity: if you've got all the time to do whatever it is that you can think of doing, you will exhaust any possible goal you can set for yourself. Then what? Then you'll find yourself in the same situation as one of the alien characters described in

Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (one of my favorite contemporary philosophical works).

The alien in question happened to be immortal, a very unfortunate condition, which he coped with by inventing all sorts of ways to pass his endless time. At the moment he appears in the book, he is involved in the project of personally insulting every sentient organism in the universe in its own tongue. But, of course, it is a desperate (and meaningless) attempt to retard the inevitable: eventually, he'll run out of beings to insult, and out of insults to hurl at them. The point was, arguably, already clear to Dante: his Comedy (in the sense of a play, not because it is particularly funny) is divided into three sections: Inferno (Hell), Purgatorio (Purgatory, you know, he was Catholic), and Paradiso (Heaven). While the latter should have been the most exciting place to be (after all, you get to spend the rest of eternity—a contradictory concept in itself—basking in the light of God), it was, by far, the dullest, with the Inferno as the place where the action is interesting and the characters are endlessly fascinating and, well, so human.

Contemplating the meaning of life is one of humankind's oldest occupations and we are peculiar for inventing all sorts of fabulous stories to make sense of our existence. One of the minimalist answers I run into puts the futility of such an effort in good evidence. It's a cartoon with a series of living organisms, from simple creatures to more and more complex ones, ending, obviously, with humans. The caption says: "The meaning of life?" Every creature has a balloon that says "Eat, sleep, reproduce", — all except for the human's, which asks: "What is the meaning of life?"

There is more to life than eating, sleeping and reproducing (though those are indeed fairly basic components). For example: writing columns or watching movies; being kind to your friends and relatives; and being at least decent to the rest of humanity.

But, despite all our mythologies depicting an everlasting happiness in this or other worlds, we would condemn ourselves to a miserable eternity.

What then? Well, just make sure that your double role as director and star of your life's movie is worthy of an Academy Award. It shouldn't be that difficult...

Quotable quote

"I MEAN, if you can believe in Christianity, you can believe in anything, you know it is so utterly preposterous."

— Tom Baker, the actor, who played the fourth Dr Who. Baker was raised a Catholic and spent seven years in a monastery.

Help needed with F A Ridley research

WRITER Robert Morrell of Nottingham is seeking help with his research into the life of F.A. Ridley, one time president of the NSS and editor of the *Freethinker*, for a biographical introduction to a new edition of his *Socialism and Religion*.

Mr Morrell requires information about Ridley, particularly in connection with his early years. He is also anxious to obtain photographs of Ridley addressing meetings which he might copy as possible illustrations.

Mr Morrell can be contacted at 42 Eugene Gardens, Nottingham, NG2 3LF. E-mail: r.morrell1@ntlworld.com.

Death sentence for blasphemy moves Iranians to question clerics' right to rule

A RADICAL Iranian group which rejects religion out of hand has been born out of the protests which took place late year against the death sentence imposed on Professor Hashem Aghajari, who challenged the right of the clergy to rule Iran.

Group RA, which emerged at the beginning of 2003, has indicated that it has no interest in "reforming" Islam. Instead, it rejects the religion in its entirety, and plans to mobilise rationalists and atheists throughout Iran. Its aim is to establish a secular movement which, ultimately, would free their country from the

yoke of theocracy.

Protests in Iran began late last year following Professor Aghajari's trial and conviction for blasphemy. For ten days in November, demonstrations of up to 5,000 students at Tehran's Amir Kabir and Science and Technology Universities looked like the start of a revolution. The support for Aghajari, a well-known figure in the pro-reform movement and close ally of President Khatami, spread out to include many university teachers, parliamentarians and prominent citizens. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei first threatened to use force to quell

the unrest, then suddenly caved in and ordered a judicial review of the sentence imposed on Professor Aghajari.

Commenting on the formation of a rationalist group in Iran, Sanal Edamaruku, President of the Rationalist International organisation, said: "We salute the courage of those who risk their lives by defending rationalism in the Islamic state of Iran. We wish them best of luck and all success in turning the tide in their country.

"The significance of the event, however, goes far beyond Iran. I am optimistic that this example may encourage hibernating and scattered rationalists all over the Islamic world."

He added that the way out of religious tyranny does not necessarily come via a long process of "liberalisation" and "humanisation" of religion.

"There is no need whatsoever for an 'Islamic Protestantism'. There is a widespread and fashionable idea, especially in the West, that Islam can be tamed, refined and transformed into a 'progressive' religion." But this, Edamaruku insists, is not the way forward. A short cut could be taken simply by rejecting religion completely. He believes that it is not beyond the bounds of possibility for an Islamic society to throw off its chains at a stroke "and walk into a future free of religion".

Mosque apologises for hateful Christmas e-mail message

A CHRISTMAS message sent by e-mail last year from a Toronto mosque so outraged some Canadians that the Khalid Bin Al-Walid Mosque – the first Somali-established place of worship in North America – found itself inundated with complaints, abusive mail and even death threats.

The message said that wishing someone Merry Christmas was comparable to congratulating them for committing murder or engaging in adultery. The e-mail equated celebrating the Christian holiday with activities that are against Islamic law, including murder, illicit sex and the consumption of alcohol.

When complaints began flooding into the mosque, officials made clear in a statement that the e-mail had not been sent by the mosque's leader, nor did it represent their official stance. They said the original message, sent out by e-mail on Christmas Day, and taken as a slur by many Christians, had been despatched by a junior employee who copied it from another website and forwarded it to subscribers to the mosque's regular e-mail newsletter.

"The Board of the Khalid Bin Al-Walid Mosque sincerely apologises for the distress that this e-mail has caused to subscribers, other Muslims, and most importantly, our Christian neighbours during this important season for them," a written statement said.

Ibrahim Absiye, executive director of the Midaynta Association of Somali Service Agencies, told Canada's *National Post* newspaper that the e-mail had let loose "a flood of racist and fanatical Islamophobic threats against our mosque and its leaders, so much so that the hate-crimes unit of the Toronto Police Services was asked to investigate the matter.

Mr Absiye, in a statement issued on behalf

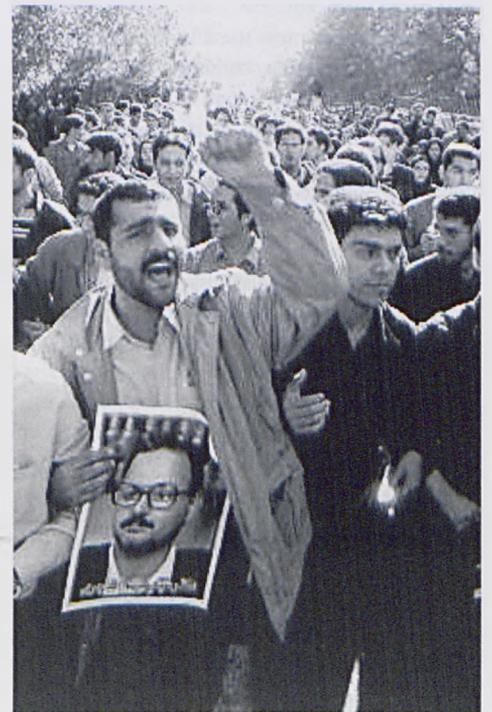
of Somali community leaders, said "The Somali-Canadian community is grateful and proud to be citizens of a country where freedom of religion is guaranteed for all. We subscribe to the core values of Canada, namely the ideals of tolerance and diversity, and in that spirit we, the leaders of the Somali-Canadian community in Toronto, join with Khalid bin Al-Walid Mosque in extending our sincere and profound apology to all Canadians, and particularly our Muslim brethren, Christian friends and believers of other faiths who were distressed by the forwarded e-mail."

Germany outlaws third Islamic group

AN ISLAMIC group accused of spreading violent anti-Semitism on university campuses and establishing contacts with neo-Nazis was outlawed in Germany last month.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, or the Party of Liberation, led by Shaker Assam, is the third Islamic organisation to have been banned in Germany since the adoption of new anti-terrorism legislation in Germany following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the US.

"The organisation supports the use of violence as a means of realising political interests," the German Interior Ministry said in a statement. It added: "Hizb ut-Tahrir denies the right of the state of Israel to exist and calls for its destruction. The organisation also spreads extremely anti-Jewish hate propaganda and calls for the killing of Jews. Hizb ut-Tahrir has sought to make contact with far-right neo-Nazi groups.



Students at Moades University, Tehran, protesting against the arrest of Professor Hashem Aghajari.

Photo: India News



Catholics generate more heat than light

THE role of Scotland's Roman Catholic schools in perpetuating the cycle of sectarianism has come under media scrutiny in a way never seen before. Unaccustomed to any questioning of their power or territory, the Roman Catholic hierarchy completely over-reacted. They have claimed that sectarianism comes from the home and not RC schools, and that this is an attack on poor Catholics and on faith itself.

For those not familiar with education north of the border, the vast majority of religious schools are RC ones. The community schools are deemed to be non-denominational, but if these have any religious leaning it is probably implicitly a Protestant one. It was because of widespread discrimination against Catholics (including school children) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that RC schools were set up. They were given legal status in 1918. It is generally accepted now, however, that RC children are not picked on in non-denominational schools – so whether or not there ever was any secular justification for such schools there is certainly not one now.

The main secular case against such schools is of course that it is not legitimate for the state to subsidise indoctrination. Another is that non-RCs are disadvantaged by not having the equal access to RC schools that the children of RC parents have to the remaining schools. A powerful utilitarian argument against such schools is that two parallel education systems cost more than one.

The argument most used in this debate was that if RC and other children were educated together they would get to know each other, and sectarianism would be gradually reduced. The opponents of RC schools do not suggest that these schools teach sectarianism, but that their continued existence reinforces an "us and them" culture and, while they remain, true integration of the community will be retarded.

Ironically, while Catholics are the main victims of sectarianism, it is *they* (and even more, their priests) who are the ones who are resisting integration most strongly. The problem is most evident in the west of Scotland, which has the highest proportion of Catholics, and – inevitably, the highest concentration of such schools.

The pitched battle started in December, sparked off by a debate on sectarianism prompted by one of the notoriously sectarian Rangers v Celtic football matches and the building of a new "joint campus" (RC and non-denominational) schools. The NSS had a letter published in the *Scotsman* noting that any mention of phasing out RC schools in this debate was pointedly being avoided by politicians. This even included those of them who

acknowledged privately that sectarianism would be lessened without such schools. The NSS called on the First Minister to focus on the role such schools play in perpetuating sectarianism. At about the same time TV presenter Kirsty Wark told teachers at a conference how sad she had been to have been separated from sharing the same school with her best childhood friend, simply because their parents' religion was different.

**NSS Executive Director
Keith Porteous
Wood reports on
an issue
currently gripping
Scotland**



Even the *Daily Telegraph* acknowledged that: "Given the poison that still flows through certain parts of [Scotland], I have no doubt that such a debate [on RC schools] is entirely warranted." But, uncharacteristically for this newspaper, the article's author had nothing but contempt for the leading Catholic cleric. "Such a debate may well prove impossible, certainly in any serious vein if the opening gambit from Scotland's leading Catholic is anything to go by", the *Telegraph* thundered. "The Archbishop of Glasgow, Mario Conti, all but debased the coinage right from the start with a silly little contribution yesterday. In this he alleged that those who would like to see an end to the state funding of Catholic schools as a way of ending sectarianism are as guilty as an infamous Kirk [Church of Scotland] report in the 1920s which called for the 'repatriation of the Irish'." To add insult to injury, the Kirk had apologised publicly for these three-quarter-century-old remarks quite recently.

Conti claimed the Humanist Society of Scotland (HSS – whose Ivan Middleton has been a staunch ally in this battle) and the NSS "would like to deprive people of such a choice [of RC schools], bent as they are on the destruction of religion. It is not sectarianism, but faith itself which they despise". A further clerical own goal came when (according to Glasgow's *Herald*) "Catholic bishops increased the stakes by promising to urge their congregations to make education a central issue in next year's Scottish Parliament elections". The NSS's response prompted an article entitled "Catholic hierarchy accused of [electoral] 'blackmail'".

Enter white knight Professor Richard Dawkins, or as the *Herald* put it: "With God on his side, in the red corner, is Mario Conti, Archbishop of Glasgow and one of Scotland's leading Roman Catholic clergymen. In the

blue corner is Richard Dawkins, faithful atheist and professor of the public understanding of science." RD put up a magnificent fight, which even earned him a "quote of the week" in one of the English papers.

When the NSS was reported to have asked the First Minister to call for a referendum on the issue, it seems that it prompted an emergency bishops' conference – and the Catholic media machine went into overdrive. Their top media person and I were the panellists on a one-hour Radio Scotland programme. The RC establishment was writing letters to anyone who would publish them. The evasiveness of these letters can best be illustrated by one to *The Tablet*, which managed to occupy a whole column without ever mentioning sectarianism.

While the Society has criticised Scots politicians for refusing to discuss integrating the school system, it is only fair to acknowledge that they have made some limited attempts to dampen sectarianism – by building twin non-denominational/RC schools with shared campuses. The idea is that while the pupils are taught separately, they share facilities. Even these modest moves have met with petty clerical demands. Bishops had already been insisting that there should be separate staff rooms and entrances for the RCs. Yet there are worrying signs that the RC Church is pulling up the drawbridge completely, and is about to start blocking even these token moves towards integration. The *Herald* reported that "recent comments by Jack McConnell, the first minister, that shared campus schools might be the solution to problems of sectarianism, have opened the way to a much harder line of opposition within the Church."

A poll carried out by the *Herald* showed that only 29 per cent of Scots Catholics said they were in favour of abolishing denominational schools, while 67 per cent of Catholics believed they should be retained. Of the whole population, 48 per cent of Scots are in favour of the abolition of denominational schools, while 42 per cent, believe they should be retained. Of those in the 55-64 age group, 57 per cent thought Catholic schools should be scrapped. Worryingly, a higher proportion of the young favour retention of the schools, perhaps through misplaced politically correct reasons. Fifty per cent of the 18-24 age group wanted to retain them. This suggests the prospects for integration are slim.

I am also grateful for support in print from Stephen Fry, and NSS Honorary Associates Iain Banks and Sir Ludovic Kennedy. The RC hierarchy must have been furious when the ace footballer, RC Billy McNeill, came out saying that all children should "go to the same schools regardless of their religion"!

More woes for US Boy Scouts over atheism ban

"AN atheist cannot be a good citizen. If an atheist were to find a wallet in the street, he or she would simply steal the money. An atheist would, therefore, be unacceptable to the Boy Scouts of America, because, to be a member, he would have to get around the rules by lying."

Those words, directed late last year at a group of American scouts by Glenn Schmidt, a senior scouting leader, sparked a row that is still reverberating around the United States.

On hearing Schmidt's words, 19-year-old Seattle scout, Darrell Lambert, who had earned Eagle status – scouting's highest award – stood up and challenged the scouts' district committee chairman: "You are wrong. I have never lied. My Eagle board knew I did not believe in God when they passed me, and they commended me on my bravery for being honest about my atheism. If anyone wants to tell me I am not a good citizen, they can kiss my butt," said an angry Lambert, who had earned 37 merit badges, and devoted more than 1,000 hours of his time towards community service.

After this outburst, Lambert was given a week by the Boy Scouts' regional executive to declare a belief in a supreme being and comply with Boy Scout policy, or quit the Scouts.

Lambert responded by saying "no way" would he change his beliefs. In an interview with the *Seattle Times* Lambert, who had been in scouting since he was nine, said: "It's just not going to happen." He was then told to leave the scouts.

In 2000, the US Supreme Court upheld the Boy Scouts' right as a private organisation to ban certain members. The Scouts exclude atheists and gays.

Every Boy Scout and adult leader in the US must attest to a belief in a higher power on an application in order to join. It can be part of subscribing to a structured religion – such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Hinduism – or a more amorphous faith in some presence greater than ourselves.

The issue, said the *Seattle Times*, has garnered national attention over the years. In 1998, 16-year-old twins Michael and William Randall, who refused to swear an oath to God, won a seven-year legal battle with the council in Orange County, California, and were awarded Eagle badges.

"I think the only power higher than myself is the power of all of us combined," Lambert told the newspaper. "Our interactions affect each others' lives. We're all in symbiosis with each other. But other than that, there's no higher power governing what I do."

Speaking in support of Lambert, one parent said, "He's willing to take care of our boys, our land, and he goes and rescues our people. What more could the Boy Scouts want?" Another, Joanne Warren, said: "Darryl walks the walk of Christ; whether he professes it or not, he walks it."

'If anyone wants to tell me I am not a good citizen, they can kiss my butt', says angry atheist Eagle scout

Lambert's spirited defence of his atheism earned him a \$1,000 student activist award from America's Freedom From Religion Foundation. He subsequently addressed the 25th FFRF annual national Convention, which took place in San Diego late last year, where he received his award.

Meanwhile, news has broken that two of California's largest bar associations are petitioning the state Supreme Court to prohibit judges from associating with the Boy Scouts of America. The legal groups claim that by affiliating with the Boy Scouts, the judges are giving the perception that they have an anti-homosexual bias in the courtroom.

The Los Angeles County Bar Association (LACBA) and the Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) have asked at least one state Supreme Court judge to assist in overhauling the state's Code of Judicial Conduct. The legal groups claim an anti-homosexual loophole exists in the code that must be corrected.

According to Canon 2C of the code, "A judge should not hold membership in any organisation that practices invidious discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin." However, the code does not prevent judges from participating in a "non-profit youth organisation" such as the Boy Scouts.

San Francisco's municipal court system has already adopted a resolution that prohibits judges and court commissioners from participating in any group that excludes homosexuals if their "sexual orientation alone renders them 'unclean', 'immoral', or 'unfit'." Los Angeles judges and lawyers are waiting for a state-wide rule before enacting their own county-wide ban.

New studies link Catholicism with mental disorder and sexual abuse

A NEW study claims devout Catholics are more likely to show symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. It compared nuns and priests with committed lay Catholics and others with virtually no religious involvement.

Volunteers were asked to list symptoms like intrusive mental images and worries.

Researchers from the University of Parma in Italy found the more devout Catholics reported the more severe symptoms. But they admit the study doesn't prove religious devotion in early life causes symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Claudio Sica and his team say it's equally likely people with those character traits feel more drawn to religion and devote themselves to God.

Patients with OCD can become convinced that everything around them is dirty. In extreme cases, sufferers spend up to eight hours a day cleaning.

The results of the Italian study support the theory that a God-fearing upbringing may contribute to obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Lynne Drummond, a psychiatrist at St George's Hospital, London, says many OCD patients say they had a strict upbringing where actions were either right or wrong.

Other theories on possible causes include a link to genes, head injuries and emotional trauma. The results of the Italian study are reported in *New Scientist*.

Meanwhile, a separate study conducted by St Louis University, Missouri, and published last month, suggests that more than 34,000 nuns in America may have been sexually abused, in some cases by priests and other nuns.

Forty per cent of American nuns from 123 religious orders said they had been sexually abused, and nearly ten per cent said they had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of priests and nuns in childhood, according to the study, which was partly funded by nuns. Researchers said that one in 10 nuns thought the abuse was punishment from God, and six per cent considered leaving the Church.

Ann Wolf, one of the academics who did the research for the health sciences department of St Louis University, a Jesuit foundation, said it was time the Church recognised the problem and acted.

"The bishops appear to be only looking at child sexual abuse. But the problem is bigger than that. Catholic sisters are being violated in their ministries."

French Muslim cashes in on anti-US feeling with Mecca Cola

IF ITS success in France is anything to go by, Mecca Cola will prove an enormous hit in the UK – and will make Tunisian-born Tawfik Mathlouthi, 46, a very wealthy man.

Mathlouthi, who lives in France, decided last year to capitalise on a wave of anti-US feeling by persuading consumers to ‘buy Muslim’, and switch from Coke to his brand of soft drink. There was an added incentive: ten percent of the profits will go to a Palestinian children’s charity. “Don’t drink stupid,” reads Mecca-Cola’s label, “drink committed.”

Launched last October in France, Mecca Cola sold more than two million of its 1.5-litre bottles in just three months. Now the entrepreneur is targeting the UK and its population of 1.8 million Muslims. In an interview with the *Guardian* (January 8), he described Britain as “a huge market for us, which will soon be bigger even than France. We have just signed a contract to send 20 lorries a month – that’s about two million bottles – to Britain, and are even now setting up two UK companies, Mecca Cola UK Ltd and, with a partner in Birmingham, Mecca Cola Distribution.”

But despite appearances to the contrary, Mathlouthi insists he is not trying to compete with Coke, and denies his product is anti-American. “I have nothing against the Coca-Cola company, and I like the US and its energy and dynamism, but I fiercely object to its foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East and towards the Zionist entity [Israel],” he said.

“We Arabs love an America open to the world, not this America, dangerous and aggressive to others.”

Mr Mathlouthi says he has had a few complaints from more fundamentalist Muslims that he is profaning the sacred name of Mecca for commercial purposes, but believes that “in the current anti-Muslim climate, any positive mention of Mecca can only be beneficial.”

According to the *Guardian*, “Coke’s reputation in the Arab world has been shaky since it opened the first franchised soft drinks plant in Israel in the 1960s, and activists have made repeated calls for boycotts. Coca-Cola bosses acknowledge the current boycott has made an impact on sales in the Middle East. Now the protest is spreading to Europe.”

Masood Shadjareh, chairman of the London-based Islamic Human Rights Commission, which is backing calls to shun US brands, predicted huge interest in the new brand. “The Muslim community is targeting Coca-Cola because people feel that the only

thing they can do is to hit America economically,” he said.

Martin Norris, communications director for Coca-Cola UK, said: “We don’t believe calls for a boycott are a proper way to further any

sort of cause. As a business we don’t take a position in matters of politics or religion.

Mr Norris dismissed the threat from Mecca Cola, saying: “There are always competitive brands out there.”

Muslims and Catholics declare war on secularism

“THE ideas that secularism carry are very dangerous ... secularism is the cause of the intellectual decay and total destruction of all moral values in society,” according to a 44-page *fatwa* issued last month by Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammad, Judge of the Shari’ah Court of the UK and Ameer of Al-Mahajiroun.

Entitled *Islam’s War on Secularism*, the proclamation says that secularism had created a situation where “Islamic activists and scholars are fought against and labelled. They face accusations and slander. A picture is painted of backward, shallow, un-educated and narrow-minded individuals. These so-called ‘extremist fundamentalist Muslims’ have no intellect and have ‘declared war against technology, science and progress’. They are a ‘lunatic fringe’ within society”.

The *fatwa* says that “Islam is based on total submission and obliges us to reject any thought based on total or partial rejection of God.

It concedes that democracy, “which is the result of secularism”, has benefited Muslims and allowed them to propagate Islam, “but we must not give it [democracy] any credence or legitimacy.” (The sheikh also believes that it is perfectly acceptable for Muslims to accept income support and other state benefits from liberal “kufr” democracies because ultimately “all wealth belongs to Allah”.)

Another call for “a war on secularism” came around the same time from the leader of Scotland’s Catholics, following repeated attacks by the National Secular Society over the role played by Catholic schools in perpetuating sectarianism.

Keith Patrick O’Brien, Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh, told the *Sunday Herald*: “I call for any and all church leaders to think of our own war. Scotland is a Christian country, yet Christianity and the Christian message are getting squeezed out. Folk that want to redress that balance aren’t doing very well. If it continues, then obviously we will become more



Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammad, who blames secularism for his ilk being branded part of the ‘lunatic fringe’.

secular and a considerable selfishness will seep into society. There is definitely concern within the church in Scotland and more of us are trying to do something about it.”

O’Brien highlighted the decision by Edinburgh City Council not to include a nativity depiction in its Winter Festival display as just one example of how far Scotland had come from being devout. “I have spoken to the Lord Provost about it,” he said.

The moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Right Rev Dr Finlay McDonald, agreed that churches needed to hit back at secularism. “Christian communities must unite to stop the spread of religious scepticism, indifference and secularism,” he said.

The National Secular Society’s response featured on the front page of the *Sunday Herald* with a quote from its President, Denis Cobell: “It is historically typical that the Church should call for a war on secularism: war between faiths has marked the Christian era as two millennia of bloodshed.”

William Hazlitt

ENGLAND'S finest essayist, William Hazlitt, was born on April 10, 1778, and this year admirers will be celebrating his 225th anniversary in special fashion. As a result of public subscription, his grave in St Anne's churchyard, Wardour Street, Soho, has been restored and will be unveiled by Michael Foot, supported by two Hazlitt biographers, A C Grayling and Tom Paulin. A black Lakeland slate slab will bear the same original inscription of well over a thousand characters: "A despiser of the merely rich and great: A lover of the people, poor or oppressed: A hater of the pride and power of the few, as opposed to the happiness of the many. A man of true moral courage ... lived and died the unconquered champion of truth, liberty, and humanity ..."

It isn't known who wrote the original tribute, but it was "one whose heart is with him in his grave". A C Grayling offers two suggestions: a lawyer, Charles Wells, who was thrilled by hearing Hazlitt lecture; and Hazlitt's first wife Sarah Stoddart, whom he divorced, but who remained friends with his family until she died, and who wrote Hazlitt's death notice in the *Times*.

My wife and I subscribed to the restoration fund and, as well as being invited to the celebration, will be among the founders of the Hazlitt Society, which will help to preserve the memory of the man described by Tom Paulin as "one of the greatest masters of English prose". Make a note of the date, April 10, between noon and 3pm.

Not-so-sweet charity

FRANKLIN Graham is the elder son of evangelist Billy Graham and a friend of President Bush. He is also chief executive of Samaritan's Purse, the American charity behind a scheme to send a million Christmas boxes from British schoolchildren to those in poorer countries.

Children of all denominations – and none – took part in last year's appeal, decorating the boxes and packing them with sweets, toys and pens. They were sent to 13 countries in Eastern Europe and south-west Asia, some with large Muslim populations. It sounded like a great idea until Patrick McCurry found that, along with the gifts, were religious pamphlets aimed at introducing children and their families to Jesus Christ (*Guardian Society*, December 18). Franklin Graham, it will be recalled, branded Islam "wicked, violent and not of the same God"; and when on a tour of India with the charity's founder, he wrote about "hundreds of millions of people locked in the darkness of Hinduism ... bound by Satan's power".

While the charity's website describes it as a "mission", nothing of this appeared on the lit-

erature received by the schools, and head teachers have expressed alarm at the underhanded nature of the Christian operation.

The screaming Blairs

I RECALL my surprise many years ago now, when a Sri Lankan delegate to a World Union of Freethinkers congress told me that his country's leaders consulted astrologers when making political decisions. Since then we have had Ronald Reagan pursuing the same path and nearly bringing the world to Armageddon. Now it is our turn. We knew that Cherie Blair wore a BioElectric shield that warded off evil forces. But the *Observer's* Nick Cohen drew attention to an account in the *Times* a year ago describing how, during their summer holidays in Mexico, the Blairs visited a "Temazcal", a steam bath enclosed in a brick pyramid. Inside they met Nancy Aguilar, a new-age therapist, who told them that the pyramid was a Mayan womb in which they would be reborn. They "experienced inner-feelings and visions"; smeared each other with melon, papaya and mud from the jungle, and then "let out a primal scream of purifying agony".

There is talk of a "homoeopathic dowser healer" and, of course, Sylvia Caplin, mother of Carole, ballet dancer turned spiritualist. No wonder it was this government that gave "alternative" remedies the same status in the NHS as conventional treatment.

Tall stories

"WHO was the real Virgin Mary?" asked the *Guardian* in the week before Christmas (December 19, 2002) and called on Dr Helen K Bond, lecturer in the New Testament at the University of Edinburgh, to sort out "the truth from the tales". The result was, of course, a failure. "There can be little doubt that Mary existed" was the unwarranted assumption from which Dr Bond's imagination ran riot. "Like other women of her day", Mary would have been married around the age of 12; the marriage would have been arranged and would take place a year or so after betrothal; and "we believe" she left her family to move in with Joseph. Was she already pregnant when she moved into Joseph's house as Matthew and Luke maintain? Here comes Dr Bond's first note of scepticism. She doubts whether either evangelist had "any reliable historical sources". Nor, she admits, will we ever know the precise details surrounding Jesus' nativity. But she is prepared to make a "historical guess" that Mary gave birth to him "in a perfectly ordinary way in the family home in Nazareth".

And so it goes on, speculation after speculation. Perhaps it was from Mary that Jesus got his gift for story-telling and "his powerful social critique". What Mary thought of Jesus'

mission is "open to debate". Did she warn her son of the danger he was facing? Pointless questions that do nothing but fill out an article which, naturally, didn't do anything to sort out "the truth from the tales". But then, how could it, when they are all just tales?

The root of the problem

AT LAST someone who has seen the situation from the inside has said what all newspaper commentators seem to have ignored, that celibacy lies at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church's problem of paedophilia. Paul Crawford, who trained for the priesthood at Oscott College during the 1980s, had first-hand experience of "the unhealthy development of human sexuality" among the clergy. He realised that the priestly life with its "marked isolation, loneliness and sexual denial, cannot fail to frustrate individuals and deform otherwise natural urges and desires into more bizarre, or simply counterproductive and pathetic appetites." (*Guardian*, December 18, 2002)

Sexuality and the realities of celibacy were largely taboo subjects during his training and, "quite apart from those who hide behind the mask of Christian love to pursue and abuse children ... others are being forced to compromise their sexual dignity by seeking 'illicit' relationships with men or women during their ministry ..." Crawford is now happily married with two children. Not surprisingly, in the last 25 years some 100,000 priests and bishops have likewise left to get married, and supplies of new seminarians are drying up.

Sectarianism: past and future

ANOTHER welcome piece appeared earlier in the *Observer*, when Scotsman Robin McKie dealt with the curse of sectarianism in his native land, quoting an amusing exchange between a proddy (Protestant) Rangers supporter and a Celtic-supporting Taig (Catholic) from Christopher Brookmyre's latest novel, *The Sacred Art of Stealing*. But, as McKie said, the subject is anything but funny: "it has blighted workplaces, spilled blood and caused untold misery across Scotland for more than 100 years".

The country's first minister Jack McConnell has declared that "we need to put sectarianism in the dustbin of history", which is a noble thought, but easier said than done while Scotland continues with its denominational schools. The only answer, as McKie said, is secular education. And he found it disturbing "to watch the rest of Britain plunge towards a similar sad, sectarian future, just as Scotland struggles to evade it".

New Labour has been warned of the danger, notably by the National Secular Society, but takes no heed. The future looks sad indeed.

Having the neighbourhood branch of your bank turn into a trendy wine bar can be infuriating – but something far worse could be the transformation of your local independent cinema or theatre or hall into a branch of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a multi-national praise-the-Lord-and-pass-the-cash operation which specialises in exorcisms ... and prising open the purses of the poor.

The UCKG's slogan is "Stop Suffering" – but its Finsbury Park branch in north London signally failed to stop the suffering of little Victoria Climbié. Indeed, the UCKG has to bear partial responsibility for her death. It was, after all, the church that attempted to exorcise demons from Victoria, who was murdered by her great-aunt and her partner, when what she needed was to be taken from their control to a place of safety.

Victoria was delivered to a branch of the church four times in the last eight days of her life and only on the last occasion, when she was slipping in and out of consciousness, did the pastor suggest that her great-aunt, Marie-Thérèse Kouao, and her boyfriend Carl Manning, take her to hospital. By then it was too late.

At the public inquiry into her death, the UCKG pastor concerned, Alvaro Lima, said he thought she was possessed by the devil.

Victoria was first taken to a "deliverance from witchcraft" service at the church on February 18, 2000, by Kouao and Manning, who were later both jailed for life for the girl's murder.

Lima said he prayed and fasted for Victoria when he first saw her because the girl told him she was possessed by evil spirits. "She said that Satan controlled her life, that Satan had told her to burn her body," he stated. "She said



Little Victoria Climbié, victim of abuse, aggravated by exorcisms performed by the United Church of the Kingdom of God

she liked doing bad things. I thought this was all part of her nightmares and a result of past traumas. He decided to pray and fast with an assistant, Audrey Hartley-Martin, because he believed the girl had "spiritual problems".

Lima admitted to being unconcerned about Victoria's medical welfare, despite her being withdrawn and having virtually no hair.

The pastor told the inquiry he only suspected Victoria was being neglected when the trio returned to the church five days later – the day before her death. Victoria had 128 separate injuries on her body when she died.

UCKG buys art for its Praise-Pass-the-Cash

Until that horrifying case came to light, few in Britain had ever heard of the UCKG. Then, last year, the church found itself in the news again when, to the fury of local residents, it acquired a huge, glorious art-deco cinema in Hoe Street, Walthamstow, east London, for £2.8 million; and announced plans to buy a disused Catford cinema in the south London borough of Lewisham. If planning permission is granted, both will be transformed into cash-clawing UCKG operations.

Last November 12, Waltham Forest Council unanimously rejected the planning application from the UCKG to turn the EMD Cinema into a church, but the UCKG has appealed the decision, and the matter was referred to central Government. A full public inquiry is expected shortly, and will deliver a final decision on the future of the cinema, which closed its doors to the public on January 3 following a charity gala night organised by the McGuffin Film Society.

There has been a huge groundswell of public opinion against the UCKG taking over the cinema, with a number of diverse local organisations, including the Walthamstow Anarchist Group, taking to the streets and leafleting the borough to voice their disapproval. One campaigner, Labour Councillor David Blunt, said "an empty building owned by a church that it can't use is no good to anyone. Much though it would choke most people to hand over money to the UCKG, the only sure way of securing this building for the future entertainment of the people of Waltham Forest is to buy it back."

While such opposition to the UCKG is encouraging, the real issue – whether the church should be allowed at all into the borough – seems to have been completely ignored. Indeed, it has even been suggested by some Waltham Forest councillors that there were other properties in Walthamstow that the UCKG could use instead, rather than put an historic, functioning cinema out of business. This reflects a deplorable level of ignorance about the workings of the church. Leaving aside its dubious financial arrangements, there is mounting evidence that churches such as these pose a very real danger to children, as the Climbié case so graphically illustrated.

A special report by Freethinker e lodged a formal objection to the U of God operating the EM

Research in the US has shown that, in the past 15 years, more than 200 children have died because their parents relied exclusively on faith to heal them. The children died of treatable ailments such as diabetes or dehydration.

This fact came to light in an article last year in the American *George Street Journal*, published by Brown University. It focused on

Theatres and movie houses

A KEY reason for the UCKG targeting theatres and cinemas is that this type of building is most conducive to the sort of hokey, show business-style of religious service the UCKG conducts, as the following extract from a report in the Los Angeles newspaper, the *LA Weekly* (June 29-July 5, 2001) demonstrates:

"The demons just won't let go. Dozens of people, tormented by the forces of evil, fill the aisles. Church officials clutch the hair of the possessed, their shoulders, their flailing arms, doing whatever it takes to break the spell. Some of the faithful crouch on the floor, coughing up bile on newspapers. The cavernous "temple" – an architectural gem along downtown L.A.'s historic theatre row – fills with the roar and chanting of 3,000 men and women, as Bishop José Luiz bellows at the altar, directing the mass exorcisms.

"This is the Friday-night service of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, one of the best shows in town, where the bishop and his band of pastors battle the dark spirits that dare to mess with humanity.

"What is going on here in the old State Theatre on Broadway is no ordinary service. It's a raw blend of Christianity and witchcraft, and the top-selling spiritual hope for hundreds of thousands of Latino immigrants in the United States. In fact, the church's popularity is pumped up by the downright frightening nature of this spectacle, and by its firebrand allusions to the horror cinema so common in Mexico. The captivating

Art-deco cinema e-the-Lord-and- ash activities

inker editor **BARRY DUKE**, who has
the *Universal Church of the Kingdom*
e *EMD Cinema as a church*

research carried by Dr Seth Asser, who made a study of the deaths of children due to medical neglect on religious grounds.

In 1998, Asser published a paper in the journal *Pediatrics* that evaluated the deaths of 172 children between 1975 and 1995 from families of 23 religious groups whose rituals dictated that healing must occur through prayer. The

article was the largest study ever conducted of such deaths.

The study found that 140 fatalities "were from conditions for which survival rates with medical care would have exceeded 90 percent", and that overall only three children would likely not to have benefited from medical care. "Not only did they die needlessly, but many of the deaths were slow and painful," Asser said.

Public officials, said Asser's co-author, Rita Swan, have long ignored these deaths. Swan is president of Children's Healthcare Is a Legal

houses are ideal for church's show-biz-style services

combination of theology and culture threatens the staid Catholic Church both here and in Brazil. It is the work of a Rio de Janeiro lottery bureaucrat and former street preacher named Edir Macedo, who started the Pentecostal-style religion in 1977.

"Twenty-four years later, the church claims to have six million mostly working-class members in 85 countries. They stuff the red collection bags with at least \$1 billion per year in return for the spiritual care provided at storefront temples and converted movie houses. In Brazil, the church's influence extends beyond spiritual matters, into ownership of Brazil's *Rede Record*, the country's second-largest television network, and hundreds of radio stations, various newspapers, a bank and a credit company.

"Along the way, Macedo has become a multi-millionaire who draws criticism like the devout attract demons. A few years after he held his first service, in a tiny mortuary in Rio, unsubstantiated rumours began circulating about his multi-million-dollar international empire being little more than a giant money-laundering operation for the Colombian drug cartel.

"In 1996, the Brazilian press quoted Interpol official Romeu Tuma as saying that the US Department of Justice had been asked to investigate the allegations; now, five years later, neither Interpol nor the US Attorney's Office will comment on the matter.

"The unproven accusations of seedy drug connections have followed the church to Europe, where a 1997 report by the Belgian

Parliament claimed the church is out to defraud believers: 'This is an authentic crime organisation whose only goal is to enrich itself. This is an extreme form of religious merchandising'."

"Macedo has been relatively untouched by it all. In 1992, two years after the \$45-million acquisition of the *Rede Record*, he was arrested on suspicion of fraud and quackery, and spent 11 days in jail, according to a Brazilian newspaper. The charges were later dropped. In an interview with the Brazilian media, Macedo denied any wrongdoing.

"The Universal Church is well-known for its relentless fund-raising tactics. Rick Ross, an international cult expert, says Universal is the greediest religious group he has encountered. 'It is the most aggressive collector of money I had ever seen in a church service, and I've been attending church services and observing groups for about 20 years,' says Ross, who testified on behalf of an elderly Salvadoran woman who sued the church after falling and breaking her arm while in line for holy oil after an L A service.

"Members face not one or two offerings every service, but as many as three or more, with pastors exhorting them to donate as much as \$1,000. The church's lore is littered with tales of former members brought to financial doom by excessive giving. In an early training film, the fiery and dynamic Macedo is shown slamming down a Bible as he counted piles of money, and telling pastors, 'If they don't pay, they can get out'."

Duty (CHILD). This Iowa-based non-profit organisation works to protect children from abusive religious and cultural practices, especially religion-based medical neglect.

Many cases of religiously motivated medical neglect never become public due to cover-ups, lack of investigations and poor record keeping, Asser said. His most recent findings provide bone-chilling evidence that some individuals and groups look outside of medicine for healing illness and disability.

Asser studied the deaths of youngsters in an obscure religious congregation. In 1998, 78 graves of children buried since 1955 were discovered in a cemetery of the Followers of Christ Church in the suburbs of Oregon City. The finding sparked widespread publicity about poor record keeping and inadequate investigations.

In 2001 he flew to Oregon to examine public records for information about causes of death. He tramped through mud to record data on the children buried in the Followers of Christ cemetery. He combed through the group's telephone directory and counted the people coming to a service at the Followers church, as he stood on the sidewalk receiving their hostile glares.

These methods allowed Asser to compare the proportion of child deaths for the group with state-wide numbers. Children born into the Followers of Christ Church were 4.5 times more likely to die compared to peers in the surrounding population, he found.

"Once again many of the deaths were from conditions easily prevented or treatable," Asser said. After the deaths were publicised, Oregon repealed laws giving religious exemptions to charges of child abuse, neglect, manslaughter, criminal mistreatment, and criminal non-support.

In fact, no children in the Oregon Followers of Christ Church have died of medical neglect since the repeal, Asser said, and members were witnessed taking children to doctors. Concluded Asser, "To stop these preventable deaths, other states should promptly repeal similar exemption laws."

(Continued on p11)



'Bishop' Macedo: "If they can't pay, they can get out."

"I'D LIKE TO STRIP THEIR COLOURS OFF THEM, JUST LIKE THAT!"

THE speaker was a mature Afro-American gentleman who, with a colleague and friend, was participating in an American TV show about street gang warfare in the US. The two men, who at one time had themselves been involved in such "games", are now devoting themselves to persuading gang members to lay down their colours.

In this context colour alone distinguishes enemies from friends. Loyalty to colour overwhelms that to friends and associates. Colour splits families, even identical twins. In itself harmless, merely ephemeral, a sign or a symbol, the colour of the particular gang you belong to separates you from all others who do not exhibit, wear or adhere to it. And to those who wear other colours, it is a rag to a bull. Be it white, blue, orange or mauve. Colour causes strife, hatred and enmity towards those wearing garments of another hue.

"I'D LIKE TO STRIP THEIR COLOURS OFF THEM, JUST LIKE THAT!"

Gang warfare is a game involving cruelty and brutality and can – and often does – lead to murder, as events in Birmingham last month so graphically demonstrated.

"I'D LIKE TO STRIP THEIR COLOURS OFF THEM, JUST LIKE THAT!"

Colour rivalry has always existed. It is here, there and everywhere, though rarely with such lethal overtones. And it has always been and still is important in the gentler arena of sport. In motor racing each country has its own colour. Italy, the famous Monza red, France pale racing blue, Germany white or silver, Britain dark racing green. Football teams are famous for their strips and colours. Aston Villa favour blue and maroon. Nowadays they are not all so constant but give way to the fickleness of fashion – as always, dictated by financial interest. At the time of writing this, Manchester United sports a new red strip.

Cricket is a more conservative game. All players wear white but the colour of caps and blazers varies. For example, Australians wear green, West Indians maroon, and English blue. In the famous annual boat race, Oxford wears dark, and Cambridge light blue. In horse racing each owner displays his own chosen colours.

Humanity evolves extraordinarily slowly. Nearly 2000 years ago, competing charioteers in the Circus at Rome were also distinguished by the colour of their owners' liveries. Red and white were at first the predominant colours, then green and blue were added to the scene. When the Emperor Constantine

(288-337) transferred his capital from Rome to Byzantium (which he renamed Constantinople), the fashion spread there. Just as today supporters and fans wear the colours of their favourites, so they did in the days of Constantine. Even he and later emperors took sides, supporting one faction or another. The rivalry of the Hippodrome spread to the city and involved other elements, some political, some religious.

Humans have a tendency to divide into rival groups, and use colour to signal those divisions. Why do we do it? JOAN SIMKINS has some suggestions

The Emperor Anastasius I joined and supported the greens. At a festival at the end of his reign (491-518) the greens massacred 3,000 blue supporters, which sparked off further violence. The Emperor Justinian I (483-565) had married an ambitious prostitute, Theodora. She had also been an actress, and had suffered at the hands of the greens. She and her husband became devoted blues. They persecuted the greens and terrorised the city.

"In 532 a riot broke out in the Hippodrome, which Justinian tried to stop by executing ring-leaders on both sides; this only inflamed both factions against him and the so-called Nika riot began. Much of the city was burned, including St Sophia itself, and the reluctant nephew of Anastasius was crowned Emperor by the crowd in the Hippodrome. For five days the city was abandoned to the factions, whose watchword was *Nika* meaning vanquish. Justinian was on the point of flight from his defended palace, but his redoubtable wife saved the situation. She persuaded the blues to abandon the hippodrome but then sent two generals to storm it. 30,000 greens died there."

– (*The Origins of Virtue*, p167)

"I'D LIKE TO STRIP THEIR COLOURS OFF THEM, JUST LIKE THAT!"

What caused such murderous rivalry? Jesus.

Not the man and not the name

But what he was – or what they thought he was – is what is to blame.

Was he green or was he blue?

No one ever really knew

Depending on your point of view

He was green and he was blue.

The blues were the "orthodox" and the greens the "heretics". And the battles between them were almost entirely about doctrines and dogma.

The Early Church, from its inception, was fraught with theories and theologies about Jesus. He already had several Biblical titles:

Lord – Jesus – Christ – Jesus Christ – Son of Man (presumably his own preference) – Son of God – Logos – Messiah ...

While the Church was establishing itself and "Christianity" was becoming the name of this new religion, diverse opinions about the nature and person of its central figure were elaborated in discussions, arguments and treatises. The more uncertain his identity, the more complex and controversial the definitions. Was he just a man, or a wraith who appeared to have but had in fact no reality? Was he a son of God, or the only Son of God? Was he purely human? Was he half-human and half-divine? Was he purely divine? Was he *homoousios* (of the same substance) or *homoiousios* (of similar substance) with the Father? Was he of one spirit with God? Was he God? There were Gnostics, Arians, Monophysites, Docetists, claiming one or other of these views.

The Biblical stories and sayings of Jesus were ambiguous and confusing (eg "Why call you me good? There is one good, that is God" and "I and the Father are One".) This position was too weak for those at the top of the hierarchy, the bishop or pope. And when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, this was too vague for the Emperor as well. Especially as that Emperor was Constantine. For he demanded absolute clarity. Constantine believed that the time had come for society to be re-modelled by the fiat of despotic authority and we meet with the undisguised assertion that the will of the Emperor is the sole fountain of law. Constantine, in fact, embodied the spirit of absolute authority which both in church and state was to prevail for many centuries. So in 325 Constantine had decided to settle the issue and summoned bishops from all over the Empire to a Council at Nicaea. The confession of faith there drawn up became known as the Nicene Creed and it is still the official orthodox dogma:

*We believe in one God,
The Father, the Almighty
The maker of heaven and earth,
Of all that is seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one lord, Jesus Christ,
The only Son of God,
Eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us men and our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin
Mary, and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under*

*Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the
living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the
giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the
Son.
With the Father and the Son he is wor-
shipped and glorified.*

*He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apos-
tolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the for-
giveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and of the life of the world to come
– Amen*

However, in spite of this authoritative ruling, heresies continued to survive and flourish and conflicts between the orthodox (dubbed the blues) and the heretics (the greens) remain.

*So was he green or was he blue?
No one ever really knew
Depending on your point of view
He was green and he was blue
Perhaps a nice aquamarine?
And there are other colours too
The latest, tragically seen,
Is orange clashing with the green.*

“I’D LIKE TO STRIP THEIR COLOURS OFF THEM, JUST LIKE THAT !”

And when I’d stripped the colours off, what would I find?

Under the colours of a street gang member a psychologist or a psychiatrist might make a better guess than I could, though we might agree that we would find a frightened and insecure soul anxious to belong to something more powerful and more meaningful than he himself alone.

And under the colours of those who fight and kill to underline that they are right we might, sadly, find evidence of religion’s power to excite bigotry. A biologist or zoologist might interpret the behaviour as evolving from the tribal rivalries of the chimpanzee.

The true colours of the leaders, those who imposed and enforced such authoritative dogma upon church and state, were surprisingly complex, in one case distinctly sun-tinted. Constantine, in spite of his role as Convenor of the Council of Nicaea, was a lifelong follower, indeed High Priest of the Sol Invictus Sun God

cult. He became a Christian only on his death bed.

Justinian, at the very end of his long career of theological discussion, lapsed into heresy by accepting the doctrine of Aphotodocetism – the belief that the earthly body of Christ was incorruptible, insensible to the weaknesses of the flesh.

“Even his devotion to work which excites our admiration in the centre of a luxurious court, was to a great extent unprofitable, for it was mainly given to theological controversies, which neither

he nor anyone else could settle ...”

– *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, p212

• Born in 1921, Joan Simkins, of St Agnes in Cornwall, enjoyed a long career in education, culminating in her being appointed to the post of principal lecturer in education and head of religious studies at the City of Leicester College of Education in 1965.

She has written, and co-authored, a number of books on religious education. Her latest book, *Ceaucescu’s Children*, was published in 1998 by Harper Collins Religious, 1998.

Expansion of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God

(Continued from centre pages)

Asser said he would continue to collect data on religion-motivated medical neglect to “push legislators to change laws.” He advocates medical care for a simple reason: It saves lives.

“Witnesses to some of these deaths tell how the babies died,” Asser said. “Each story is worse than the last. They died in pain. They died horribly. They died within easy access to top-notch medical facilities. These are examples of how hard-headed some parents can be in the face of what is reasonable and logical and good – protecting and saving the lives of their own children.”



Now to the UCKG itself, whose symbol is shown on the left. In an article in the *Observer* (March 3, 2002) Jay Rayner reported that “the church has always been controversial. It was founded in Brazil in 1977 by Edir Macedo, who propounded a doctrine of intense prayer, exorcisms and financial sacrifice. Members are expected to donate 10 per cent of their income to the church. Services are part prayer meetings, part Dutch auctions with congregants – mostly from the very poorest sections of the community – competing to see how much they can give. In Brazil it is now a significant political force. It claims three million members, owns a major TV station, a couple of dozen radio stations, and mass circulation newspaper, and has around 20 deputies of the Brazilian Congress affiliated to it.

“The church’s turnover is estimated at £700-million, all of it from its congregants who are told that the donations will help smooth the path to salvation. Even secret videotape of the founder lasciviously counting donations and encouraging his deputies to screw more out of congregants with the imperative that ‘if they don’t pay they can get out’ has done no harm. The church continues to prosper and has now spread to 85 countries.

“UCKG arrived in Britain in 1995 and soon became so wealthy that it was able to buy the old Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park, which was once host to David Bowie and The Who. Now the hall echoes to the sounds of anxious prayers and wallets being emptied. But do their willing congregants know where their cash is going? A trip to the offices of the Charity Commission is thoroughly revealing.

“The constitution of the charity does indeed list providing help ‘for orphan families, the elderly and drug addicts’ among its aims. The accounts tell another story. Its main aim seems to be accruing funds. Between 1996 and February 2001 the church’s reserves rose tenfold from £651,000 to £6,333,000.

“Under charitable expenditure, there is no mention of any spending on the schemes for helping the homeless and drug addicts. A large slab – £143,000 in 1996, rising to £911,000 in 2001 – goes on running church services and maintaining the buildings in which they are held.

“They do make donations, but all of them, bar £33, whose destination is not indicated, go to ‘sister churches’ abroad. It started with £43,000 in 1997. By March 1999 they were in a position to send £900,000 straight back to Brazil. Last year nearly £2.6 m was sent abroad.”

Rayner concluded his article thus: “Out of a fear of being seen as intolerant, no one will criticise them [the UCKG]. The best source of a proper critique is the mainstream churches, but they are the most wary of the lot. The Church of England says its job ‘is to propound the gospel of Jesus Christ’, not to raise questions over other churches. In any case it says it helps fund the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (Inform) based at the London School of Economics. For good reasons Inform does not take a position. It simply provides information on new religions and lets people decide for themselves.

“But that does not let the Church of England off the hook. After all, if it is willing to put forward a view on, say, gay sex – a very bad thing, demanding a ‘call to repentance’ – why should it stay silent on its specialist subject, religion? But silent it stays. Warily, then, I suppose I’ll have to do the job for them. If someone from UCKG comes near you collecting money, make sure you know exactly what it is you’re helping to fund before you throw your money into the bucket.”

YOU might think it unusual to be reviewing this book here; but it is an unusual book; and we are living in unusual times, with dangerous warmongers in the White House and Downing Street. We must do all within our power to prevent Bush and Blair leading their unwilling countries into a disastrous conflict for which there is no logical or moral justification, and Michael Moore's is the best book I can think of to help the cause of sanity. Moreover, by buying it we are showing our abhorrence of censorship, because Rupert Murdoch's American publishing firm tried to stop *Stupid White Men* appearing. So let's give the matter prominence.

Moore wrote the book in the months preceding September 11, 2001, and the first copies came off the press on the evening of September 10, but were not despatched to bookshops the following day, as had been intended, because of the national situation. A few weeks later, when the author rang his publishers ReganBooks, a division of HarperCollins, he was told that the book could not be released as it was written, because the "political climate" of the country had changed. Moore could hardly believe his ears.

Not only that: "We would like you to consider rewriting up to 50 percent of the book", said the publishers, "removing the harsh references to Bush and toning down your dissent". Then, almost unbelievably, they asked the author to give them \$100,000 to reprint. Moore learnt more about the near banning from sources inside

Oh, what a shame! She ain't a saint yet

MEA culpa! In my article on Mother Teresa in the January *Freethinker*, I said that the Pope would be canonising her in October.

In fact, October 19 is the date scheduled for her beatification, not canonisation – which requires another miracle credited to her intercession. However, that is unlikely to cause much delay, as there are plenty of "cured" patients clamouring for recognition, and the Pope is keen to get one of them "authenticated" in time for him to canonise Teresa before he dies.

Misled by the fact that some of her devotees had jumped the gun and were already referring to her as Blessed Teresa, I assumed that the Pope's recent ceremony, formally recognising the validity of the requisite miracle, was the actual beatification ceremony. But no. Teresa must kick her heels in heaven for another nine months before she becomes officially Blessed, and a little longer again before being dubbed Saint Teresa of Calcutta. We all await her formal sainthood with bated breath.

— Barbara Smoker

Murdoch's News Corporation but, regrettably, "British law does not allow me to publish these things in this British edition of my book".

How, then, did *Stupid White Men* ever appear in the United States? It is a remarkable story which began with a librarian named Ann

COLIN McCALL reviews *Stupid White Men ... and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*, by Michael Moore, Penguin £7.99; and WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews *H L Mencken on Religion*, edited by S T Joshi, Prometheus, 2002, ISBN 1-57392-982-4, 330 pp, \$29.00

Sparanese from Eaglewood, New Jersey, who, hearing Moore's "tale of woe", organised a mass protest of other librarians via the Internet, demanding that ReganBooks release the work. Hundreds and thousands joined in, *Publishers Weekly* took up the story, and, after Michael Moore had been summoned to a meeting of "the brass at HarperCollins" and told again that the book could not be released, it was – with not a single word removed or changed.

Even then, however, the publishers were not prepared to reprint, until Moore himself went on the Internet telling everyone that "words were now considered as dangerous as terrorists". Within hours the first 50,000 copies were sold out and *Stupid White Men* was top of the Amazon.com bestseller list. Commercialism then seemed to take over at ReganBooks and by the fifth day the book was up to its ninth printing. At the time of writing it is in the top ten English non-fiction paperbacks.

This isn't the first time Michael Moore has found a better relationship outside his own country rather than in it. The BBC offered to produce his first TV series, *TV Nation*, after it had been rejected by NBC in America, and Channel 4 screened his next series. But things are not all that rosy over here, as we all know. Moore knows it too: "America decides to bomb some country – and your head of state (*sic*) joins right in. We accept a dumbed-down mass media – and your nightly newscasts soon start to resemble ours. We decide to eliminate the safety net for our poor, and your legislative bodies can't wait to start cutting numerous social services that have been in place for decades." And that last one has shocked him as much as it has us. "Consider this book as a mirror of what is happening now in your country. Consider it as a warning of what is yet to come".

Moore's first chapter, "A very American

coup", details the way George W Bush usurped the presidency; then we have pen pictures of his ultra-conservative buddies: vice-president Dick Cheney, who voted against a House resolution calling on South Africa to release Nelson Mandela and was CEO of a company which did business with Iraq; attorney general John Ashcroft, who is opposed to all abortion, even in cases of rape or incest; secretary of health and human service Tommy Thompson, who received tens of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from the tobacco industry; and so on.

Michael Moore once heard Noam Chomsky say that if you want proof that the American people are not stupid, just turn on any sports talk radio show and listen to the incredible retention of facts. The American mind is alive and well, it just isn't challenged with anything interesting or exciting. The challenge was, Chomsky said, to make politics as gripping and engaging as sport. One takes the point. Nevertheless, says Moore, there are 44-million Americans who are "functional illiterates"; and a nation that churns out illiterate students and "goes out of its way to remain ignorant and stupid is a nation that should not be running the world – at least not until a majority of its citizens can locate Kosovo (or any other country it has bombed) on the map".

But the American people are unlikely to be encouraged in their search for knowledge by their leader and warmonger in chief. During his commencement address to the Yale Class of 2001, George W Bush bragged about having been a mediocre student. "And to the C students, I say, you, too, can be President of the United States". Of course, as Moore remarks, it helps if you have "an ex-president father, a brother as governor of a state with missing ballots, and a Supreme Court full of your dad's buddies".

In retrospect, Moore suggests, the South won the Civil War. Its conservative ideology certainly has the nation in its grip: mandating that the Ten Commandments be posted in public places; teaching creationism; banning books; reducing social services; "thirsting to go to war at a moment's notice; and looking to resolve any problem through violence...". And "in the last ten presidential elections the winner (or Supreme Court appointee) was the one with his feet planted most firmly in the South or West. No longer can anyone from the North get elected to lead the nation".

Education is in a mess in Britain, but it is worse in the States. Many school buildings are inadequate; ten per cent have enrolments beyond their capacity, so that classes have to be held in "hallways, outdoors, in the gym, in the cafeteria"; one school that Moore visited even held classes in a janitor's cleaning room. And in New York, 163 schools opened the 2000-2001 school year without a principal.

Here's an indication of Bush's interest in lit-

eracy. In his first budget he proposed cutting federal spending on libraries by nearly 19 per cent. Yet, as Moore says, "the very politicians who refuse to fund education in America adequately are the same ones who go ballistic over how our kids have fallen behind the Germans, the Japanese, and just about every other country with running water ...". And while supermarkets may be infiltrating schools in England, corporate sponsorship of school programmes and activities has boomed in America, where students receive books with Calvin Klein and Nike ads on their covers. More directly, three pop drinks companies push their products in schools in 31 states.

Michael Moore has much much more to say about American and world affairs as important to us as to his native land; but let me cite another item showing how people's actions can affect public policy. One college class at Midwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, proved that five individuals on the state's death row were, in fact, innocent. Those students and their professor saved the lives of five people. Alas, though, as Michael Moore says, the United States stands out as one of the few countries in the world that puts juvenile offenders to death. And 38 states have the death penalty.

Stupid White Men is deservedly selling well here, but I fear that the one man for whom it should be a must will be too busy preparing for his next war to read it.

– Colin McCall

H L Mencken learned the true function of religion at an early age, when his father, who was not a believer, regularly sent him to Sunday school to get him out of his hair for a couple of hours so that he could pursue other interests. But despite, or perhaps because of that early exposure to nonsense, "I cannot remember that even in the blackest moments of long and ghastly nights I ever had the slightest impulse to pray to God for help." Instead, he "sided with heretics on the great majority of issues where religion came into conflict with science, politics, and the advance of civilization."

Much of *H. L. Mencken on Religion* will be of little interest to modern readers, for the logical reason that it is too time-specific, and not relevant to a later age. For example, his newspaper columns on the subject of the Prohibition Amendment focused on the fanatics who orchestrated it, information of historical perhaps but not general interest. Only a small proportion of his arguments can be equally applied to the current marijuana laws.

In contrast, if his observations on religion were republished in the *Washington Post*, it would be by no means obvious that they were not written yesterday. For example, "*Homo boobiens* is a fundamentalist for the precise reason that he is uneducable", and "Either Genesis

embodies a mathematically accurate statement of what took place during the week of June 3, 4004 BC, or Genesis is not actually the word of God. If the former alternative is accepted, then all of modern science is nonsense: if the latter, then evangelical Christianity is nonsense".

'The first effort of the early Christians was not to regulate sex at all, in any ordinary sense, but to destroy it altogether. They had, for some obscure reason, a tremendous fear of it, and were quite willing to exterminate the human race in order to get rid of it.'

– H L Mencken

And "his observation that the United States has 'always diluted democracy with theocracy' in defiance of the First Amendment is as true now as it was in his time."

Mencken was equally blunt in his opposition to quack medicine: "The very day that news of insulin is in the newspapers, *Homo boobiens* seeks treatment for his diabetes from a chiropractor." Anyone who does not know that chiropractic is dangerous pseudo-medicine is referred to *The Disinformation Cycle* (Xlibris.com), pp. 155-156.

In his summation of Mencken's "Treatise on the Gods," Joshi writes, "His anthropology is now a bit antiquated, and the work as a whole cannot stand up to intellectual scrutiny. Accordingly, I have not included any of it in the present compilation." He also does not include any of Mencken's attempts to blame Methodist and Baptist Catholic-hating churches for the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. But he does report the existence of such writings, and declares them "somewhat off the mark," so clearly there is no attempted cover-up of the reality that Mencken was not always right.

In reviewing a book calling for sane sex laws, based on justice instead of religion, Mencken wrote, "The first effort of the early Christians was not to regulate sex at all, in any ordinary sense, but to destroy it altogether. They had, for some obscure reason, a tremendous fear of it, and were quite willing to exterminate the human race in order to get rid of it." And that was written long before the accession of one of the most sex-hating pope in Vatican history, John Paul II.

But Mencken's sharpest barbs were directed at

the brain-dead purveyors of what today calls itself by the oxymoronic name of "creation science": "The so-called religious organizations which now lead the war against the teaching of evolution are nothing more, at bottom, than conspiracies of the inferior man against his betters ... Certainly it cannot have gone un-noticed ... that no man of any education or other human dignity belongs to them." And he had no patience with what is now called political correctness: "To admit that the false has any standing in court, that it ought to be handled gently because millions of morons cherish it and thousands of quacks make their living propagating it – to admit this, as the more fatuous of the reconcilers of science and religion inevitably do, is to abandon a just cause to its enemies, cravenly and without excuse. There is, in fact, nothing about religious opinions that entitles them to any more respect than other opinions get. On the contrary, they tend to be noticeably silly ... They run, rather, to a peculiarly puerile and tedious kind of nonsense."

Mencken achieved his highest level of public recognition from his *Baltimore Evening Sun* columns on the trial of John Scopes for teaching evolution. And in his denunciation of William Jennings Bryan he made no attempt to pull his punches: "The net effect of Clarence Darrow's great speech yesterday seemed to be precisely the same as if he had bawled it up a rainspout in Afghanistan ... During the whole time of its delivery the old mountebank, Bryan, sat tight-lipped and unmoved ... He has those hillbillies locked up in his pen and knows it ... Now with his political aspirations all gone to pot, he turns to them for religious consolations. They understand his peculiar imbecilities. His nonsense is their idea of sense. When he deluges them with his theological bilge they rejoice like pilgrims disporting in the river Jordan." And "Bryan was a vulgar and common man, a cad undiluted. He was ignorant, bigoted, self-seeking, blatant and dishonest".

Whether Mencken's (tongue-in-cheek?) recommendation that black Americans could most effectively end their oppression by followers of the white god Jesus by turning Muslim is best viewed as a first cause of the hate cult calling itself Nation of Islam, or merely a forecast of an inevitability, I will not attempt to answer.

On the double standard that existed then, and continues to be imposed by the religious nutcase in the White House and the *Pithecanthropus troglodytus* theo-fascists who lick his butt in order to pull his puppet strings, Mencken wrote in 1925. "A preacher of any sect that admits the literal authenticity of Genesis is free to gather a crowd at any time and talk all he wants ... But the instant a speaker utters a word against divine revelation he begins to disturb the peace and is liable to immediate arrest."

So what else is new?

– William Harwood

Misrepresenting Islam

I DON'T have a strong opinion on the possibility of Turkey joining the EU. However, I have a strong opinion about the editor's *Freethinking Allowed* editorial (January) which I summarise thus: Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) wished his new State were utterly secular and a retired US general dreams of a Turkish "Islamic modernity" spreading to Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, so that "the very essence of its democratic nature" can be assured. Then, the EU will no longer be a hostage to Islam even if it means the EU having to square up to wicked Islamic leaders. Which means that Turkey in the EU illustrates the compatibility of "democracy and Islam" (Ali Bubuc to Ms Toynbee).

If this expression were a piece of art, it would win the Turner prize, and as a reflection on Islam, it would certainly be in the running. However, as a representation of Islam it is false. The central feature of Islam is that there may be no State, unless that organisation is controlled by the Party, the Party in this case being Islam. The central feature of those of us who are embraced by the Roman legacy is the sovereignty of the State as law. Law in Islam is the unalterable, ie holy, law; law in EU territory has developed out of variegated case law and statute that responds to the changing circumstances of life. So, in Islam there are no citizens, only subjects, and, as a consequence, as Rushdie elaborates in *Satanic Verses*, there may be no thriving culture. I don't dwell on the history of Islam as the editorial seems to put that in a separate compartment. But it is also not true that because Wahhabism was and is puritanical, it is, therefore, eccentric. So the implicit assumption that there would be a citizens' culture if there had not been Wahhabism is another post-modernist flight. Not least it overlooks the much more profound influence of Djama al-din al-Afghani and his disciples. As Ibn Warraq explains well in *Why I am not a Muslim*, cultural development in the *dar ul islam* has always been perilously in despite of Islam. For starters, members could do worse than read Kanan Makiya's recent novel *The Rock*.

None of this is to say that the Turkish ruling clique and Islam are compatible.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Exclusion of women

SUE Lord (*Points of View*, January) revived memories of constant whingeing and complaining by the sombre sisterhood during my editorship of the *Freethinker*.

For some years now, Sue Lord has been banging on about how the secularist move-

ment, and in particular the *Freethinker*, supposedly "excludes women activists". Her industrious research over a six-month period for evidence of discrimination revealed that "out of 75 articles, five were written by women. Out of 70 letters to the editor, ten were from women." Fascinating though this intelligence may be, it does not produce a shred of evidence to show that women are excluded from the *Freethinker* on grounds of gender.

The editor of a secular humanist monthly cannot be expected to act on a biblical injunction and "go into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in". To put it plainly, no *Freethinker* editor can compel women to write articles or letters for publication. Perhaps Sue Lord should be reminded of the feminist slogan, *A Woman's Right to Choose*. By the same token, a woman may choose not to write.

Even when her letters and articles are published, Sue Lord confesses to an "overwhelming feeling ... this is done grudgingly". Some may wonder if she would be happier if all her contributions were rejected, thus providing evidence of discrimination and the *Freethinker's* "sexist leanings". She mentions the possibility that she may be regarded as a "paranoid and over-sensitive feminist". Perish the thought! But if the cap fits ...

The secularist movement has campaigned on a range of issues, some of which directly affect women's lives. The National Secular Society, for example, depends on a small, committed full-time staff and the voluntary work of anonymous supporters. All are endeavouring to enlist new members and readers, irrespective of gender.

Paranoid, gender-obsessed and over-sensitive individuals with a bee in their bonnet tickle the national funny-bone. Unfortunately, they also provide ammunition for religious reactionaries and other upholders of "traditional moral values" who seek to keep women in their second-class place. Neither the secularist movement nor women benefit from the prejudice and bigotry that characterise Sue Lord's outpourings.

BILL MCILROY
Hove, E. Sussex

AS someone who was greatly influenced by Women Against Fundamentalism during my early years in the secular humanist movement, I was interested to read Sue Lord's complaints about the lack of female perspectives in the *Freethinker*, and specifically in the WebWatch column (*Points of View*, January).

Keen to discover what we had been missing, I checked out her website at: www.secularsites.freeuk.com. Unfortunately, of the dozens of links available on Sue's site no more than three seemed to be written by people I was readily able to identify as female. And, incredibly, I could find no link to the

online archives of Women Against Fundamentalism. The group became inactive in 1997, but articles by them (and other resources) are available here: <http://waf.gn.apc.org/>. As Sue is a feminist, this absence of women's voices cannot be blamed on sexism.

Nevertheless, it gives her a rather tenuous basis for criticising the *Freethinker*. Perhaps she could do more to practise what she preaches?

DAN BYE
Sheffield

Hypocrites in frocks

IF Alcoholics Anonymous denounced the evils of alcohol, and was then found to own shares in a brewery, we would all be justifiably cynical.

What then should we make of the Church of England's wail over the holiday period that Christmas is too commercialised and that the relentless march of consumerism is destroying societal values? This is apparently the same Church of England that trumpets in its annual report for 2001/2 its investment in the Touchwood retail park in Solihull, a 650,000 sq ft development comprising 80 shops, 20 restaurants and bars and a 9-screen cinema. The blurb for Touchwood claims that the development "has doubled Solihull town centre's retail space to over 1.25 million sq. ft. and the town is now a Top 20 UK retail destination." Amen.

Is this an example of the moral dimension that religion can bring to business, according to the Archbishop of Canterbury? Or does the ethical investment policy of the Church Commissioners require one of those "make-overs" the Archbishop so detests?

ALISTAIR MCBAY
Maidenhead

Tax discrimination

I WAS delighted to read of Barbara Smoker's stand for our human rights over the BBC programme, *Thought for the Day*. As an avid radio 4 listener, I wish her success.

It occurred to me a long time ago that we are discriminated against in another way: taxation. The government taxes us as the religious but refuses to give us the same educational rights. Now the Human Rights Act may give them an opt-out to ride rough shod over our beliefs, but I don't think it gives them a right to tax us unfairly. We would not accept different rights in the Health Service. So why do we pay the same tax for less service in education? We are even given fewer schools to choose from in the first place.

So why not a tax rebate for those so persecuted? I think it would dramatically increase



those declaring themselves to be non-believers. Imagine all those scheming, middle-class parents torn between gaining a place at a "good" school or claiming a tax rebate!

Surprisingly, when I wrote to the PM to ask about equal taxation rights, I received no reply. Which may indicate he thinks I have a point ...

MRS DORRY LEWIS
Egham, Surrey

Catholic child abuse

Do I detect a whiff of gloating? Paedophile priests in the Roman Catholic Church are pilloried almost daily in the tabloids but are we freethinkers joining in the fun? What we expect of the popular press is what we get: the kind of hysteria and witch-hunting that rationalists deplore, a loathsome sniffing out of paedophiles that panders to the worse instincts of the lynch mob.

The Roman Catholic Church is in freefall, so we are told, its hierarchy desperately trying to defuse a scandal of major proportions in the priesthood. It is nothing of the sort. The real scandal is the vile venom of anti-Catholic bigots and a salacious media coverage.

As a lifelong atheist I stand in defence of Catholic priests. My quarrel has always been with the false ideology of religion and the institutions of Christianity.

To tar all priests as perverts is to see only the apples and not the rotten barrel, as was pointed out in a recent, and rare, fairly presented television documentary. I urge caution on the rationalist and secular humanist press in its coverage of this issue. Our values are highly principled. Our critique as freethinkers is aimed at religion per se, its ideological role in history and society, not at its practitioners – priests or paedophiles.

By not remembering this or in snide sniping from the wings, atheists acquiesce in what is a far greater and pernicious perversion: the inverted Inquisition of the Unenlightened, gleefully seeking out fresh victims for its racks and thumbscrews. Paedophile priests are neither symptomatic of Roman Catholicism nor are they peculiar to religion. They are not our target. Religion is.

Most priests are decent human beings whose only mistake in life is to have opted for the supernatural in a mainly misguided belief that they serve a holy cause. By attacking the tiny minority who abuse their positions and power over children we run the danger of isolating and denying support to gay and disaffected priests as well as perpetuating the institution that can sacrifice them and still come out of this scandal intact. We are supposed to be humanists. Priests are human. Where is our humanity?

TERRY MARTIN
Blairgowrie

WITH regard to the Catholic priesthood claiming that they are not all bad in the wake of the clerical child sexual abuse revelations I have this to say: Child abuse is a part of Roman Catholic doctrine which they support and promote. They want children to honour a man whose historical existence is uncertain. They are even to die for that man rather than deny him as the apostle allegedly did. The Bible tells them that a Supreme Being should be put before themselves and their parents, and all love must be given to him. A depraved old book commanding murder and hatred and hypocrisy in the name of love must be accepted as the word of God.

It is child abuse to tell children that it is God's business what they do.

They are left to worry more about what God wants than what they feel they should do. That is no way to teach a child responsibility and imbue self-esteem.

The Bible commands child-abuse for it says that anybody who does not know that their sins murdered Jesus will be damned forever in the agony of Hell. These are awful things to tell a child. It is the kind of stuff that would make some children kill when they grow up.

The Church likes to keep the fact that the Torah, the Law that God dictated to the evil Moses, did nothing about the Hebrew tradition of marriages being arranged between men and girls who were just children. The Law railed against adultery and homosexuality, but its God turned a blind eye to this perversion. He did not even have the decency to lay down a minimum age.

There is no end to the self-destructive conditioning that the Church pumps into children. The Bible is a palliative for the conscience of the paedophile. The priest claims to be giving you the most important thing there is, faith in God and in his true Church. But the priest takes no responsibility for what harm this does. He will not compensate you if you can prove you were misled by his Church.

Tell them where to stick their apologies.

PATRICK GORMLEY
Co. Donegal, Ireland

One of the tosh pot?

THE *Freethinker* has a long and honourable history. I take a Voltairean view on allowing views with which I disagree to get an airing but the communication from Frederick Bacon on smallpox vaccination transgresses the principle that objective and rational judgements should guide us during our period on the planet. The errors in his piece are too numerous to list: in the interests of brevity and in order not to detract from the main thrust of this letter, I will make only one comment.

The *Freethinker* and the NSS which it represents have an extremely important role to play

at the beginning of this new era; as your own editorial makes clear "NSS is on a roll". Our credibility and our cause are however not helped – indeed I would postulate are diminished – by the publication of the irrational, non-evidence-based subjective opinions of fundamentalist cranks.

How can you logically distinguish between Bacon's statements and those of, for example, Mother Teresa and the flat-earthers quoted in the 'Tosh Pot' in your last issue?

I can see that this is a difficult area. We need to encourage freethinking and iconoclasm but when our broader task is damaged by publication of unsupported views – in this case on vaccination for which the evidence for a beneficial effect on the human species is overwhelming especially regarding smallpox – then I think there is a need to consider carefully your editorial policy (and this is not the only example I could give from recent issues of the *Freethinker*).

The cause of secularism is too important to be damaged in this way.

Keep up the good work!

STEPHEN JEFFCOATE
Surrey

The Freethinker

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Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, February 2, 4pm. Barry Duke: *Defending Our Right to Ridicule Religion*.

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

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. 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.

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, February 14, 7.30pm. Celebration of Darwin Day. Speaker: Mike Howgate.

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. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, March 6, 8pm. John Cryer MP: *A Backbencher's View of Parliament*.

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@dalcruie.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, February 11, 7.30pm. John Hughes:

The Famous Five Rebel!

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://homepages.stayfree.co.uk/Iss>. 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, February 27, 8pm. Terry Liddle: *Joseph McCabe, Forgotten Hero*.

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, February 5, 8pm. Bernard Little: *Ecology, Politics and Religion*. Wednesday, March 5, 8pm. *Definitions of Humanism*.

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, February 12, 8pm. A special meeting to mark Charles Darwin's birthday.

The Thomas Paine Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, WC1. Saturday, March 8, 2.30pm. Professor Edward Royle: *Paine and Freethought in the 19th Century*.

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