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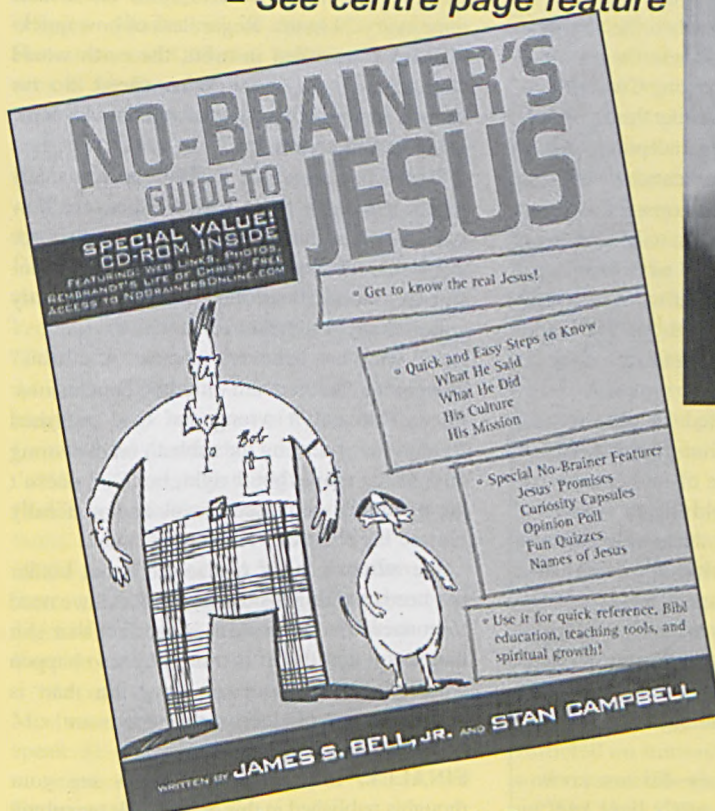
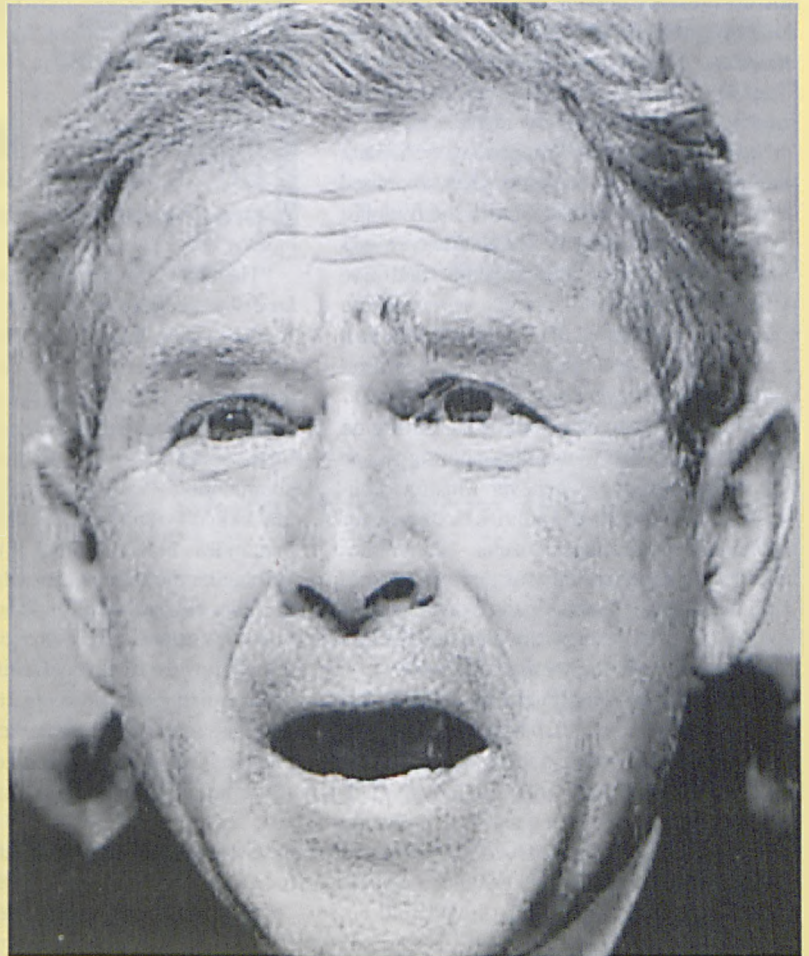
Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

Be afraid – be very afraid!

This man is President of a country which possesses the world's largest array of 'weapons of mass destruction'. He is also a devout Christian, which makes him a text-book 'no-brainer', as the authors of this *Christian* publication seem to be suggesting – and, boy, does it show!

– See centre page feature

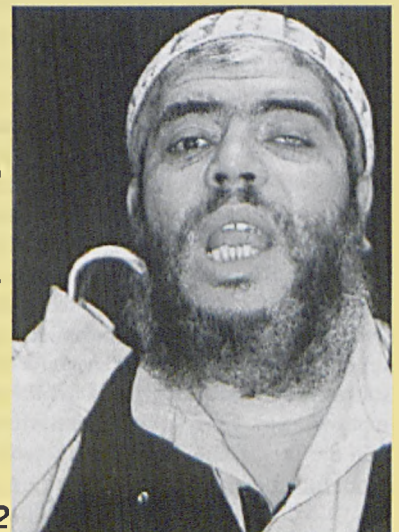


NoBrainersOnline.Com, purveyor of No-Brainers books, is "dedicated to making Christianity fun, easy and – most of all – accessible to everyone". Titles include the *No-Brainers Guide to the Bible*, and the *Guide to How Christians Live*.

Also in this issue:

A dose of *real* religion – red in tooth and claw – should be a feature of *Thought for the Day* – and who better to be a regular contributor than Muslim firebrand Sheikh Abu Hamza?

– see p2



OK. So it sounds off the wall, but how about us tackling *Thought for the Day* from a different angle? Instead of pushing for secular voices to be woven in with the anodyne waffle of religious contributors, whose thoughts – (thoughts?) – on Radio 4 are rarely challenging (or, for that matter, even vaguely interesting), we should demand that the BBC opens up this spot to far tougher and colourful champions of God.

And who better to inaugurate this vibrant new *TfiD* than the charming Sheikh Abu Hamza?

Also known as Captain Hook, Hamza – recently banned from preaching at London's notorious Finsbury Park mosque – certainly has the presence and the words (and now, presumably, the time) to come on air of a morning and clear the wax from your ears, drive the sleep from your eyes, loosen your bowels and send your heart rate into overdrive.

Hamza, head of SOS (Supporters of Shariah), was most recently in the news when he praised Allah for the disaster that claimed the lives last month of seven astronauts. The shuttle crew was made up of a Jew and a Hindu and five Americans, two of whom were devout Christians, and this led Hamza to conclude that it contained a "trinity of evil" which Allah had quite rightly destroyed.

If Hamza were to be given regular airings on *TfiD*, he might like to use the opportunity one day to explain why, whenever Muslims converge on Mecca in their millions each year for their annual pilgrimage, dozens – sometimes hundreds – die in a variety of disasters. Could it be that Allah hates Muslims as much as Jews, Hindus and American Christians? Or is it, perhaps, simply the work of *shataan*?

With the BBC's enormous resources – last month it spent a cool £10,000 junketing 130 religious leaders in celebration of 80 years of religious broadcasting – they might also gladly fork out a big fee for veteran Hollywood Actress Jane Russell.

Russell, 81, in defending her fundamentalist Christian outlook on life, last month told the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Arlington, Virginia, USA, that she was a "mean-spirited, narrow-minded, right-wing Christian bigot" – and was enormously proud of the fact.

She was making the point that she was tired of Christian conservatives being labelled intolerant whenever they stood up for their beliefs. I am sure that Russell (no relation to Bertrand, I hope) would be delighted to visit Britain at BBC licence-payers' expense and expand her views for rapt *TfiD* listeners.

To achieve a measure of balance among the religions, I am sure a dotty Jew could be added to the melange of mad voices. While we have many a manic home-grown rabbi prepared to join the fray, I think it would be great fun to send for Rabbi Shlomo Ben-Izri, a deputy

Israeli health minister in the late nineties, to demonstrate that, when it comes to "mean-spirited bigotry", some conservative Jews can hold their own with the world's finest.

Five years ago the rabbi was outraged to learn that Dana, Israel's entrant in the 1998 Eurovision Song Contest, was – (*oi vey*, and pass the smelling salts!) – a *man* before surgery had transformed him into the delectable Sharon Cohen.

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE believes the time has come to inject some real religion into BBC's Thought for the Day programme on Radio 4



"The choice [of Dana]," foamed Rabbi Ben-Izri, "is disgraceful for me as a Jew. The Jewish people have always been a light unto the nations. They will now be a darkness unto the nations. Everyone abroad will say: 'Look at those Jews and what they are sending to perform, some kind of crossbreed'. Dana is an abomination. Even in Sodom there was nothing like it". (How on *earth* would he know that, unless he was around at the time?)

Imagine the rabbi's fury when the abomination that is Dana went on to win the abomination that is the Eurovision Song Contest!

Bubbling over with babble like this, *TfiD* will, for the first time since its inception, present listeners with a *true* representation of what religion is all about – insanity on a monumental scale. And *that*, I guarantee, will send more people dashing for the safety of a secular life than would ever be achieved if we were simply to add our two-penny's worth to *TfiD* in its present insipid, yawn-inducing form.

BACK now to the ill-fated shuttle, and the thoughts of another Muslim cleric, Abdullah El-Faisal, who, at the time of my writing this, was standing trial at the Old Bailey accused of five charges of soliciting the murder of non-believers, and two of stirring up racial hatred and distributing abusive tapes.

Eschewing the "unholy trinity" theory, El-Faisal let it be known that the Columbia space shuttle crash was Allah's way of punishing the Jewish astronaut for travelling in space on a Saturday – the sabbath.

What El-Faisal obviously did not know – had he done so he would surely have kept his mouth shut – was that the issue of space and the sabbath had been closely pored-over by a battery of rabbis before the voyage. And they

concluded that it was OK for Ilan Ramon to be orbiting the earth on the Jewish day of rest – provided he actually made the effort to observe the sabbath.

The real problem, though, was to decide when, in space, the sabbath *actually* took place.

Before being blasted into the blue, Ramon said he wanted to observe the sabbath as "an act of solidarity with the Jewish tradition". While there have been other Jewish astronauts in the past – Dave Wolf, for example, celebrated *Hanukkah* aboard the Russian space station Mir – Ramon was the first one to express an interest in marking the sabbath.

But at 174 miles above the earth, everything is different. The "day" in orbit lasts a mere 90 minutes – the time it takes the shuttle travelling at 16,800 mph to circle the earth. To adhere strictly to tradition, Ramon would have to stop working every seventh orbit around the earth, something he clearly could not do.

In an effort to get the matter sorted, Ramon – who had already persuaded NASA to provide kosher food for his voyage – turned to the highest religious authority he could find: Zvi Konikov, the Hasidic rabbi of Satellite Beach, near Cape Canaveral.

Through a colleague in New York, Konikov consulted a group of respected rabbis called *poskim*. After lengthy debate, the rabbis ruled that time is not measured by what a person sees as the rising and setting of the sun, but by an objective fact: the earth spins on its axis once every 24 hours. Regardless of how quickly Ramon travelled in orbit, the earth would continue to spin at the same speed. So for Ramon in space, the day of rest would come every seventh earth day.

I have not been able to find out how many rabbis it took to reach their verdict, nor how long, but one thing I *do* know: your average atheist could have reached the same conclusion in around 30 seconds flat. It isn't exactly – dare I say it – rocket science!

So, what are believers to make of all this? It seems to me there are only two conclusions: The rabbis got it wrong and God punished Ramon for observing the sabbath on the wrong day; or the rabbis got it right, but God doesn't go a bundle on space travel and spitefully blasted the shuttle to Kingdom Come.

We rationalists, of course, need not bother our heads with such silly thoughts. All we need to concern ourselves with is the fact that shit happens – and that it is more likely to happen when we try to squeeze more life than is reasonable out of elderly space hardware.

FINALLY, if you would like to see your thoughts published in this column, please submit a photo and no more than 1,200 words to *Freethinking Allowed*, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD (E-mail: fteditor@aol.com).

'Church of Islam' proposed to tackle the 'Muslim problem' in France

AS FAR back as 1987, the then French Interior Minister, Charles Pasqua, described Islam as France's "No. 1 problem." Since then, successive Governments of the left, right and centre have tried a variety of ways of dealing with France's diverse Muslim population.

The latest initiative, championed by the present Interior Minister, Nicholas Sarkozy, is the creation of what he describes as "a French Church of Islam." The project aims at creating an officially recognised authority capable of representing France's Muslims. Similar authorities exist for Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christian communities, as well as Jews. The "French Church of Islam" would decide who should attend official functions, and who should be consulted on matters of faith as far as the Muslim community is concerned.

Commenting on this initiative in America's online *National Review* magazine, Amir Taheri, author of *The Cauldron: The Middle East behind the headlines*, said that such an authority would prove impossible to administer or, if administered, could divide the Muslim community in France, and encourage radical fundamentalists.

"Sarkozy, like his predecessors, fails to understand the specific nature of Islam as a religion. Almost all of France's Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox inhabitants are citizens of the French republic, who have grown up in a culture based on a separation of church and state. They are distinguished from other French citizens only by faith.

"Islam is different. To start with, only half of the estimated 5.2 million Muslims who live in France are French citizens. And even many of those who do have French citizenship insist on keeping their previous Islamic nationality. (That is especially the case with the North Africans.) Clear ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities mark out most of France's Muslims from the rest of society.

"More importantly, the Muslims who live in France are divided into countless religious faiths and persuasions. There are, of course, all the usual Sunni and Shiite variations. But there are also numerous Sufi movements, especially among those of Turkish and Kurdish background.

"According to recent studies, France's Muslims come from 53 different countries, speak 21 different languages, and represent numerous Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and European cultures.

"All these groups and movements would deeply resent any attempt by the French government to impose a single authority on them.

"Studies by the National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris show that fewer than 13 per cent of France's Muslims practise their religion. But almost all emphasise Islam as part of their more complex identity.

"Supporters of the Sarkozy project insist that a French Islam will be 'progressive, liberal, and modern'. *Fatwas* (opinions) coming from a mufti in Paris are likely to be less 'reactionary' than those coming from, say, Qom or Bamako. In time, Paris could become a major centre of Islamic scholarship and theology, perhaps even leading Islam into its version of the Reformation. And, somewhere down the road, why not imagine French Muslim missionaries criss-crossing the globe to offer their brand of 'progressive' Islam? All that, however, is taking place on an increasing scale already, and without government intervention."

Taheri points out that "Islam has always faced a dire choice between unity and diversity. Whenever it chose unity it gained monetary military and political strength but at the price of lost spiritual, scientific and cultural vitality. This was

because unity always ended up being confused with uniformity." He said the Sarkozy project may impose a measure of unity on France's Muslims, this giving them some political clout. "But it could harm their rich diversity and strengthen the position of the fundamentalists who have always emphasised uniformity."

He adds: "The Sarkozy project also has a security sub-text. This is understandable. Since the Sept. 11 attacks against New York and Washington, many politicians in the West believe that 'the Islamic dimension' of terrorism must be brought under control.

"There is no doubt that many terrorist organisations, especially those operating in Algeria, have been able to exploit the Muslim community in France, and a number of other European Union countries, for fund-raising, propaganda and logistical support.

"These are activities that have to be monitored by the police and stopped in accordance with the law. The creation of an artificial, but officially approved, French 'Church of Islam' is unlikely to do the job."

Transsexuals under fire from the Vatican

NEW directives issued by the Vatican take unprecedented aim at transsexuals, declaring that they suffer from "mental pathologies," are ineligible for admission to Roman Catholic religious orders, and should be expelled if they have already entered the priesthood or religious life.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's orthodoxy watchdog, sent the directives to the superiors of religious orders worldwide last month. The leaders were told to implement the directives or turn cases over to the Congregation for handling.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said transsexuals should be barred as priests, monks, friars, nuns and brothers in religious orders.

• News of the Vatican's attack on transsexuals coincided with a report in the Brighton *Argus* (February 4) that 57 worshippers at the Holy Cross Church in Hove had signed a petition objecting to the presence in their neighbourhood of a shop specialising in selling clothing to transsexuals and transvestites. They pointed out that "there were schools nearby".

Sue Sheppard, herself a transsexual who operates a similar shop in Kent, said: "These people should be protesting about something serious, like war with Iraq, or drugs and kids."

A few days later *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke had the following letter published in the *Argus*:

"I may not know much about men who dress in women's clothes, but I do know a great deal about those who cloak themselves in religion and think that their ridiculous beliefs gives them the right to tell the rest of us how to conduct our lives.

"The latest example of such Christian bigotry and arrogance comes in the form of the petition signed by members of the Holy Cross Church in Hove against a shop that specialises in clothing for cross-dressers. According to a report in the *Argus* they object to the shop being 'near schools'.

"Given the damage Christianity has done – and continues to do – to the world since it was inflicted on humanity 2,000 ago, I would be much happier having a centre for transsexuals and transvestites near a school than any church.

"The Holy Cross congregants' objection is rendered even more ridiculous by the fact that, in many denominations, especially Catholic, males are frequently seen prancing about in fancy frocks. The fact that they are priests wearing robes is neither here nor there."



The new cultural Christians offer no hope for the Church

FIGURES from the latest census have just been published, and the results of the "religion" question have caused quite a stir. The "Christian" box was ticked by a whopping 71.6 per cent of respondents in England and Wales.

How can we reconcile this 71.6 per cent identifying as Christian and the 7 per cent who actually attend any kind of Christian place of worship on an average Sunday? The difference has many components but probably the major factor is the emergence of a new phenomenon in Britain – the secular or cultural Christian.

A survey conducted for the BBC's *Soul of Britain* series in 2000 found that 43 per cent regarded themselves as *belonging* to a specified Christian denomination. I suspect that much of the disparity between the 43 per cent and the 72 per cent is that the former claimed to belong to a particular denomination and the latter simply identified with Christianity. This much less specific identification will be seen by many as being simply "moral" or "cultural" rather than devotional or practising in any way.

'Son of Section 28' could damage sex education

WHAT is being dubbed "son of Section 28" could place a dangerous weapon in the hands of evangelical Christians, and lead to the total elimination of sex education in certain schools.

This warning was sounded last month by Tory MP John Bercow, who expressed his opposition to a proposal by Conservative leader Ian Duncan Smith that the anti-homosexual Section 28 be replaced with a law that would allow parents to ban any sex education materials they did not approve of.

In an exclusive article for the gay weekly, *The Pink Paper*, Bercow – who left the shadow cabinet because he refused to vote against giving gay couples the right to adopt – said that "despite the good intentions of its proponents, the sanitised version of Section 28 is fraught with problems and likely to be counter-productive".

He pointed out that "in highly religious areas, a group of devout parents whose children attend a mainstream school could oppose the use of all materials – in effect denying young people even basic information about sex."

He said that the real choice Tories had to make was to keep Section 28 or scrap it. "The case for repeal of a piece of legislation which is badly drafted, offensive and redundant is overwhelming."

There is ample independent evidence that many of the people who classify themselves as Christian do not even accept the basic tenets of Christianity, and some don't even believe in

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reflects on the results of the latest British census – the first to include a question about religious affiliation



God. Evidence for these latter categories are provided by other figures in the BBC survey. While 38 per cent (5 short of the 43) thought Jesus to be the son of God, only 32 per cent believed in the resurrection of the dead, and an extraordinarily low 26 per cent believed in a personal god.

Most of us are indoctrinated into the Christian faith at a very early age. Bear in mind that a third of our schools are church-run, and an act of Christian worship is a statutory requirement in every school in the land. Religious education is also mandatory. So it is not surprising that many will tick the "Christian" box. Others will do so because they don't like to be thought of as believing in "nothing", even if they don't believe in anything.

A significant proportion of the population were baptised when we were babes in arms. The Church of England claimed in 1998 that there were 25-million Anglicans in the UK, using this ridiculous "baptised" basis. Then most of them will have been "confirmed" before they were old enough to make our mind up and in that way they have come to regard themselves as "Christians" – although the word has little meaning to most of us, and, except for the occasional wedding and funeral, we'll never see the inside of a church again.

Sixteen per cent of people were prepared to say on their census form that they had no religion (rising, curiously, to 25 per cent in Scotland); this compares with one per cent in 1940. A further seven per cent did not state their religion, and I suspect most of those will have been non-believers. A further complication is that this question, probably as a result of our work in Parliament, is voluntary. The figures have been projected to assume that those declining to answer are as religious as those who did. This will almost certainly have had the effect of still further exaggerating the religious numbers. Other surveys have shown

many more people identifying themselves as having no religion. The British Social Attitudes Survey in 2000 put the number at 45 per cent. They aren't all atheists, but quite a lot of them are.

So, do the results of the census offer any hope that the church can tap into this vast well of apparent Christians and tempt them back to the pews?

Soon after the results of the census were announced, the Bishop of Lichfield said: "These figures prove as a lie the claims by the National Secular Society and others that England is no longer a Christian country," but even he had to admit that, "welcome as they are, they are a wake-up call to Christian leadership. While the Christian faith remains relevant to the majority of society, the Church is clearly no longer seen as important."

The BBC survey revealed that only 27 per cent thought of themselves as a "religious person", while 31 per cent said they were "spiritual", which is good news for the crystal healers, aromatherapists and other New Agers, but not such good news for the Archbishop of Canterbury or Cardinal Murphy O'Connor.

Interest in organised religion in Britain continues to plummet, and the age profiles, and the near disappearance of the young from churches, indicate that this decline is likely to accelerate over the next few years.

Other surveys have shown that when people are asked to name those to whom they look for role models, priests come way down the list – along with journalists.

Many of those in the Jewish community throughout the world regard themselves as secular Jews. They identify strongly with the Jewish culture but stand on the sidelines as far as religion is concerned. Normally, the secular Jews and their religious cousins co-habit peaceably, but not in Israel. There, many of the ultra-orthodox Jews do not work, and they receive substantial state hand-outs in exchange for praying for everyone else. This includes those undertaking compulsory military service, from which the ultra-orthodox have managed to secure exemption. This has fired resentment among secular Jews to such an extent that they have founded their own secular political party, the Shinui party, which was highly successful in the recent elections. Perhaps there is a lesson for us there somewhere.

Especially with the increasing polarisation of the world, the same thing is happening to Christianity in Britain. Based on the numbers who go to church, we are one of the most irreligious nations in the world, but, like the Jews, many Britons cannot escape their heritage.

US sees a dramatic rise in religious discrimination at work complaints

MORE and more Americans are lodging complaints about religious discrimination at work. Such cases make up a very small percentage of overall workplace discrimination complaints, but they are rising at a much faster rate.

The increase, according to an *Associated Press* report, is creating new challenges for employers. The change is due in large part to the nation's increasing religious diversity, but it also signals changing expectations by workers who are now more openly bringing a religious identity to the job, experts say.

"People look at religion now as being more central to who they are and they come to work with that religious piece of themselves," said

Chris Metzler, who directs Cornell University's equal employment studies program. "September 11 brought more attention to it, but it's not just people who claim to be of Muslim descent who are lodging complaints. It's also people who practise less conventional religions," he said.

Worker complaints of religious discrimination made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission jumped more than 20 per cent last year, driven primarily by claims of retaliation against Muslims.

Many employers have adjusted by encouraging employees to tolerate differences, and agreeing to worker requests for adjustments in

schedule and dress codes, allowing for holiday decorations or creation of on-site religious affinity groups.

But those efforts have not prevented all conflicts, many of them hinging on federal laws requiring employers to make reasonable accommodations for workers' religious beliefs.

In a survey released last year of personnel executives, 20 per cent said their companies had seen worker requests for religious accommodations increase in the past five years. Just one per cent saw such requests decline, according to the survey by the Society for Human Resource Management and the Tanenbaum Centre for Interreligious Understanding.

About one in five said their companies have seen instances of employees proselytising co-workers. More than a third of those surveyed said there are more religions represented in their ranks than five years ago.

Those changes may help explain the steady increase in religious discrimination complaints to the EEOC. The agency fielded 2,572 last year, up from 1,388 complaints in 1992, with a little less than half the increase attributed to complaints by Muslims.

"You have employees of hundreds of different religions in the workplace ... and some employers are not aware of their obligations to make accommodations," said David Grinberg, a spokesman for the EEOC.

Unusual case

One of the more unusual cases dealt with by the EEOC concerned Carol Grotts, hired by Brinks Inc as a uniformed guard – part of an armoured car. But trouble erupted on her first day at work when she was asked what size trousers she wore. "I don't wear pants, it's against my religion," Grotts, a Pentacostal Christian, replied. Brinks managers said "We would never have hired you if we'd known you did not wear pants."

"I knew that was discrimination," said Grotts. She told the EEOC that she offered to pay for a skirt or other alternative garment made of the same material as Brinks required uniform. That offer was rejected, and she was fired. The company rehired her two year later, in 1999, after intervention by the EEOC, but laid her off last year, citing economic reasons. Brinks agreed in early January to settle the case by paying Grotts \$30,000, covering her lawyer's fees and pledging to train all the managers at the office just outside Peoria, Illinois, in religious accommodation requirements.

Pacific Island churches drive families into bankruptcy

SOUTH Auckland families are being pushed into bankruptcy by some money-hungry Pacific Island churches, according to a report in the *New Zealand Herald*.

In an article by reporter Alan Perrott, lawyer Hellen Riley-Tomb is quoted as saying that she has clients who voluntarily go without food or become bankrupt rather than miss a payment to their family church.

Families have mortgaged their freehold homes or got quick money from loan sharks. One of her clients became so desperate he turned to crime to fund donations.

After defending him in court, Ms Riley-Tombs examined his family's finances and found they were more than \$80,000 in debt and living on food parcels from the Citizens Advice Bureau.

"I understand the general donation was 25 per cent of your income, so if they have any money in their purse they hand it over. Some ministers can be very forceful in their rhetoric when saying 'We want and expect this donation from you', and I don't believe these people are empowered enough to understand they have a choice."

Most concern falls on the Pacific Island-based churches, now establishing branches in New Zealand, which use peer pressure to squeeze more money out of followers. Perrott reported.

Arthur Anae, a Samoan *matai* (chief) and former National Party MP, described the churches' coercive practices as "abhorrent and disgusting", and is angry with ministers who name those who provide donations, along with

the amount, thereby shaming those who give little or do not give at all.

Mr Anae said huge amounts of money were flowing from Pacific Island families to the churches and their home islands. One Otara church he visited collected \$1 million in donations in one day.

He said research he did during his time in Parliament showed that \$26 million was being sent to Samoa and \$15 million to Tonga each year. He said such generosity put some people into financial hardship, but they were reluctant to seek help.

"They won't raise [the issue], won't talk about it," he said. "They are too proud, but they do it from the heart ... They'll make do and get by because [giving money] is what they wanted to do."

The Pasifika Problem Gambling Helpline has dealt with some who take to gambling in the hope of raising money for their church.

Rangi McLean, from the Manurewa People's Centre, has friends who have mortgaged their homes in order to hand over lump sums of \$50,000. He said they regarded their church as the focal point for daily life, and providing money was natural.

Quotable quote

FOR telling a good and incisive religious joke you should be praised. For telling a bad one, you should be ridiculed and reviled. The idea that you could be prosecuted for the telling of either is quite fantastic.

– British comedian Rowan Atkinson

HERE'S a joke. I hope it doesn't come across as anti-semitic. Hymie is in trouble, he owes money all round and some of the creditors are nasty people. Then a lottery is announced, and the first prize would solve his problems. Hymie hasn't prayed for years, but now he says, "Oh Lord, you know I haven't been to synagogue when I should. I don't even stick to kosher food, but if you will just let me win the lottery I swear I'll do everything I should for the rest of my life!" There is no reply. Every night he prays again, and on the last night before the draw he hears a voice: "Hymie!" "Yes, Lord, is that you?" "Yes, Hymie. You want I should let you win the lottery?" "Oh, yes, Lord, I beg you!" "Well, Hymie, at least meet me halfway. Buy a ticket!"

Most religions – if not all – incorporate miracles, and Christianity in particular has one at its core, namely the resurrection. Millions also hold transubstantiation to be fundamental. Then there are many thousands of lesser examples, from Joshua making the sun stand still to statues of Ganesh drinking milk.

The best known argument against miracles is that of David Hume, essentially that it is always more likely that human testimony should be mistaken than that the laws of nature should be suspended. This seems unsatisfactory. Hume himself argued that laws of nature are probabilistic, not absolute, so that an exceptional event is always a possibility. And who can then say it was not caused by God? Hume's argument assumes that there are laws not caused by God. But the religious can always argue that *everything* is caused by God, who usually acts in fairly predictable ways (laws of nature) but is occasionally unpredictable (miracles). Personally I find the notion of such an arbitrary universe depressing, but that does not disprove it. However, it renders science in principle futile, since we can never be sure that God will not step in to invalidate what we have painfully established.

On this line of argument it all depends on the existence of God. In my view there is no convincing proof of this, and several arguments against it. The outcome is little different from an absolute disproof. But I want to mention some other arguments against miracles.

There is no universal definition of a miracle, but it is commonly taken as an unusual event

caused by divine or supernatural intervention. Miracles then seem to divide into what we may call strong and weak. In the latter, God, as it were, tips the balance. If Hymie had a ticket, God could bring it to the top of the pile. And even if he hadn't (which is why it is a joke), God could slip in an extra ticket with Hymie's name on it. Miraculous cures are often like this. Obviously a cure is always a possibility while the patient lives, and millions think that if they visit Lourdes, or wherever, God may helpfully intervene. The criterion for a miraculous cure,

If miracles ever do occur, why are they always so trivial?
JOHN RADFORD,
Emeritus Professor
of Psychology at the
University of East
London, poses
the question

apparently, is that it is not explicable by medical science. Or, more exactly, medical experts appointed by the Vatican, as recently in the case of Mother Teresa. A patient was supposedly cured as a result of praying to her – although the hospital doctors put it down to their normal treatment. Now no one supposes that existing science can explain every single outcome, but that does not entail a supernatural explanation. And the rate at Lourdes, for example, is no higher than that of spontaneous remission.

In "strong" miracles, what occurs is logically impossible. No person can be raised from the dead. One reason this has been believed is no doubt that death was formerly thought to be instantaneous, the point at which the soul leaves the body. Presumably, it could be miraculously brought back. In fact death is a process, in which several systems slow down and stop, and the physical substrate decays. "Clinically dead" means the point at which all attempts to revive have failed. Just occasionally, however, recovery occurs even after that. But eventually a point comes at which the organs are destroyed. Strictly, death is that condition from which recovery is not possible. To claim recovery from that state is a logical contradiction, like the children's conundrum of what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object? It is nonsense, because the existence of one precludes the existence of the other, by definition. Similarly with transubstantiation. According to the official Roman catechism, at the consecration bread and wine become, in actual substance, the body and blood of Christ – even though in any observable or measurable way they do not. It is a miracle which "passes understanding". It is

also nonsense. A thing cannot be both itself and some other thing, and to assert it is to reduce language to gibberish.

This argument goes back to the Roman lawyer Cicero. Some other arguments are not so much logical as psychological. One concerns the universality of miracles. All peoples seem to have believed in them, and in very similar ones. Charismatic heroes have often been held to survive death – King Arthur, Zapata, Hitler (a hero to some, unfortunately). Elvis Presley died only in 1977, but has been reportedly seen alive many times. Even the fictitious Sherlock Holmes receives several hundred letters a year, at least some of which are from people who clearly believe the great detective resides at 221B Baker Street.

Again, the idea of eating a god, either literally or magically, who later revives, is widespread as is that of the limitless feast – the host will always go round however large the world congregation, like its forerunner the loaves and fishes. It is not too fanciful to see the origins of these notions in very primitive wish-fulfilling thought.

Another argument, I think, is the triviality, indeed absurdity, of so many miracles. If God, or some god, is an intelligent being seeking to communicate, why does he, she or it, do so by causing a statue very occasionally, and observed only by some, to move its head slightly? (It's probably a well known illusion, the psychokinetic effect.) Or by making liquid a small phial of some unknown brown substance, allegedly blood; or appearing as a vague image on the side of an office building or on the inside of a potato; or – but there is simply no limit to human credulity. Those whose religious beliefs are an integral part of their personality will seize on every possible apparent confirmation, however ridiculous, and ignore or deny contradictions. The mechanism has been well explored in psychological experiments. But why doesn't God prove his existence by saving a few thousand starving children?

Lastly, miracles are often claimed as support for a particular religion. But since all religions make the same claims, about the same sorts of miracles, are they all equally true? The only religious answer I have heard is the purely circular one, that miracles prove the faith, and we know they are true because the faith is true. Conversely, however, although gods frequently appear to, or intervene for, the devout in all cultures, they never intrude on each other's domains unless they have been introduced, so to say. Jesus never appeared in the Americas before missionaries brought him, and Zeus has not done so at all as far as I know, although he was very active in classical Greece.

These arguments won't stop Hymie praying. But if he had a ticket, his chances would be just as good without.

Quotable Quote

It is no accident that the symbol of a bishop is a crook, and the sign of an archbishop a double-cross.

– Gregory Dix,
 British Benedictine monk

A fatal freedom

FREEDOM to choose her husband, a freedom she asserted and a freedom her father, a Kashmiri Muslim in Birmingham, granted, probably cost 21-year-old Sahda Bibi her life. Late last year Ms Bibi, a dressmaker, told her parents she had fallen in love with a distant relative from Barnsley, South Yorkshire. "You're a Brummie", her father responded. "As my daughter, who you want to marry, you marry". But some members of Ms Bibi's extended family didn't think a young Muslim woman should be allowed to marry the man of her choice, and it is thought that her cousin Rafaquat Hussain murdered her on her wedding day, stabbing her 14 times in the head, neck and shoulders. He then disappeared.

Last year the Foreign Office released a detailed study of forced marriages which suggested that the practice was increasing because more young people were reaching marriageable age in British Asian communities. But Narina Anwar, a young woman who was forced into marriage herself but escaped, and now works with the Foreign Office to help others, is doubtful about the increase (*Guardian*, January 18). She thinks more people are "coming out and standing up for themselves, realising they are being forced into marriage".

West Midlands Police, who have dealt with around 50 cases of forced marriages over the last two years, agree that there is increasing westernisation among young Asians, but are not sure that forced marriage is declining. However, Sultan Mahmood, who was interviewed by the *Guardian* while pushing his two-year-old daughter in a pram down the street where Ms Bibi lived, dismissed "the old idea" of an arranged marriage for his daughter when the time came. His father's generation had tried to put the idea across, but those brought up in this country were "more into letting things progress as they will", he said. No doubt things are changing but not fast enough to have saved Sahda Bibi.

Bush's handbook

TO understand the White House, writes David Frum in a biography of its present illegitimate incumbent, you must understand its predominant creed. Frum calls it "modern evangelicalism", although what is modern about it is hard to see. He also calls it a "kindly faith", but, being Jewish and a Zionist may be influencing his judgment here because, as he acknowledges, Bush is "one of the staunchest friends of Israel ever to occupy the Oval Office". Frum thought that Bush was "soft on Islam" after September 11, but that he has now "progressed" from softness to regarding Islam as "one of the world's great empires" against

which the United States must "enforce respect". Neither Bush nor Frum realises that respect has to be earned and is not earned by military power.

George and Laura Bush visited Israel in 1998 and, after dinner one night, he and a group of Mormons, Baptists, Methodists and Jews went down to the Sea of Galilee, joined hands underwater and prayed together on bended knee (*Observer*, January 26). You won't be surprised, then, to hear that Bush's favourite book is the Bible, which he regards as "a good political handbook" in his crusade against the infidel.

Still in charge

CILLA Black's announcement that she was leaving the long-running TV show *Blind Date* is said to have "shocked the nation". As I have never watched the programme I reserve comment on that. What I find more intriguing is the reason she gave for retiring. The *Sun* told us that she had been to a psychic who "revealed" that Cilla's husband Bobbie, who died three years ago, thought it was time for her to quit. Managing her from beyond the grave, as it were.

The "perverse" prophet

"DUTCH Muslims have barely been able to conceal their anger" over an article critical of Mohammed, by the Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Somali-born immigrant to the Netherlands and a former Muslim, wrote *Guardian* correspondent Andrew Osborn (January 29).

"As a member of parliament and as someone involved in promoting integration she should not be making these remarks" said a spokesman for the country's main Muslim lobby. "Her remarks are blasphemous and have been received with a great deal of pain by the Muslim community. Freedom of speech was one thing for an ordinary citizen, he added, but MPs should not be allowed to say exactly what they wanted in public. Which, you'll agree, is rather limiting.

Ms Ali, called rather insultingly by Osborn, "a self-styled" champion of Muslim women's rights, has angered Muslims in the past by alleging that Muslim men frequently indulge in domestic violence against women. She then received death threats and had to flee the country. But this time she dared to criticise the prophet himself as, by Western standards, a perverse man and a tyrant whose attitude was "do it my way or there'll be trouble"; who said that women must stay at home, wear a veil, do not have the same inheritance rights as their husbands and can be stoned to death for adultery.

The Amsterdam public prosecutor's office has initiated an investigation to see if Ms Ali is guilty of inciting racial hatred against Muslims. Ironically, as Andrew Osborn noted, the same laws have been cited in past, unsuccessful

attempts to prosecute imams for preaching hatred against gays, Israel and the US.

A sweet-toothed spook

THE Rt Revd Hugh Montefiore, former Bishop of Birmingham, has written a book on the paranormal which, if a review in the *Church Times* (January 24) is anything to go by, is a real hoot. When he was translated to Birmingham, the bishop appointed four priests with exorcist duties and in his new book he regrets what he sees as "the reluctance of the Church to investigate the paranormal as part of God's creation". We are deeply impoverished, he says, if we turn our backs on "the evidence of psychic realities"; and he finds it "deplorable that scientists deride it and religion ignores it".

Montefiore draws upon the "experiences" of the Bishop-elect of Monmouth, the Rt Revd Dominic Walker, for whom poltergeists have presented the commonest problem over the last 20 or 30 years, but who has also seen clocks going backwards, lights flashing on and off and volume controls going up and down. In one place, he tells us, the community was drawn together by door knockers knocking by themselves. And he describes – we must assume with a straight face – how half a pound of sugar kept appearing each day in a kitchen in Surbiton. "No one knew where it was coming from" he adds.

To which one must ask: didn't anyone try to find out? And the door knockers? Didn't anyone keep a look out at night for naughty boys? Probably not. That might have dispelled some of Montefiore's "psychic realities".

Clemens and Ingersoll

HESPERUS Books, who publish little paperbacks of 100 pages or so, have given us Mark Twain's *Diary of Adam and Eve* (£8.99) with an excellent foreword by John Updike, who points out that, like that other outstanding American freethinker, Robert Ingersoll, Clemens "sharply turned the Bible against itself". All it needed was "a plain retelling in a down-to-earth American voice".

His Adam is a loner who, not used to company, resents Eve as an intruder – and a talkative one at that. But in time the two learn to live together. And after the Fall, Adam admits that he was mistaken about Eve in the beginning, so that "it is better to live outside the Garden with her than inside without her".

Eve, for her part, is also content. The Garden may have been "enchantingly beautiful", and they have lost that, but she has found love. She hopes that she and Adam will pass from this life together, but that is not to be. She dies first, and as Adam says touchingly at her grave: "Wheresoever she was, there was Eden".

ASTONISHINGLY, despite the mountains of commentary on the Iraqi *imbroglio*, no media pundit has broached the obvious question: Why hasn't George W Bush multilaterally deployed the ultimate weapon against the intransigent Iraqi strong man, Saddam Hussein?

Not nuclear bombs. While they can indeed humble an obstinate foe, they can have unpleasant side-effects on the environment and complicate international diplomacy. Even when nuclear strikes are maximally surgical, some collateral damage is bound to occur. The world community might question the moral legitimacy of vaporizing thousands of women and children to bring one bully to his knees. A better course is available to a Christian president.

President Bush isn't constitutionally obligated to emulate Constantine, Charlemagne, Richard the Lion-Heart, Henry V, Louis IV, Peter the Great, JFK, LBJ, Ronald Reagan, George H W Bush, and other Christian heads of state who opted to meet force with force, swagger with swagger, rather than to turn the other cheek and forgive enemies 77 times (as the nominal founder of Christianity recommended).

Mr Bush is well-versed in the ultimate weapon. In February 2002, at the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, he told assembled lawmakers, foreign leaders, and prominent clergy that "the true strength of America lies in the fact that we are a faithful people by and large."

The President understands the incomparable power of faith to soften the hardhearted. "Faith," he told the dignitaries, "shows the way to self-giv-

ing, to love our neighbors as we would want to be loved. Faith instructs us 'never to target the innocent.'" Noting that the terrorist attacks of September 11 had put him "on bended knee," Mr. Bush urged Americans to turn to prayer in "this time of testing."

The Vice President, too, understands paranormal forces. Mr Cheney has said for the record, "Every great and meaningful achievement in this

Louisiana-based retired Professor of English, Gary Sloan, says President Bush should try using prayer make Saddam Hussein see sense



life requires the active involvement of the One who placed us here."

Should Mr Bush ever be hauled into court to defend his actions, Attorney General John Ashcroft will make an excellent *amicus curiae*. Last year, at the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, he said: "Civilized individuals – Christians, Jews, Muslims – all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator. Governments may guard freedom. Governments don't grant freedom. All peo-

If Faith ca Mountai not Dict

ple are called to the defence of the Grantor of freedom, and the framework of freedom He created." The Grantor does not require a violent defence.

As an ideological disciple of Jesus Christ, whom the President has cited as the biggest influence in his life, Mr Bush undoubtedly prefers to eschew military interventionism in Iraq.

When he says the United States may invade Iraq if Saddam Hussein doesn't come clean, the President is no doubt acceding to pressure from his national security adviser, hawkish legislators, corporate moguls, and others with a vested interest in military action.

Mr Bush should follow his own heart. He should disregard all secular strategy and counsel, no matter how well intended. Instead of bombs, he should deploy the true ultimate weapon against the Iraqi leader (and, for that matter, against every other recalcitrant leader): humble supplication.

Christian doctrine recognizes the universal efficacy of prayer and the infinite remediable

'Don't wear a cross if you are not a Christian', says



OK – but only if you are a Christian, says the Vatican – is this glow-in-the dark cross, modelled by Mark of Wildcat in Brighton, £15.00.

THE growing trend of wearing of crosses for fashion, rather than as a sign of Christian devotion, has upset the Vatican – to such a degree that Fides, a Catholic charity at St Peter's in Rome felt it necessary to issue a strongly-worded statement attacking what it describes as a "mania".

The Vatican indicated that it was particularly concerned that the tendency to display the Christian symbol was spreading among show business personalities. It said: "There is a spreading fashion of wearing crosses decorated with diamonds and other precious stones. Personalities of the world of entertainment are making it the mania of the moment. Jennifer Aniston wears a cross of precious stones. Model Naomi Campbell has an enormous collection of jewel-studded crosses, while actress Catherine Zeta Jones wears a gold and diamond one. This mania is incomprehensible."

The Vatican's views were supported by a spokesman for the Churches of Christ organisation, Bill Hunter, who said: "Anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ can express that by wearing a cross; if they don't believe, then that

piece of jewellery becomes meaningless."

But British jewellery designer Theo Fennell could not see what the fuss was all about. "If one wants to be semantically correct, the cruciform is very different to the crucifix. The former is a satisfying shape for a jeweller to work with, the latter a religious symbol."



Above: Definitely not OK – rocker Ozzie Osborne and cross. But if you are the Archbishop of Canterbury (right), it's perfectly OK to wear a huge, ostentatious one

can Move ins, why tators?

power of divine love. The most egregious reprobate is redeemable. Verily, even Saddam Hussein.

President Bush should immediately begin to plump for multilateral prayer rallies, not preemptive (and peremptory) strikes. Prayer is safe, feasible, tested, and cost-effective.

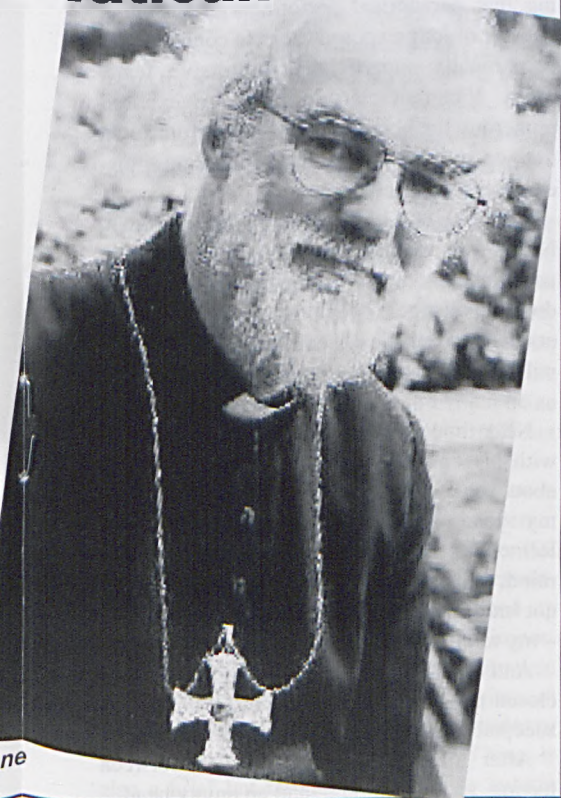
True, the Pentagon may be piqued. Yes, defence contractors may grow antsy. The National Rifle Association may indeed squawk. Certainly, secularists will ridicule him.

Against all opposition, Mr Bush must be resolute. The benefits of relentless prayer are incalculable.

Touched by grace, Saddam will become as docile as a lamb. He will tell weapon inspectors everything they want to know. He may even disband his armies and melt his pistols. Best of all, realizing it is better to give than to receive, he will sell his oil at a bargain-basement price.

Who knows? He might become the Billy Graham of Baghdad

vs Vatican



Words fail George W Bush

"I WANT it to be said that the Bush administration was a results-oriented administration, because I believe the results of focusing our attention and energy on teaching children to read and having an education system that's responsive to the child and to the parents, as opposed to mired in a system that refuses to change, will make America what we want it to be—a literate country and a hopefuller country." – Washington, DC January 11, 2001.

"You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test." – Tennessee, February 2001.

"It is fitting that we have a National Prayer Breakfast. It is the right thing to do, because this is a nation of prayer. I know, from firsthand knowledge, that this is a nation of prayer ... I believe in prayer. I pray. I pray for strength, I pray for guidance, I pray for forgiveness. And I pray to offer my thanks for a kind and generous Almighty God." – Washington D C, February 2003.

"And so, in my State of the—the—my State of the Union—or state—my speech to the nation, whatever you want to call it, speech to the nation—I asked Americans to give 4,000 years—4,000 hours over the next—the rest of your life—of service to America. That's what I asked—4,000 hours." – Bridgeport, Connecticut., April 2002.

"I know what I believe. I will continue to articulate what I believe and what I believe—I believe what I believe is right." – Rome, July 2001.

"Our nation must come together to unite."—Tampa, Florida, June 2001.

"For every fatal shooting, there were roughly three non-fatal shootings. And, folks, this is unacceptable in America. It's just unacceptable. And we're going to do something about it." – Philadelphia, May 2001.

"But I also made it clear to [Russian President Vladimir Putin] that it's important to think beyond the old days of when we had the concept that if we blew each other up, the world would be safe." – Washington, DC, May 2001.

"I was proud the other day when both Republicans and Democrats stood with me in the Rose Garden to announce their support for a clear statement of purpose: you disarm, or we will." – Speaking about Saddam Hussein – October 2002

"The war on terror involves Saddam Hussein because of the nature of Saddam Hussein, the history of Saddam Hussein, and his willingness to terrorize himself." – Michigan, January 2003.

"I think the American people – I hope the American – I don't think, let me – I hope the American people trust me." – Washington D C, December 2002.

"And we need a full affront on an energy crisis that is real in California and looms for other parts of our country if we don't move quickly." – Press conference, Washington D C March 2001.

"There's only one person who hugs the mothers and the widows, the wives and the kids upon the death of their loved one. Others hug but having committed the troops, I've got an additional responsibility to hug and that's me and I know what it's like." – Washington D C, December 2002.

"The law I sign today directs new funds and new focus to the task of collecting vital intelligence on terrorist threats and on weapons of mass production." – Washington, D C, November 2002.

"We need an energy bill that encourages consumption."—Trenton, N J, September, 2002.

"There's no cave deep enough for America, or dark enough to hide." – Oklahoma City, August 2002

"I firmly believe the death tax is good for people from all walks of life throughout our society" – Waco, Texas, August 2002.

• Source of quotes: the American on-line magazine, *Slate* (www.slate.com).

"ONE thing is immediately clear," the middle-aged psychic lady announced to me. "You have come here today with a completely open mind."

She had made this statement from her position on a platform at one end of the room, before an audience of some 25 patrons at a provincial hotel's monthly "Psychic Fayre".

Around the other walls were arranged perhaps a dozen tables, each featuring a visiting expert of one of a variety of hues: crystal ball, tarot, palmistry, and other less well known techniques all on offer. Each practitioner would take their turn at a short general performance from the platform on the hour throughout the day, between offering individual readings to visitors to their tables.

Much the same thing goes on at similar events around the country every weekend of the year.

In fact, open mindedness on my part to such a set-up could hardly be further from the truth. The speaker had misread the set features that I always present to any such practitioners, presumably mistaking them for some sign of receptiveness.

I adopted this practice after reading about the methods of psychic charlatans in the writ-

ings of James Randi and his fellow members of CSICOP – the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

I once interviewed a numerologist for my local paper. She tried a positive avalanche of often totally incompatible Barnum statements ("something for everyone") on me in an effort to read my character, hoping for a flicker of recognition to be elicited by one of them so the cold reading procedure could really take off. After a

There are times when keeping an open mind is far from appropriate, argues HUGH THOMAS

quarter of an hour she was reduced to saying that I was the type of person who gives little away and "would make a good MI5 agent".

Our Psychic Fayre lady had no such time to waste today so, after one more wrong guess probably based on my garb and general appearance ("I sense you are a teacher of many?" – "Er, no actually I'm not a profes-

sional teacher"), she moved along the line to more gullible listeners.

No doubt some of them had indeed come with an open mind and were duly impressed with what she had to say about meeting tall dark strangers and going on journeys.

But really, is an open mind such an appropriate stance to take in these situations? Frankly, I would suggest not.

We all like to think we have an open mind, with all that this term seems to convey about our being willing to look at the evidence, be receptive to new ideas and give all sides of any argument a fair hearing.

But there are also cases where keeping an open mind is far from appropriate.

For example, should we keep an open mind about whether Adolf Hitler was a good man? Or whether cyanide is a useful food additive? Or if $2 + 2 = 4$? No, of course not: in these examples, as in many others, there is no doubt about what is the case and what isn't. Here, we all know enough to know what's what and what's not. Keeping an open mind is not a realistic option.

In fact, keeping a totally open mind would make life impossible. If you had an open mind about whether the internal combustion engine had the power to move vehicles or not, you'd never get in the car to drive to work in the morning.

Of course, there are some matters where the jury is still out and we just don't know enough to make pronouncements one way or the other.

But clairvoyance and the like are definitely not in that category.

Over the last hundred years or more, a mountain of evidence has accumulated indicating that paranormal performers are using a number of long-exposed tricks to conduct their occasionally superficially impressive feats. Many Victorian clairvoyants were exposed numerous times, needing to move from town to town and country to country in various guises to seek new audiences.

So until UFOs land on the Whitehouse lawn, Nessie is hauled up on the Loch Ness beach, and somebody wins James Randi's million-dollar challenge to demonstrate psychic powers under scientifically controlled conditions, I will retain a thoroughly closed mind on these, as on many other, subjects.

Next time someone tries to bend your ear with his or her deranged or perverse beliefs about the afterlife or whatnot, why not follow my lead and simply cut them short? Remember that you can't argue with a sick mind, and just say to them: "I'm sorry – I'm not interested in your opinions on this subject – my mind is completely closed".

And don't worry; it's perfectly OK to have a closed mind in this way. In fact, it's not only acceptable; it's positively essential.

After all, there is a difference between having an open mind ... and an empty head.

Doped or Duped? Was marijuana used by Jesus to pull off his 'miracle' cures?

A STUDY of scriptural texts published at the beginning of the year suggests that Jesus was almost certainly a cannabis user, and that he and his disciples used the drug to carry out "miraculous" healing.

According to Chris Bennett, writing in the drugs magazine *High Times*, the anointing oil used by Jesus and the disciples contained an ingredient called *kaneh-bosem*, which has since been identified as cannabis extract.

In the article, *Was Jesus a Stoner?*, Bennett claims that the incense used by Jesus in ceremonies also contained a cannabis extract.

Quoting scholars to back his claim, Bennett suggests that those anointed with oils used by Jesus were "literally drenched in the potent mixture ... although most modern people choose to smoke or eat pot, when its active ingredients are transferred to an oil-based carrier, it can also be absorbed through the skin".

Quoting the New Testament, Mr Bennett argues that Jesus anointed his disciples with the oil and encouraged them to do the same with other followers. This could have been responsible for healing eye and skin diseases



And God brought forth grass ... this is how Jesus may have looked with a spliff between his lips if smoking had been discovered by him and his gang

referred to in the Gospels.

"If cannabis was one of the main ingredients of the ancient anointing oil ... and receiving this oil is what made Jesus the Christ and his followers Christians, then persecuting those who use cannabis could be considered anti-Christ," Bennett concludes.

Carl Ruck, Professor of Classical Mythology at Boston University added that "there can be little doubt about a role for cannabis in Judaic religion."

THE late great Frank Zappa was asked in an interview how he would feel if a child of his habitually used swear words. Ever the model of good sense, he replied that it would not bother him in the slightest.

I'm with Frank on this one. Being bound by verbal taboos seems entirely prissy, as well as pointlessly restrictive. There are, however, certain words that do make me blanch. Chief among them is the word "spiritual". For a start I don't know what it means. Then there are the images it conjures up, of damp-handed unctuousness and fey self-regard (to name just a couple). The words "piety" and "holiness" have a similar effect on me.

It is with caution, therefore, and a sense of mild foreboding, that I offer this first link. *Resurgence* magazine has been on the go for some 30 years. It offers articles and features on ecology, economics and sustainable development and a critique of global capitalism. And (and here's the rub) on creativity, frugality and spirituality. The thought is based on the ideas of Schumacher, and the product itself is good looking, well produced, and frequently very interesting indeed. The whole magazine is not available freely online, but there is enough to make the pages well worth a visit. Try it at <http://resurgence.gn.apc.org>

Off-line for quite a while, but now back with a bang is the excellent *Skeptical Tank*. It's at <http://www.skeptictank.org/index.htm>. It's a site which (as it says of itself) "maintains extensive archives on destructive groups, individuals, and ideologies, with special focus on religion's impact upon history as well as religion's impact upon rights, liberties, health, and safety of the world's populace in contemporary times". It also "maintains as a primary focus the scientific debunking of claims of the paranormal. This includes all *testable* claims of the paranormal from aliens in flying saucers to vague, ill-defined conspiracies. *Untestable* claims of the paranormal are really of no interest, as metaphysical queries are pretty tiresome and pointless and there are enough testable claims being made by paranormalists that should be addressed. The *activities* individuals perform as the result of those beliefs, however, are subject to scientific inquiry as the *Skeptical Tank* considers such its venue". Cast your line into the *Tank* and you are bound to pull out something interesting.

A while ago in the pages of the *Freethinker*, editor Barry Duke wrote about the Nigerian secular humanist, nationalist and educator Tai Solarin. I have to confess that I knew very little about the man. A web search turned up enough to give at least some idea of his importance and significance. The most complete article is one by Richard Carrier at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/Tai_Solarin.html. There is also a brief but moving testimony to Solarin

from Wole Soyinka, in a interview Soyinka gave that was originally published in *Free Inquiry*. This is now available online at http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/soyinka_17_4.html with the title "Why I am a Secular Humanist". Religious interests often claim that religion (their particular brand, of course – not any old religion) is a force for social and individual good, a necessity, even – and that in non-Western societies this is especially true. Figures like Solarin and Soyinka give the lie to such patronising and weaselly nonsense.

In last month's *Freethinker* Colin McCall wrote a bracing and illuminating review of Michael Moore's indispensable book *Stupid White Men*. Moore also has (inevitably, I suppose) his own website. It's at <http://www.michaelmoore.com/>. For those curious about Moore it's well worth a look. He's also placed on it an extra chapter to the book that's not available in the print version. Good stuff.

Moore writes a lot about the gun culture of the USA, so it's perhaps appropriate to include here a link to the bizarre site of The Christian Gun Owners Web Page. Yep, there really is such a thing. Open it by going to <http://www.geocities.com/finis3/> and enjoy the introductory strains of "John Brown's Body" arranged for what sounds like a massed choir of Stylophones ... and be comforted. As the site says of itself: "Friend, have you ever wondered how you can reconcile your faith in Jesus Christ with your interest in firearms? Well, you have come to the right place. One of our functions here is to provide Christian

gun-owners with solid Bible teaching on the individual right to keep and bear arms". Well, spin my chamber there, you good ol' boys!

For a further insight into the Christian mind, take a walk on the wild side and go to <http://www.propheticvision.org.uk/eurovision/index.html>. Amongst its various sections is one called "Healed". This relates a succession of wondrous and miraculous healings. Call me a boot-faced sceptic, but I'd like to see a bit of independent evidence before I start tugging my grizzled forelock and saying "praise the Lord". In fact I'm just about to contact the organisation with just such a request. Should be interesting to see what response I get.

Lastly, take a look at a quirky site put together by a young Canadian atheist, the "Atheist Girl Wonder". It's a brave attempt by a teenager to convey some of her thoughts and feelings about being an atheist, and she does so with a mixture of passion and humour. There are some good cartoons there too. Check out the one called "God's Cure for Constipation". Take a look as well at her essay "What Gawd Taught Me". Best line? The one where she describes at age six or seven having God "pumped into my little impressionable brain like air into a bike tyre". This site is at <http://www.geocities.com/girlwonder2009/atheist.html>.

More evidence, as if more were needed, of Dawkins' thesis concerning the toxic effect of mixing religion and childhood.

As ever, thanks to all who have sent links. They're mounting up nicely, but more are always welcome. Please send them, as usual, to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

Catholic church in Scotland outraged by toilet humour

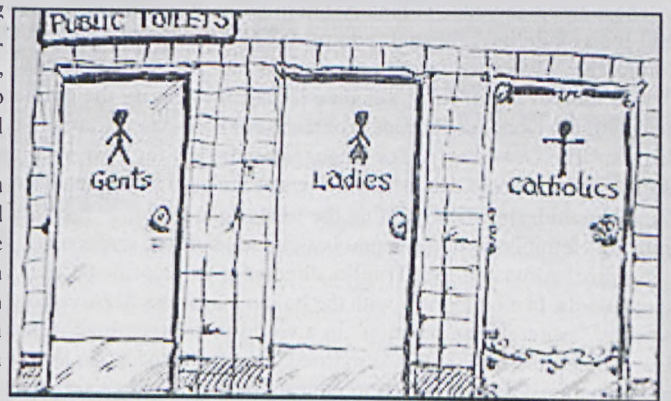
A CARTOON showing a public toilet with three doors – one for men, another for women and a third for Catholics has infuriated the Catholic Church in Scotland.

The cartoon, in the Scottish Parliament magazine, *Holyrood*, pokes fun at separate Catholic education and denominational schools.

It was condemned as an offensive slur by church spokesman Peter Kearney, who said it was in "shockingly bad taste" at a time when the Scottish Executive was committed to tackling religious intolerance. He called on the magazine's editor Paul Hutcheon to apologise.

Mr Hutcheon is standing his ground, saying separate, faith-based education was, like most issues, open to both serious and satirical comment.

Responding to criticism that the church overreacted Mr Kearney said that if the word Catholics had been substituted for Jews or an ethnic minority group then there would have been a greater row.



THIS is the second series of short philosophical pieces written mainly for the Saturday edition of the *Guardian*; the first, *The Meaning of Things*, having appeared in book form in 2001. I say philosophical pieces, but they are by no means abstruse; they deal with subjects of interest to all, in a way that can be understood by all. The most important question we can ask ourselves, says Dr Grayling, is how is one best to live? How and where are we to find the resources to give meaning to our life; to make it worthwhile for ourselves and others; to keep growing and learning, and "attaining a degree of understanding of oneself and the world"?

The civilising hopes of the Enlightenment may not have materialised: we still have war, injustice, intolerance and racism; but those who defend Enlightenment values, as free-thinkers must, have a duty to fight for those values and try "to enlist as many as possible to join in the enterprise". We must not give up hope, Grayling says. No one is naive enough to think that the new Jerusalem can become fully true, but that is not the point. "What would the world, and life in the world, be like without such hope?"

These are the thoughts of the author as he introduces his essays on matters of morals, public culture, politics and war—as well as a few more personal problems—the general aim of which, as with the previous volume, is "to apply considerations of philosophy to concrete situations in life". Then there is a section on nature and naturalism and finally a few slightly longer essays, including a short memoir starting with his early days in Africa.

In his treatment of moral education, a subject of perennial importance, Grayling dismisses the widespread belief in a golden age of goodness in our parents' or our grandparents' generation, a belief invariably raised in "law and order" debates, although comprehensively

demolished by Geoffrey Pearson in *Hooligan* (Macmillan 1983). Moral panics occur, as Grayling says, because information about what happens in our society is not matched by a public—and I would add a ministerial—capacity to reflect upon it and deal with it rationally.

COLIN McCALL reviews
The Reason of Things:
Living with Philosophy,
by A C Grayling
(Weidenfeld &
Nicolson, £12.99);
and BARRY THORPE
reviews *Here Lies the*
***Bible,* by Jeffrey Pike**
(Self-published, printed
in the UK, £15.00
paperback.)

The popular media whips up public fears at every opportunity; and the decline in religious belief and teaching is held up as the cause of "moral collapse". Grayling, of course, has no truck with this. Religion is, as he says, "worse than an irrelevance as the inculcation of morality". He cites some biblical absurdities: that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter heaven and so on. More seriously, he refers to religious teachings and practices like the incarceration of women, mutilation of genitals, amputation of hands and terrorising in the name of faith, when religious morality becomes not just irrelevant but dangerous.

Not only moral education, but the very concept of liberal education is vanishing in the English-speaking West, where the emphasis is now on training focused, as he puts it, on "participation in the life of the economy". The

maxim "learning for life" has now gone the way of all the other progressive ideas once favoured by the party that the "Reverend" Blair has ruined. If the Prime Minister were able to perform a miracle it would no doubt be to allow rich men to pass through that needle's eye and enter the kingdom of heaven. Meanwhile he ensures that their life on earth is as idyllic as possible.

"Evil" is a word outside the freethinker's vocabulary. It is a religious notion meaning what a particular religion dislikes, and the free-thinker need only employ it in religious disputes. Religions, however, do great harm when proselytising the young – leading them to believe, for instance, that the statement "Jesus is the son of God" has the same validity as "the Normans conquered England in 1066". One can then describe religion as a "social evil". "Human credulity and superstition, and the need for comforting fables, will never be extirpated", says Grayling, "so religion will always exist, at least among the uneducated", and the only way "to manage the dangers it presents is to confine it entirely to the private sphere". Again, however, that is something which the present government resolutely refuses to do.

Nor does it recognise the value of teachers, who, as Aristotle said, "should be more honoured than parents, for whereas parents give their children life, teachers give their children a good life". But Aristotle had a broader view of education than government ministers. For him it meant being informed and able to think, not just learning to pass tests. Grayling is right to say that the status of teaching as a profession in the contemporary world has been undermined by "the contemptible view that only what makes money is admirable". As the husband of a teacher (now retired), I know how depressing it is when every "new" step in educational policy is retrograde. It is easy to see why so many teachers can't wait to quit.

Dr Grayling is reader in philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London, and when he is asked his profession he says "I read philosophy" or "I study philosophy". He does not say "I am a philosopher" because that would be to assert too much. He regards the title of philosopher as "an honorific which can only properly be applied by third parties and only to those who merit it". When he is further asked, how did he enter his profession, he tells us the "invitation" came from Socrates, whose conversation with Charmides in Plato's early dialogue of that name, Grayling read at the age of twelve in English translation. Two years later he bought a battered copy of George Henry Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy*, his admiration for which I share.

I am glad, too, to see the "natural/unnatural" debate exposed as the absurdity it is, both being emotive terms expressing people's

Vatican writes 'glossary' on sex terminology

THE Holy See is to publish a new glossary of 90 words related to sexual and family issues. The *Lexicon of the Family and Life* will also clarify the Catholic Church's teachings on birth control, sex education, assisted procreation and homosexuality. The work intends to clarify "neologisms, ambiguous terms and difficult concepts in frequent use".

Those terms include "voluntary interruption of pregnancy", "reproductive health", "matrimonial indissolubility", "sexual education" and "conjugal love". When bandied about in a global forum, they can cause "grave moral confusion", the lexicon states.

"It's long overdue, but a welcome initiative to clarify the political hijacking of the language", said William Donohue, president of the New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. "The Orwellian use of language by the left for their own agendas has been going on for decades", he added. Certain "elastic" terms are used in print and broadcast for better or worse, Mr. Donohue said, specifically citing the terms "gender" and "reproductive rights". They are simply code for feminist or homosexual issues and abortion, respectively, he said.

Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, director of the Pontifical Council for the Family, criticised the same words. In an interview with the Italian magazine *30 Days*, he said the family has been threatened by "cultural manipulation" in a world that increasingly affords homosexual and common-law couples the same rights as married couples. "Gender" no longer indicates a person's sex, "but in international debate is used to indicate radical ideological feminism", the cardinal said.

preferences. "Natural" is not a synonym for "good", dietetically or otherwise, plenty of "natural" things, like diseases and earthquakes are not "good"; whereas many things once thought unnatural, like blood transfusion and organ transplants are now regarded as good by all but a few religious cranks. Moreover, what is considered natural and acceptable in some cultures may be thought disgusting in others; that, and changes of fashion and use render the concept of "naturalness" practically useless.

Alas, there seems no end to human credulity and no shortage of tricksters and charlatans to exploit it. Fortune-tellers and occultists flourish and are consulted by politicians and princes. Tarot cards have a special appeal in reading the future, although, as Grayling says, they are not properly speaking a divinatory practice, but a complex card game invented in the fifteenth century. And he refers us to books on the subject by the philosopher Michael Dummett and two collaborators, which show "definitively and finally that occult applications of tarot cards are not only bunkum but exceedingly recent bunkum, dating from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries". Whatever "meaning" the cards may once have had has now been lost, which makes them ideal for occult purposes. They beautifully illustrate the recipe for nonsense, which Grayling describes as taking "something strange-looking, whose meaning is now forgotten", and liberally stirring in imagination and superstition. In this respect he regards the divinatory tarot as "a paradigm of all superstitions".

Most of Dr Grayling's essays have a topical relevance; some deal with specifically topical matters, like the cloning debate which provoked "the standard chorus of horror and alarm" that humanity was interfering with "nature" or playing God. And he notes with disquiet the defensive attitudes adopted by those working towards therapeutic cloning, a defensiveness which yields too much to the ignorance and prejudice of the mainly religious opposition.

A C Grayling has written many books on philosophy and philosophers, but he is also responsible for a recent biography of William Hazlitt (*The Quarrel of the Age*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000). Fittingly, then, there is a piece in the present collection on English essayists like Hazlitt, Addison and others of the great tradition, who may not be studied in schools as they once were but "are still read with relish and enjoyment if only by a minority". His own little book should be read for the same reasons.

– Colin McCall

Here Lies the Bible was "plugged" in the National Secular Society's email newsletter.

Newsline last December. The URL given in the brief mention led directly to the author's website and then to Amazon.com. Why I wish I hadn't bothered to buy it will become clear.

The blurb says that Pike started as a pharmaceutical researcher and then moved into business in various parts of the world, and "has been a humanist from an early age". Now he is back in full time medical research.

You may think, from the punning title, that the book is a collection of biblical errors, or that the author is proclaiming the death of the bible's power. In fact, the author sets out to explain to the reader the background to the writing of the Old Testament, one of the seedbeds of Christianity; the Hellenist and Judaic sources of the New Testament, and what lay behind early lack of interest in Christianity and its subsequent growth. This he does with little polemic or heat.

There is a bibliography (starting bizarrely with *Winnie the Pooh and Jesus*) but no index, and a reprint of *The Evidence for the Resurrection* by Samuel Butler.

But there are many problems, falling under four headings.

Misspelling of names: While there are several misspelled common words which may be put down to slips of the fingers, there are many examples of proper nouns consistently or haphazardly misspelled. So: Sumarians for Sumerians; Eusabius for Eusebius (who Pike says was Bishop of Rome instead of Caesarea); John Hyrancus for John Hyrcanus; Archelas for Archelaus; Abah for Ahab; Omni for Omri; Quernius for Quirinius; and many others.

In the introduction, in referring to the monotheistic pharaohs, Pike uses the common form Amenhotep III and Amenhotep IV (who later took the name Akhnaten), but thereafter uses the less well-known Greek version Amenophis and the form Akhnaton.

Simple errors: Isaac "sacrificed" Jacob (Abraham and Isaac); Emperor Trajan the son of Titus (son of another Trajan, adopted by the Emperor Nerva); Homer influenced by Pythagorean philosophy (Pythagoras was centuries later, though not the Orphist notions which influenced him); destruction of the Temple in 62 (70); Matthew misinterprets the word *almah* in the Hebrew text (*parthenos* – he spells it *pathenos* – in the Greek text), Septuagint written in 3rd C AD (BCE) and so on.

Poor English: The punctuation is shaky, with commas appearing for no apparent reason and

in other places left out where they would be useful.

Mistakes of vocabulary include "mitigates against" (militates against); both instead of each, infer instead of imply, etc.

Some sentences are so badly constructed that they make no sense. The usual difficulty is a pronoun without any antecedent, so that any of three or four previous persons or things could be indicated.

"As a philosopher the following could all be quotes about, or statements by, Jesus".

"The Romans respected the fact that the Jewish faith had a long history and allowed the Jews to follow the traditions of their fathers despite the fact the Romans found some Jewish rites insulting, such as the 'worship of pigs' and found circumcision ridiculous, even though Jews diverted income to the Temple in Jerusalem which otherwise could have gone to pagan temples and despite the fact that the Jews were involved in a war in Judah against Rome itself."

Misunderstanding of sources or garbling: In discussing the administrative arrangements of the Emperor Diocletian he gives no explanation of the titles Augustus and Caesar, and appears not to understand them (two Augusti – senior emperors; two Caesares – junior emperors).

"Bishop Polycarp is of historical interest because he is the first person to record the reading of what we now know as the New Testament as opposed to the oral tradition held by pagans" (Is the oral tradition of Christianity held by pagans?)

"As late as 230 AD Cassius Dio wrote an entire history of Rome in no less than 80 volumes and yet makes no mention of Christians although he does make Maecenas recommend the 'persecution of those innovators of new religions' which may be a tangential reference. (Only 22 of the 80 books survive; Maecenas died in 8 BCE.)

Other problems: Parts of the text, sometimes whole pages, are in italics. The author gives no explanation, but the nature of the italicised text suggests that for other authors it would form part of the end-notes to a chapter.

Throughout, a hyphen is used instead of a dash, so that unconnected words are joined – another irritant, as if there weren't enough already.

Finally, a humanist writing in the 21st century should now be in the habit of using CE and BCE instead of AD and BC.

I have no quarrel with the main thrust of the text, and where I had knowledge of the material, I found no serious mistakes in broad. However, in detail, there are serious problems as illustrated above, serious enough to say don't buy this book until it has been given a thorough revision.

– Barry Thorpe

Freethoughts

Barbara Smoker's latest book, *Freethoughts*, which was very favourably reviewed in the December issue, is available directly from the author at 51 Farmfield Road, Downham, Bromley, BR1 4NF. Published by G W Foote, the book is priced at £9.50 plus £1.00 p&p.

Organising humanism

BRIAN King's fears (*Points of View*, December, 2002) about the implications of my earlier suggestions for re-organisation and redirection of humanist effort are misplaced. First, I am not suggesting one organisation but two: one for support and education of membership, a charity; one for campaigning. Reorganisation alone would be most unlikely to frighten the government but, if it did, that would be a good thing for the prospects of the humanist movement. The government's consultations bring changes in government policy when the government is frightened of the body it is consulting, or when that body represents something the government needs, rarely otherwise.

Brian King's assumption that "there already exists a body of moral guidance that has triumphed over the religious one in the minds of all but the cranky few" is far from being borne out by current evidence, which suggests rather a general feeling of moral confusion accompanied by a vague notion that religion, suitably diluted, remains a morally beneficial influence.

That last notion is the one we have to negate and, so far, we are not making a very effective job of doing so. The cover of the issue of the *Freethinker* in which Brian's letter appeared featured one of the new NSS mugs bearing the message, "Religion is the problem not the answer". I regard that as a true statement but, as a statement, it is a mere allegation until demonstrated by convincing argument. Too much of our argument is addressed to religious specifics, on which the religious can finesse and sometimes give a little ground and which the non-practising passively religious can ignore as not fundamental. We should be concentrating overwhelmingly on the reasons which make all religions incurably unreliable as a basis of moral and social culture, and representative of patterns of thought of which humanity, as a matter of evolutionary adaptation, needs to divest itself.

An effective concentration on this theme might well frighten the government, and a good thing too!

JIM ROSS
Perth

Guarding civil liberties

SECLARISTS, I would have thought, should guard civil liberties, so often abused by religionists. But not *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke who advocates "imposing jail terms on people guilty of trying to undermine the values of a society into which they have settled" (*Freethinking Allowed*, January)

I take his point about kindlers of strife and those who foment hatred and intolerance, but "undermining values" is another matter. This is

topical since from this December it will become unlawful, for the first time in Great Britain, to harass somebody on the grounds of their religion or belief. In the draft regulations, harassment is defined as conduct which violates the person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. In other words I can turn to the law if, as a secularist, I face hatred and intolerance. Quite right. And religionists are protected equally. But I don't want the law to protect my values. I'll do that myself.

Some religionists disagree. And now, I find, so does Barry Duke.

BOB DEACON
Wolverhampton

Vaccination

FREDERICK Bacon's letter in January's *Freethinker* adds to my conviction that doctors do more harm than good when they freely inflict their "treatments" upon an unsuspecting public.

I and many of my family have suffered severe ill effects from prescription drugs and immunisation, some having been brought close to death. We have been saved by the alternative therapies which the medical profession goes to great lengths to condemn and debunk in order to keep the profits of pharmaceutical companies at a high level.

It never ceases to amaze me how gullible people can be when being brainwashed by scientists with a hidden agenda. They will enthusiastically parrot what the money-grubbers tell them to believe. Freethinkers really should think for themselves and try both doctors' drugs and alternative therapies to get a truly scientific comparison. It is worth remembering that some debunkers of safe, effective, alternative therapies are paid large sums of money and that your health is not a consideration when they happily trouser these inducements.

BARBARA BARRETT
Berkshire

A GRAPH of smallpox deaths in England and Wales – produced by Professor T McKeown – shows smallpox declining rapidly in the 1800s: the smallpox death-rate would have gone off the graph around 1870/80 but for the compulsory vaccination campaign. In 1867, with the start of mass vaccination, the death-rate took off, with a peak of 42,000 deaths in 1871/2 alone.

After the shot had done its lethal work the deaths declined until the 1920s when isolation defeated the disease.

Around the world the shot was a disaster: apart from the tens of thousands of deaths there was a huge legacy of tuberculosis, dysentery, malaria etc. The only large-scale scientifically valid trial of any vaccine was in Southern India, involving 260,000 people and

the BCG "anti-tubercular" shot.

Unfortunately for the vaccine makers and their pals they ended with more TB in the vaccinated group than in the controls. After this, vaccine trials were abandoned.

The massive explosion of childhood illness – physical, mental and emotional – has run parallel with the vaccine campaigns. This is hardly surprising since the children are being subject to multiple assaults involving the injection, directly into the bloodstream, of animal-derived proteins and viruses, formaldehyde, carbolic acid, gelatin, aluminium, mercury, antibiotics and so on.

Criminals have a high incidence of symptoms caused by encephalitis: the chief cause of encephalitis is vaccination. This explains the spiralling incidence of adolescent criminality, violence, arson, social unrest, learning and behavioural problems etc. We are now experiencing the US situation as our vaccination rates reach the same levels as over there.

PAT RATTIGAN N D
Author *Blood Poison*,
Chesterfield

Secularism in Turkey

JANUARY'S *Freethinker* discusses Turkey's application to join the EU and describes that country as "secular". The Turkish authorities (and the USA) would like us to think that this is the case, but the claim does not really stand up.

In a secular state the authorities are even-handed as between different faiths. In Turkey, however, the Ministry of Religious Affairs concerns itself only with Sunni Islam, not with the Alevis estimated to make up 30 per cent of the population, and not with the much-reduced Christian communities. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the leadership of the Nestorian Christians have, when circumstances have permitted, complained of all manner of official discrimination. One has to wonder why there are now only 3,000 Greeks in Istanbul when there were 300,000 in the early 1950s; the answer is not simply "money".

As recently as 1993 there was what can only be described as a religious pogrom in the city of Sivas: fanatical Sunnis set fire to a hotel that was staging a festival of Alevi (a minority strand of Islam) culture when they discovered that Aziz Nesin, publisher of the Turkish edition of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, was present. Thirty people lost their lives, but equally disturbing are reports that the fire brigade response was deliberately tardy in order to appease majority religious sentiment.

The leader of the majority party in the Turkish Parliament has a conviction for incitement to religious hatred. If Turkey joined the EU, more foreigners would visit the country: though Turkey has gone some way to meet EU



legal norms of civil liberties there remains an element with the mentality of those who perpetrated the Sivas massacre.

In Turkey, secularism does not mean what we in the UK take it to mean. Because the founders of the Turkish Republic saw religion as a potentially reactionary political force, they decided that the state should take control of majority (Sunni) Islam, which has in practice become a faith with official privileges. This is not what I understand by secularism, but who am I to quibble when bishops sit in the upper chamber of my country's parliament?

BILL COLLINS
Derby

Offensive cover

USUALLY I donate my *Freethinker* to the local library. But I will not do so in the case of the January issue, nor will I pass it on to anyone else. Regrettably I must put it out with the wastepaper. Why? Because of the headline on the cover. Accompanying a picture of a man swinging from a cross, it reads: "Come on baby, let's do the crucifixion". Crucifixion was, as we all know, a cruel method of execution used by the Roman empire. Neither that, nor any other form of torture, can be regarded as a joke. This cover could alienate people who may be inclined to give support to the secular cause. The cause does not need this kind of humour. Religion is so manifestly absurd that its nonsense is best exposed by wit, not crass bad taste.

JESSIE BOYD
Gwent

Aspects of Jesus

IT WAS sad to see the "Christmas" trash available from websites (*Freethinker*, January) because the target of the humour was not necessarily religious organisations but the fictional or actual person Jesus. I don't mind which he was, for much of his reported behaviour and particularly that of his attempt to reform the Jewish faith was and still can be inspiring, so long as one avoids "churchianity".

This character was tough on hypocrisy and its causes and, though his and his followers' campaign was not successful, the story is good and the idea itself is nothing to laugh at.

PETER ARNOLD
Alderney

PATRICK Gormley (*Points of View*, February 2003) claimed that the "historical existence" (*sic*) of Jesus is "uncertain". Well, of course, insofar as the past is inaccessible, the existence of any historical character is "uncertain". Historians typically have to guess about the past and make assumptions based on whatever evidence comes to hand. However, in the case

of Jesus, I know of no historian who doubts that he did exist. They are sure that a person of that name was crucified by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. This does not mean that we have to accept everything claimed in the Gospels, on which matter see my book *The Rise and Fall of Jesus* (1996).

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Women contributors

THE reasons women are under-represented in the *Freethinker* and other areas of public life are many and varied, and well worthy of discussion.

As the editor points out in the January issue, and Bill McIlroy in the February issue, if women do not submit items to the *Freethinker*, they will remain under-represented.

However, I am deeply disturbed by the tone of the replies to Sue Lord's letter in a journal that is supposed to be part of the humanist movement.

Women (and men) need support and encouragement. Some of the phrases used were completely unacceptable. An apology is called for.

D A LANGDOWN
Kent

THE *Freethinker* editor says that women choose to exclude themselves from the *Freethinker*, and thinks he know why.

Where, I wonder, is his evidence that women are "reluctant to be associated with the mainly radical anti-religious tone of the magazine", the most outspoken journalists supporting our views at the current time are women. Polly Toynbee, Joan Smith, Natasha Walter, Mary Ridell in the press, and women contributors to the *Freethinker* are no less likely to write on a wide range of secularist issues, political, historical and social, and are as outspoken as male contributors. What they are more likely to do, however, is look with a cool eye on the malign effects of religion, on people, community and politics on a practical level. Rational religion bashing by men or women is necessary and is not the same as empty ritual god-bashing.

He thinks it is "natural" for the *Freethinker* to be reluctant to accept contributions written under pseudonyms. Perhaps he is unfamiliar with the perfectly respectable and acceptable practice used by writers throughout the ages. It has never been considered in any way disreputable or discreditable. It has been especially used by women who want to avoid the sheer small-minded nastiness of misogynists who cannot assess material without the help of their prejudices.

Cherry Potter, in an article in the *Guardian* last year, describes the problems encountered by women writers who want to "speak with confidence about the human condition, and especially the psychological and social condi-

tion of women living in a deeply patriarchal age", and adds "They strive to be both acceptable and radical at the same time."

For more information and research findings see www.rootsofsexism.freeuk.com. Nor is the use of pseudonyms confined to women: the late Nicolas Walter used pseudonyms, including at least one female identity.

The editor's insinuation that women only write for money deserves only contempt. If I ever get paid for anything I write or any of the work I do to promote strong atheist, secularist views it will be a first, and I expect this goes for most of us other than the very few employees of whom the editor is one! In my view the *Freethinker* should be more than just a vehicle for a narrow, and rather old fashioned, personal concept of atheism. Its editor has, in my opinion, not only a responsibility to write entertaining and informative leaders (which he does brilliantly) but to widen the range of contributors and topics, male and female, on the expression of atheism and anti-religious polemic. Not least because it is the ONLY British journal that does this. We cannot afford its being used as a personal newsletter for a small, self-selected clique.

A SHAW (www.shaw.freeuk.com)
London

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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 Cleevelands 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 Balgores 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 Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. 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, 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 Mellroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.

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