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The Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

VatiCon

The Pope says:
**Don't be a dickhead,
rubber up!**

Don't be fooled by cheap imitations. Look out for the Virgin Mary stamp of approval on every condom wrapper

Pack of 3 blessed johnnies

'I never leave home without one'
— John Paul II

In a more sensible world, will we see ads like this?

see p7 report



The real Archbishop is pictured right

Many think that the new Archbishop of Canterbury is a dead ringer for Gandalf the Magician, but a toy maker sees him more as a cuddly teddy, and has launched Rowan the Bear. The company hopes people all over the world will be clamouring to get their hands on the fuzzy-faced, £120 Rowan. Ah, but will it wash your feet?

— See pages 2 & 3

NEW employment protection regulations required by a Directive from the European Union are to come into force in the UK in December 2003. They are intended to protect religious believers and others from discrimination at work.

Rationalists are on shaky ground if we protest when, for example, a religious school wants all its employees to be Christian. If we object to this, we are applying pressure in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

Our objection has to be to *the existence of religious schools at all*, and to the teaching of any religion to children in schools.

If there is a Jewish school or hospital or shop already set up, of course they would prefer everyone on the staff to be Jewish. Likewise Quaker, Muslim, Catholic etc.

It is not coherent to say: "You can have a Christian (or Muslim) school, but you can't insist that all your employees be Christian (or Muslim)."

If we founded a Humanist Hospice, we really would not want any of the nurses or cleaners or anyone employed there to be evangelising Christians, or proselytising Muslims. A dying humanist or rationalist ought to be allowed to die in peace. Cleaners and the people who bring the food round in hospitals often interact with the patients and their attitudes can be as important as that of the medical and nursing staff to the well-being of the sick.

Five years ago, I was seriously ill in my local hospital, wires and tubes everywhere, plugged in to blinking and pinging machines. Two Muslim nurses harangued me, separately and together, over several days, that I must be Muslim, as my name is Arabic. It was not fun. A Christian dying in a Christian hospice would not like it either.

A resident in a nursing home for vegetarians would feel more comfortable if everyone on the staff were vegetarian. It's probably impos-

sible to find enough vegetarians for this. But if the woman who cleans your room is a meat-eater, she is likely to treat you, if only subliminally, or unintentionally, or behind your back, as a bit of a freak. Can we say that vegetarians should not be allowed their own places? Vegetarians harm no one. Similarly, care homes for elderly members of any religion would understandably prefer all members of staff to be of that religion.

Something which causes no comment, but is to me highly objectionable, is when non-Muslim, probably secular architects, design mosques and other buildings in Muslim coun-

Guest contributor RASJIDAH ST JOHN gives her views on the new employment protection regulations required by the European Union

tries and here in England. It is right and good that a *doctor* treats and tries to save the life of any person whatever their beliefs or crimes. As far as I have been able to ascertain, architects think the same applies to their profession – any commission is a job, and they just do whatever they are paid to do. Business is business. So that at present in Saudi Arabia, Western architects are engaged in the construction of a huge shopping mall, with a separate entrance for women, long ramps for them to be driven up by their male chauffeurs or relatives, with no possibility of encountering a man. (Women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive.) How can any honorable secular or Christian architect take part in such an undertaking? One is reminded of the anger after World War 2 at the firms which had supplied the cremation furnaces for the Nazi extermination camps. Such furnaces were ordinary com-

mercial products – in the 1930s cremation was just beginning to be accepted in Europe, but the ordering of so many ovens must have rung alarm bells.

Regarding the segregation of women today, this is something we in the West have struggled against for a century or more, so how can Western architectural firms condone it? The same criticism applies of course to the building labourers, the white-collar workers and everyone involved. But the professionals ought to be expected to have the highest standards as they know what the commission really is; most of the others probably don't.

At Nuremburg, we did decide that: "I was just doing my job" is not any kind of an excuse. And one wonders, "Have the Muslims not got architects and builders of their own? If not, why not?" Our medieval cathedrals were built by Christians, I think. Or did we import Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish architects?

Today in Britain, Hindu temples are being built, some of which are specifically for certain castes only. In India itself, the caste system is theoretically illegal, and has been since independence, though it is still powerful in practice. Certainly, in England, such caste segregated buildings must be against our law.

I myself have no wish to prohibit the existence of religiously affiliated hospices for those in need of care, or for the dying. Schools are another matter altogether. We certainly should campaign against religious schools, starting with Northern Ireland.

A similar and non-religious example of the dissociation of the worker from her work, is the secretary. Back in the 1960s, I knew a woman who was secretary for ten or more years to Jack Jones, the much-liked and respected Trades Unions leader. She was a lifelong staunch conservative, and said so when she applied for the job. She used to argue with him about what he was trying to do.

I can understand that this loyal opposition might have been useful for Jack, but *her* position I found and find astonishing. She was a dedicated and efficient worker, the best kind of secretary, and a highly intelligent political animal. Secretaries take pride in their professional ethics, that they do not have to be in agreement with the kind of work that they do. Loyalty to the boss is taken for granted. If you are a devout Christian working for a Jewish rabbi, no problem. Perhaps individual secretaries and architects draw the line somewhere, but not as clearly as one would expect of human beings who are free agents, who are rational.

Rather than argue about whether non-Catholics should have the right to work in a Catholic school, we should ask "Why would a non-Catholic WANT to work in a Catholic school?" Architects, secretaries and others should not have a professional ethic patterned on that of doctors.

Archbishop lookalike teddy launched

ROWAN Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has been described as a "hairy lefty". But even he is not quite as hairy as a new lookalike teddy bear which is about to go on sale, according to BBC News Online.

The Rowan Bear, priced at £120, was launched just in time this year for members of the Church of England general synod to order one.

The bear was launched by the satirical Christian online magazine Ship of Fools. Co-editor Stephen Goddard said: "We recommend Prime Minister Tony Blair buys one for comfort because the real thing is unlikely to be quite so cuddly."

The bear, which is 11 inches tall and made from German mohair and silk, is expected to become a collectors' item.

Another off-the-wall item launched with Christians in mind is the world's first inflatable church, which went on display to the public for the first time last month. The bouncy-castle-style blow-up church, which is 47 feet (14.3 metres) high from ground to steeple, 47 feet long and 25 feet (7.6 metres) wide, includes a blow-up organ, altar, pulpit, pews, candles and "stained glass" windows.

The church, produced by Michael Gill of InnovationsUK.com Ltd in Salisbury Green, near Southampton, was on display at the National Christian Resources Exhibition in Esher, Surrey.



WE may not have heard the last of Rowan Williams' feet washing ceremony because a rumour is circulating that it is the forerunner of a major change of direction to be taken by the Church of England.

Pressure for the change comes from the ever growing awareness that, due to such serious infections as Herpes and now SARS, the unhygienic oral form of the Eucharist should be replaced by a more benign practice such as pedal purification using blessed warm water laced with a squirt of antiseptic holy spirit*. Footwear would be left by the front door thus enhancing interfaith relations with our Muslim brethren.

Rowan William's foot-washing stunt at Easter fired the imagination of ARTHUR LEDGER and NORMAN PRIDMORE

Such a radical shift would, at least, have biblical support because, by definition, our Lord washed more feet than he had last suppers, or possibly even hot breakfasts. The big question though is whether or not such a show of ecclesiastical interest in our lower extremities would get more bums on seats. It's queues for the pews that we're really after and the custom of putting hands together is not working so some are saying "give feet a chance". The scheme just might work for, picture this if you will: you've been out shopping all morning and your feet are killing you. What could be more inviting than a footsoak in the nearest C of E.

Personal problems such as smelly feet would be resolved using copious amounts of incense. So God might have had a purpose in directing us to use the stuff after all. Some form of priestly mantra would have to accompany the ablutions and I imagine such phrases as "the tired feet of Jesus" or "God bless the footsie" might be strong contenders. Yet another benefit could be a modest form of priestly chiropody advice related to corns or bunions. Then instead of displaying "Jesus is risen" on church notice boards, which just sounds to me like a successful Bero recipe, they could claim that Christianity brings not only healthy minds but also healthy feet.

If the above ideas are adopted then one might speculate that Pope John Paul will follow Rowan's lead by personally going down on a select few of his flock. I wouldn't expect him to descend to ground level, though, due to his considerable flexible deficiency. Perhaps he might settle for navel cleansing using Vatican designer belly-button wipes. That should pull them in off the streets; in fact, just thinking about it makes my back hairs rise. And, as before, there would be theological backing for the change because tradition has it that, when Jesus chased out the evil spirits they vacated their victims through those little "innies" and

Or How the Archbishop of Cant, if He Dares Risk it, Will turn Water into Wine, and a Biscuit into Soap

"outies". So, both the theory and the practice would be perfectly *kosher* (if you'll excuse the expression). Curiously enough, for centuries, a significant section of the Catholic priesthood has shown a preferred interest in the more erogeous zones of the human body, particularly in young people. Sadly for these bringers of God's love, erectile functions behind closed doors are now strictly no go (or come) areas, but the proposed ritual would, at least, bring them closer to the G-spot than they can hope to reach under the present Vatican regime reluctantly imposed after public pressure.

Finally, one might look forward to an ideal world in which other religions choose their alternative anatomical areas of special interest and then in one glorious ecumenical coalescence they all merge as one to service the sum of the parts the others had reached. Religious centres worldwide would then take on the mantle of holy massage parlours into which, as distinct from now, congregations would enter in high expectation and emerge with smiles on their faces and Hallelujas on their lips. Speaking in tongues would be commonplace and, at last, Sunday attendance would be up like never before.

So it's congratulations to Rowan. His holy washing-up bowl idea is brilliant, and I hope he introduces it nationwide just as soon as God gives the word.

I can't wait to put my foot in it.

* Whether the water should be blessed before or after heating can be settled at the next Synod or two.

— Arthur Ledger

IN between spouting gobbets of the Higher Nonsense over the Easter period, our Archbishop of Canterbury (the "our" is in reluctant recognition of the fact of Establishment, nothing more) I note that he contrived to do something approximately useful. Or something that might at least have been useful in other circumstances.

I refer, of course, to his act of feet-washing. Good stuff, Rowan. I'm sure that the recipients

felt much better as a result of having their ten little piggies freshened up.

Of course, it wasn't a real foot washing. No, no, not at all. It was Symbolic. Apparently it was something that

Rowans pin-up boy Jesus did. Being keen to follow his example, Rowan decided that he should go and do likewise. Can we look forward to his performing a forty day fast in the Brecon Beacons, I wonder? Or a visit by him to York Minster (which is I



Foot-washing as depicted by the Christian Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe

gather about to introduce admission charges); he'd cut a fine and dashing figure wielding a whip and overturning the cash registers. Real front-page stuff.

Anyway, back to the foot-washing. How grubby were the feet in question, I wonder. Not very, I suspect. Did it cost him much? Did he feel "humbled" by performing this act? Did he feel better after he'd done it, as though he'd fulfilled some divine imperative? In a nutshell, what was the point of the whole imbecilic exercise?

In the far-off mid-sixties when my father was grubbing together a living as a peripatetic chiropodist I used now and then to go out with him on his calls. I remember vividly one visit he made to a Shropshire hovel to attend to the feet of an ancient woman. I will spare readers the more gory details, except to say that to my young eyes it was impossible to determine where the feet began and the encrustations ended.

With unspeakable tenderness my father washed these feet. Over the years I have lost count of the number of times I have, in the course of my work, dressed wounds, eased the pain of the dying, wiped faeces from the bodies of those far gone into the world of Alzheimers disease. I could go on to multiply examples, but I'm sure my drift is by now well caught.

These were not "symbolic acts". They were, rather, the acts of a normal human being ungoverned by liturgical rigmarole and the demands of dogma. Countless similar acts were being performed at the same time by countless others with no thought of God or some "Higher Necessity", with no sense of obligation other than that a particular suffering mortal needed help.

In performing his "symbolic act" the Reverend Archbishop showed only the degree to which hypocritical slop lies at the heart of his religion and the extent to which Christian Goodness is a fantasy-driven artefact of confused sentimentality.

— Norman Pridmore

THE Government has finalised the Employment Regulations drawn up under the European Directive to combat discrimination on the grounds of religious/belief and sexual orientation.

But in the case of organisations who claim they have "a religious ethos", exemptions are to enshrine in law their right to discriminate on these grounds (and to an astonishingly wide degree). This will probably result in an increase, rather than the intended reduction, in the level of discrimination practised by such employers.

As the Regulations are being introduced as Statutory Instruments there will be only a brief debate in Parliament and no amendments can be made. Parliament can only accept or reject the Regulations as they stand. The chances of rejection are slim, given the size of the Government's majority and that the Regulations are required by EU Directive to be passed into UK law this year.

The NSS expects these blanket exemptions for the UK to be used as a blueprint by evangelical groups in other member countries. As a result of NSS campaigning in Brussels, however, the only exemptions to the Regulations permitted in any country are those passed by its own legislature, so the exemptions granted in the UK do not have EU-wide applicability.

The problem is Regulation 7 of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 which allows discrimination on the grounds of religion (or none) "where an employer has an ethos based on religion or

belief and, having regard to that ethos and to the nature of the employment or the context in which it is carried out—

(a) being of a particular religion or belief is a genuine occupational requirement for the job;

(b) it is proportionate to apply that requirement in the particular case.

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reports that impending anti-discrimination regulations for the workplace might, in fact, increase discrimination



Subsection (c) is even more sinister in that it states baldly that the employer will not be held liable if "the employer is not satisfied, and in all the circumstances it is reasonable for him not to be satisfied, that that person [employee] meets [the requirement]." In other words, religious employers can discriminate if they merely suspect that an employee, whatever s/he says, is not of the requisite faith, or sexuality, or even that the employee is co-habiting outside marriage.

The equivalent Regulation, also number 7, for "(Sexual Orientation)" is even more draconian. It contains the same wording as above, plus the following:

(3) This paragraph applies where:-

(a) the employment is for purposes of an organised religion;

(b) the employer applies a requirement related to sexual orientation—

(i) so as to comply with the doctrines of the religion, or

(ii) because of the nature of the employment and the context in which it is carried out, so as to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers.

(Readers may care to compare this with the C of E's Response dated January 23, 2003 to the DTI Consultation Document: "Nothing in ... these Regulations shall render unlawful anything done for the purposes or in connection with an organised religion so as to comply with the doctrines of the religion or avoid offending the religious susceptibilities of a significant number of its followers".)

This latter exemption concerning followers is the one thought to be the most likely to be the subject of any legal challenge. Some leading human rights lawyers in the UK consider there to be a *prima facie* case that some of the religious exemptions are potentially *ultra vires* under European law.

The very antithesis of secularism

The Established Church may be crumbling and near-bankrupt, but be in no doubt that it has

the ear of this Government at the highest level. And it is determined to exploit its influence to the full. The C of E's Submission also demanded that: "Churches and other faith-based organisations must not find themselves in a position where the law of the land is preventing them from conscientiously applying their own sincerely held doctrines and beliefs on moral issues." It followed this with "Given the importance of the issue we would also want the opportunity for discussions at a very senior level of Government and possibly in partnership with other Church leaders, if a satisfactory solution cannot be found." Or, in Church House speak: "Give us what we demand or we'll insist on a meeting with the PM". And of course they got exactly what they demanded.

Not that the C of E was the only religious player. The evangelical group CARE (the one that places interns in the Palace of Westminster to learn the ropes and to "network" in the corridors of power) told its supporters: "Together with the Evangelical Alliance we have had regular meetings with ministers and officials and have made written submissions." And while pleased with this "major concession to faith groups", even the travesty we have ended up with was not quite good enough for them. "The final draft is not as 'faith friendly' as we would have liked", they moaned. This dissatisfaction is because they fear that it is only "in limited circumstances" that "an employer within the faith sector can make requirements as to the applicant's or employee's sexual orientation". They do express satisfaction with the insertion, at the last moment, of a right for religious organisations to dismiss employees on the grounds of sexual orientation or religion (or lack of it).

An overview of the campaign

What can we learn from this campaign that might assist in future? We (the NSS) were among the first organisations to campaign on the Directive (before it was passed in the EU Parliament) and to alert others to the dangers. After the Brussels *coup*, though, it was downhill all the way. It has been acknowledged informally by the DTI that our submissions were well researched and well argued. We know they reached ministerial tables. We spoke at length to two ministers and to the most senior civil servants dealing with the issue. This occurred through many meetings and innumerable telephone conversations, all of which were constructive. We were one of the few organisations selected to take part in detailed discussions before the formal consultation process even started.

Yet, the wording in the consultation document was weak in terms of the protection it was supposed to provide, and despite our pointing this out *ad nauseam*, we lost out at every subsequent stage, and the religious gained. The tenor of the exchanges we had,

Death With Dignity campaigners launch new website

ISLE of Man resident Patrick Kneen, who has prostate cancer, has launched the new website for the campaign group Manx For Death With Dignity at www.Manx4DWD.org.uk.

The site calls on members of Tynwald to set up a committee to report back on the legalisation of assisted suicide for mentally competent, terminally-ill people who have made repeated requests to die.

The site argues for a change in the law to allow such people to ask for medical assistance to die if they are suffering unbearably. The website discusses why and how the law should be changed and lists possible safeguards to prevent abuse of the new law. Supporters of the Death With Dignity campaign can sign an on-line petition which will be forwarded to Members of the House of Keys asking for their support.

• An NOP poll has revealed that 81 per cent of the UK public think that a person who is suffering unbearably from a terminal illness should be allowed by law to receive medical help to die.



and the very questions in the consultation, showed that the playing field was tilted against us from the outset, and we have had independent corroboration of this well before the final regulations were published.

Our complaint about the final regulations – but only after they had been finalised – was copiously covered in the *Independent* and to a lesser extent the *Observer*. Otherwise, we failed on publicity. Yet, over the whole campaign we probably spent two or three weeks on trying to generate interest in this matter and sent out in total nearly a thousand press releases. The “pegs” for these could only be artificial ones, such as the end of a consultation period. Not too exciting to a journalist, especially as the subject

matter is rather dry, and until now it was difficult to demonstrate that our fears were realistic and important. A further problem was that the topic was highly complicated, which meant that it needed commitment from journalists to understand, and describing the problem in print could simply not be done briefly.

Apart from the outcome itself, the only other regret is that there was virtually no support from the unions or the TUC. We informed them at every stage at a senior level and offered to meet. They seemed so pleased with prospect of the Regulations themselves, they seemed unable to grasp the risk from the exemptions. Some may have been motivated by their own religious views and others seemed fearful of a backlash from their

religious members. The worst problems did not emerge until the very final version that went to Parliament, so our concerns may have seemed to them to be scaremongering. Our case was not helped by the former head of the gay campaigning group *Stonewall* (now on the DTI staff), whom we had briefed on several occasions, assuring the TUC conference that there was nothing to fear from the exemptions. Again, I cannot see what else we could have done.

Nevertheless, the NSS has raised a formal procedural complaint with Parliament about the unfairness of the process and the potential illegality of the regulations, as have leading human rights campaigners and lawyers, and this could lead to a Judicial Review.

OF the making of books, it is claimed, there is no end. And no bad thing either, I say. Of course there is a strong argument that quantity does not necessarily mean quality. But as William Burroughs commented in another context (that of drugs, to be precise, and I paraphrase): one always wants more

As usual, however, the matter is not as simple as first appears. Sure, we’re lucky. We have bookshops and libraries, clubs and groups. But what about ... oh, Saudi Arabia? Burma? China? And moving closer to home, just how easy is it to get hold of those works that have never been “fashionable” or “popular”? There’s a vast amount of really good stuff that hardly ever gets read simply because it’s hard to get hold of.

Around seventy-five years ago H G Wells published a little polemical collection called *Mr Belloc Objects*. It was his response to Hilaire Belloc’s travesty of misrepresentation of evolutionary theory as Wells had described it in his *Outline of History*. Those who think that Dawkins is sometimes a little blunt should read it. Disdain oozes from its pages. It is the apotheosis of sarcasm.

Sadly, prospective readers must hunt out their own copies. There must be quite a few around, sitting quietly in the stacks of provincial bookshops. Or your local internet bookseller may be able to help. The trouble is, it can be both expensive and time-consuming. How easy it would be if it were freely available on-line. Any takers?

Which brings me to this month’s selections. Over the years a vast amount of “freethought” literature has been produced, very little of which is easily available in print form. This is little less than a tragedy, given the extraordinary quality of much of it. It’s with this in mind that I’d like to suggest a few sites where such material is available.

Let’s start at the beginning, with Thomas Paine. OK, so his stuff is not too hard to find anyway – but for sheer convenience take a look at <http://www.ushistory.org/paine/> and <http://www.deism.com/paine.htm>. It’s

Webwatch

all there. Paine is important for his major works, certainly, but some of his comments in letters and his brief essays are significant too. These words from his letter to the “Missionary Society”, given the increasing evangelical incursions into Iraq, have a very contemporary ring – “Priests, we know, are not remarkable for doing anything gratis; they have in general some scheme in everything they do, either to impose on the ignorant, or derange the operations of government.”

NORMAN PRIDMORE roots out internet sites of interest to freethinkers

Robert Ingersoll too has not merely a historical significance. His works are collected online at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert_ingersoll/index.shtml. Wrote Ingersoll: “In every orthodox Sunday school children are taught to believe in devils. Every little brain becomes a menagerie, filled with wild beasts from hell. The imagination is polluted with the deformed, the monstrous and malicious. To fill the minds of children with leering fiends – with mocking devils – is one of the meanest and basest of crimes.” This, from his essay on “Devils”, is as applicable today to the ranting fundies as ever it was – more so, perhaps, if used-car tycoon Peter Vardy and his ilk have their way.

Chapman Cohen, editor of the *Freethinker* from 1915 to 1951 is, like Paine and Ingersoll, far more than merely a historical figure. He wrote with clarity and directness and with an intellectual passion that few have equalled. To give just one example, here is his definition of “Freethinking”: “Freethought may be defined as the rejection of authority in matters of opinion. It sets the persuasion of fact against the coercion of force. A Freethinker is one who

forms his own opinions on the facts as he sees them. Right or wrong, his opinions are his own. He is a voice, not an echo.” Go to <http://www.positiveatheism.org/tochcohn.htm> for much more.

The embattled life and awful death of Madalyn Murray O’Hair has led in some quarters to her writings being seriously devalued. Take a look at her essay “See the Tree” at <http://www.atheists.org/Atheism/seethetree.html> and at “Atheism” at <http://www.atheists.org/Atheism/atheism.html>. It’s pungent stuff, and more challenging than much that’s many times the length.

And on the subject of brevity, how about Bertrand Russell? His lecture “Why I Am Not A Christian”, delivered to the NSS South London Branch at Battersea Town Hall in 1927 is available at http://www.atheistcommunity.org/library/library_why_i_am_not_a_christian.htm

Said Russell, in his closing statement, “A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men.”

Lastly, Charles Bradlaugh. His work as an activist is justly famous, in certain quarters at least, but his writings are less well known. In fact, he was a sophisticated thinker in his own right, and a polemicist of genius. Go to http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles_bradlaugh/index.shtml and take a look at any of the works there. Wit, clarity and directness are there in abundance. And perhaps that god-fearing duo Tony Blair and George W Bush might care to ponder these words of Bradlaugh from the conclusion of “What Did Jesus Teach?” – “Torpedoes and explosive shells, one hundred ton guns and melinite, are by Christian rulers accounted better aids than faith in Jesus”. Ah, the paradoxes of faith!

Thanks for all the suggestions and comments. More, as ever, to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

The Canadian government is in the midst of a major review of laws governing same-sex couples which will continue for two years. So far the Liberal government of Jean Chretien has amended 68 federal statutes allowing homosexual couples rights ranging from shared pensions to income tax recognition.

As I write, the House of Commons Justice Committee has been holding cross-Canada hearings to examine both sides of the argument on same sex marriage and must rewrite the legal definition of marriage to conform to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Members of EGALE (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) have pointed out at the hearings that prohibition of same sex marriages violates section 15 of the Charter and have asserted that they're "not interested in some kind of constitutional booby prize".

The atmosphere at the hearings has gravely concerned veteran gay MP (NDP-Labour) Svend Robinson who has named points of order against the "hatred spewed" by religious witnesses. Some witnesses have been reported repeating the parallels between homosexuality and paedophilia and bestiality and have suggested that homosexuality is "curable" in the same way that alcoholism is. As Robinson has pointed out, "I didn't wake up one morning and decide as I was pouring the milk on my Wheaties that I was going to be gay." For his part, Robinson is presenting a Private Members Bill (C-250) to have gay people protected from hate crimes. (Svend also put forward a Private Members Bill a few years ago to have "God" removed from the Constitution).

The process of review has revealed a split in the government between those Members (including 3 government ministers) who have publicly declared support for gay marriage, and the government as a whole which remains intransigent on the issue before the courts. In fact it appears that ultimately this is a battle to be decided upon by the Supreme Court rather than a decision of government. On July 12, 2002 the Ontario Divisional Court ruled that the federal government has two years to amend its position on gay marriage to conform with the Charter. Instead, the federal government has decided to take the costly and consuming route of appealing the decision, meaning that the case could end up in the Supreme Court. Due to the Charter, however, it is anticipated that the government is unlikely to win its case. Quebec, Canada's French-speaking province, passed a law in June 2002 known as the Civil Union Act to recognize gay "civil unions". The province of Nova Scotia has a similar law. These unions, however, are not recognized outside the province in which they are struck.

The federal government's rejection of gay marriage is based on an 1866 British court decision that reserved marriage as an institution between a man and a woman only. In July,

2002, the federal government indicated that it might opt out of marriage ceremonies altogether, leaving it to the churches and some sort of legal civil union. A poll indicates that Canadians are evenly split on the question of same-sex marriage. The right-wing Alliance opposition part is vociferously opposed.

In a special report for the *Freethinker*, Canadian humanist ELLEN RAMSAY examines the manner in which the Canadian Government is dealing with same-sex couple rights, and describes how the issue has mobilised the Christian bigots

The political developments in same-sex decisions then provide the backdrop for another debate in Canada involving the Anglican Church (Church of England) and the blessing of same-sex unions. While it is difficult to tell whether this is just a tempest in a teapot, the press have blown the story to large proportion giving it front-page coverage in the early days and front-section coverage since then. In June 2002, the diocese of New Westminster (including Vancouver) became the first diocese in the worldwide Anglican community to formally endorse motion 7 in favour of the blessing of gay and lesbian relationships. The motion which calls on bishops to create a new rite for homosexual unions has been voted on three times in the diocese, each time with a majority in favour of the motion. In 1998, 51% were in favour; in 2001, 56.5% were in favour; and in June 2002, 62.5% were in favour. The bishop of New Westminster, generally believed to be a liberal bishop, declined to assent to the motion until 2002. The vote at synod in favour was 215 to 129 and sparked a protest where 12 conservative priests representing 8 parishes walked out. The disputes between the two sides may be witnessed on the worldwide web: the pro side being represented at www.vancouver.anglican.ca; and the con-side at www.acinw.org. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has been acclaimed by both sides at various times as a supporter of their views. For his part, Williams has said that the actions of the dissidents in the diocese in Canada are causing problems for the world's Anglican leaders.

The result of the synod vote on motion 7 was the formation of a breakaway faction of 8 conservative parishes, referring to themselves as the Anglican Communion in New Westminster (ACiNW) who desire to side step Bishop Ingham and have a "flying bishop" preside over them appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Officially this is referred to as granting Alternative Episcopal Oversight (AEO) and has been granted in

cases in England and the United States for churches opposing the ordination of women. So far AEO has not been granted to the dissident churches. Their recent attempts to move under the authority of conservative bishop of the Yukon, Terry Buckle, has also been thwarted and now Ingham is demanding that the dissident clergymen affirm their obedience to him or face discipline. Ecclesiastical whips are flying on both sides.

The breakaway faction has withheld their dues from the diocese as happens in these cases. While the diocese consists of 25,000 members, just 10,000 people regularly attend services and the 8 dissenting churches represent a minority of 20% of the diocese. It is estimated that the boycott is costing the diocese 18% of its revenue of \$1.5 million annually. Usually 34% of the diocesan assessment goes to support general synod, so this will be down this year.

Financially the boycott will have a cumulative effect on the coffers of the Anglican church. In March of this year, the church and the Canadian government marked the final signing of an agreement to share the cost of compensation claims by thousands of aboriginals who were abused while in the care of the residential schools. The Anglican Church, under the authority of the Canadian government, ran 26 of 80 aboriginal residential schools (also known as industrial schools) which removed children from their families and culture and placed them in English-language, assimilationist schools. The Christian religion was just one form of cultural indoctrination that the children received. These schools which operated until the 1970s have now spawned about 8,000 claims of abuse that are being dealt with in the courts in Canada. Now it has been decided that the Anglican Church must pay \$25 million in compensation for abuse of children under its care. The Church shares the cost with the government at a ratio of 30/70%. The Church has announced cutbacks (eg the ending of chaplains in some hospitals) to help cover the costs.

To return to the same-sex marriage issue, the debate has sparked a flurry of biblical citations in support of both sides. On the liberal side, in favour of same-sex unions, Luke is quoted to demonstrate that Jesus debated the interpretation of scriptures with the leaders. On the conservative side, against same-sex unions, a very troubling passage from Leviticus 20:13 is cited which states "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." The organizational strategy of the conservatives has been to conduct a series of vestry meetings and the formation of an alternative "Anglican Communion in New Westminster". They sometimes refer to themselves as orthodox Anglicans, and they set up consultative



meetings which attracted some 1,000 people (not all necessarily supporters) in the early days. The meeting organizers, co-ordinated by a conservative Texan known as Canon Bill Atwood of a mission called Ekklesia, invited two primates and two primates' representatives (out of a total of 38 primates) to preside over the breakaway group. These primates, from Asia and Africa, represent more conservative sections of the Anglican church on sexuality where even the ordination of women is not accepted.

Recently they cite other supporters of AEO as the bishops of West India, Central Africa, Kenya, Congo, Rwanda and S.E. Asia. Speaking at a September 1 meeting against same-sex marriage, Reverend Yong Ping

Chung, Archbishop of S E Asia, called motion 7 a "life and death" issue, a perspective which the other side has called inflammatory. Reverend George Fuller, a supporter of same-sex unions, has said in the local paper that the conservative side is about "power, control and cultural domination".

The Canadian situation has drawn the ire of some in the Church of England. An article in the conservative *Church of England Newspaper* referred to the presiding New Westminster bishop as "off the theological rails". The writer stated that the bishop was amongst those who "fly in the face of what the vast majority of Christians believe and have believed through the ages". The writer further fanned the flames of debate by calling Bishop

Ingham an "opponent of the Gospel" and accused him of single-handedly conjuring up a "liturgy for same-sex blessings, despite the fact that huge numbers of Anglicans in his diocese oppose such a move". And the debate is now spilling over into England where the bishops of Durham, Southwell, Coventry, Chester, London, Rochester and Liverpool are apparently lining up for a backlash against Archbishop Rowan Williams on the issue.

For those of us who share the perspective that religion is the breeding ground of intolerance, these perspectives come as no surprise. The fact that this debate takes place in the context of a much larger political debate in Canada on gay rights shows that even the church is influenced by secular society.

Ignorant Catholic Bishops still insist that condoms 'contribute to the spread of aids'

AT a time when the AIDS pandemic shows no signs of slowing down in certain parts of the world, the Catholic Church hierarchy remains as intransigent as ever over the issue of condom use.

A while back, in 2001, the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference described condoms as an "immoral and misguided weapon" in South Africa's battle against the spread of AIDS and went on to declare: "Condoms may even be one of the main reasons for the spread of HIV/AIDS."

"Apart from the possibility of condoms being faulty or wrongly used, they contribute to the breaking down of self-control and mutual trust," the bishops added, and they urged young people to abstain from premarital sex and to remain monogamous during marriage.

"Abstain and be faithful is the human and Christian way of overcoming HIV/AIDS," the bishops said.

Despite overwhelming evidence that the transmission of AIDS has been dramatically slowed in countries which have remained deaf to this dangerous claptrap, the majority of bishops insist on holding the Vatican line on this issue.

The encouraging news is that a groundswell of opinion against the Pope and his sycophants is building up among many ordinary Catholics, who are throwing their weight behind an organisation called Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), which, in 2001 launched a global campaign to co-incide with World AIDS Day with the slogan "Banning Condoms Kills". Designed to mobilise efforts in USA, Europe,

Africa, Asia and Latin America to change Vatican's condom policy, the campaign comprised billboards and ads in subways and newspapers

This unprecedented worldwide public education effort was aimed at Catholics and non-Catholics alike to raise public awareness of the "devastating effect of the bishops' ban on condoms". It invites the public to join a global campaign to end the ban.

"The Vatican and the world's bishops bear significant responsibility for the deaths of thousands of people who have died from AIDS," stated Frances Kissling, president of CFFC.

"For individuals who follow the Vatican policy, and Catholic health care providers who are forced to deny condoms, the bishops' ban

is a disaster. Real people are dying from AIDS. Real bishops are silently acquiescent. We can no longer stand by and allow the ban to go unchallenged."

The effect of the bishops' ban on condoms – the only technology available that can prevent sexual transmission of HIV – has been noted by world leaders in the fight against AIDS. UNAIDS director, Peter Piot, said that "When priests preach against using contraception, they are committing a serious mistake which is costing human lives."

The campaign ads pointed out that many of the 4,435 plus bishops worldwide actively lobby governments and the United Nations to restrict access to condoms, claiming that condoms cause AIDS, not prevent it.

Church preaching leads to Nigerian Witch Hunts

By Leo Igwe

AT least 25 people suspected of being witches have been killed in Akwa Ibom state in Southern Nigeria, according to a local police report.

The report said that, in February of this year alone, 15 suspected witchcraft practitioners were killed in different parts of the state. According to press reports, some of the victims were clubbed to death after confessing, while others were similarly eliminated as a result of arousing suspicion that they were witches.

The killing of suspected witches began after some Christian pentecostal churches in

the state began preaching against witchcraft, and accused parents and relations of some of their church members of practising witchcraft, or of being of being responsible for poverty, diseases, business failure, barrenness and other calamities. As a result of this, some church members attacked family members and demanded they confess to participating in witchcraft.

In one of the communities, Itam, the churches stirred up so much suspicion and confusion that the village head had to expel them.

Do you, like me, sometimes feel like an alien on planet earth, particularly when witnessing the imbecilic behaviour or utterances of politicians, cardinals, mullahs or rabbis ... or even some of your closer and less well anointed companions?

Take heart. You are not alone. Thoreau (1817 -1862) had it thus:

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured, or far away.

"Aspies"¹ is a warm, gentle, descriptive term for people who, five years ago, would have been described as having Asperger's Syndrome, a portmanteau term for a set of personal, mental and behavioural characteristics found at the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum². It is only recently beginning to be understood. Men seem to outnumber women in this category by about 10:1³. The characteristics, which are first noticed in early childhood, are lifelong and can be regarded as an outcome of human neuro-diversity⁴. It is *not* a mental or psychiatric condition – it is a neurological difference. About 1 in 200 of the current adult UK population might be so categorised³ but this figure is likely to suffer reassessment regularly as awareness develops. I will classify those people who are not Aspies or fully autistic as NTs (Neuro-Typicals). This term comes from the Aspie community on the Internet.

The characteristics which Aspies are considered to have include most of those in the table opposite. (NB: Some of the Aspie examples are often noticed in the majority of normal young children, pre-socialisation, and sometimes in stressed normal teenagers, but they usually rapidly leave them behind. Aspies, however, are like this when adult but often have learnt to successfully hide many of them to the casual observer, but not, say, from their partners.)

I would like to stress again that Aspies should not be seen as people to be cured. They are just different and often things of beauty. Aspies often work very hard to learn social mores and to function normally in a largely NT world. They do not always get it right. The Aspie characteristics go all the way to their core – they can not be stripped away or modified without destroying the person. Aspies should be treated as a gift and a resource for humanity, a gift and resource that NTs do not yet understand. They are not disabled.

Now that I have outlined some of the main Aspie traits for those not close to this subject, let me get round to the central theme of what I want to say.

It is my thesis that an unusually high proportion of subscribers to the *Freethinker* are likely to be Aspies.

Looking at the table, some of you may have already guessed what I am getting at. I used to

'Aspies' and freethinking – is there a link?

assume, when I was young, that I was like everyone else in the human race, but often from a very early age I could not understand why I felt other people to be different. (Of course there is a considerable sense in which I *am* the same as every other human being but I am talking detail here. Also I think the feeling was more than just an awareness of my own individuality.)

PAUL STEVENSON sees a link between Asperger's Syndrome and freethinking



I was permanently puzzled and anxious because of peoples' unpredictability. I could not read their scripts. "Because I say so" is never an acceptable answer to a child's "Why?" and it should never be for an adult either. Even worse is "Because the Book says so"! I thought "How can I be part of this lot?" as I made feeble attempts to ask out girls or watched fellow students drinking themselves incoherent on their first term's grant. (Who'd want to go out with a physics student in a hairy sports jacket who built flying model aircraft anyway?!). Not logical, Mr. Spock. Nowadays, I think I am different (as an Aspie) from most people, including most people brought up in the same environs as myself. What Aspies have in common is the experience of feeling distanced from human society. A big part of being an Aspie is experiencing life as very puzzling with frequent social failure and subsequent recovery, and learning therefrom. All people feel this, but it is a question of degree.

Failures to join the "in" crowd; failures to

convince supposedly intelligent people that religious dogma is a load of eyewash; failures to convince students at school that a good science education is a pearl beyond price. Failures to see oneself as a pawn in a rough game of office politics, ultimately losing a job.

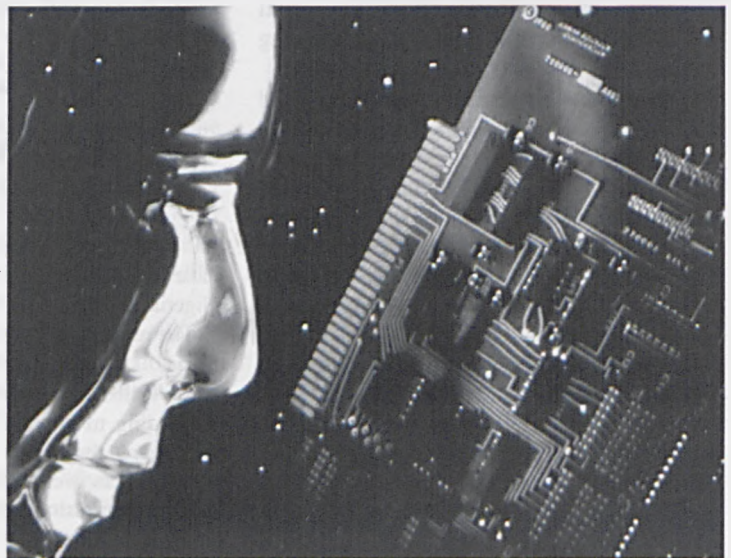
Of course I now realise that all those NTs one interacts with out there do not value logic and speaking one's mind as I do, and concepts such as truth are to them moveable feasts. They have other fish to fry which I care little about. Having said all that, life *has* had its patches of blue at a personal level – sometimes in very unexpected places.

We, as freethinkers, often state our conclusions about the danger and sheer stupidity of religious ideas in particular – and I bet almost all subscribers to the FT have been called "opinionated" in the past.

Here is what Jane Meyerding – a lesbian, a feminist and an anarchist – said about opinions. (She is also an Aspie.)

People thought she was "opinionated" (a bad thing!) if she stated *any* view clearly. She responded:⁵

"I see this as part of the 'psychologizing' of the culture. In the US, it used to be accepted as part of the democratic process – a necessary part of that process – for people to have, and to discuss, a variety of opinions/perspectives on any given topic. But now, psychology has replaced civil/political culture to such an extent



Aspies – wired up differently to the rest of humanity?



that the primary objective is 'do not hurt anybody's feelings'. And if you express an opinion, you are seen as 'putting down' (and thereby hurting the feelings of) anybody who does not agree with you. The assumption seems to be that people are so fragile (in psychic terms) that they will be damaged by having their feelings hurt – and that their feelings will be hurt by contact with anything that does not 'validate' them in every way.

"I find the whole attitude annoying. It's undemocratic, it erodes the basis for democra-

tic civil society, it inhibits free speech, and it makes life more bland than it ought to be. Plus, it makes most NT people who still retain their own opinions add on a lot more NT-type verbal and non-verbal expressive trimming to their conversations because they know they have to go out of their way to try to avoid 'offending' people. My preference is for unadorned, to-the-point speech (ie, speech I have some hope of understanding), which currently is very far out of fashion."

In the present climate, look how sycophanti-

cally scared of hurting the feelings of Muslims many people fronting the media are. The reason they are is because, almost exclusively, the presenters are image-sensitive NTs who love applause, popularity, status – and are pliable to boot. They would not have got their media front jobs if they were Aspies. In media the NT world is everything. Soap-operas on TV are wall-to-wall social interaction with faces filling screens so that the expressions (not decoded by Aspies)

(Continued on page 10)

Aspies:

- Use a straightforward or blunt communication style sometimes categorised as tactless – no beating round the bush. Say what they mean. Do not consider the effect on the listener. Regard message content as more vital than the message matrix. The medium is *not* the message.
- Have a hard time understanding the hidden nuances of NT discourse and are therefore unable to take hints or understand sarcasm. Take language and what people say very literally. Are not "mind-readers" and need explicit sequential instruction for required tasks.
- Can be perceived as arrogant. Do not care much about how they are perceived. Are often not aware if they "hurt" NTs, or if they are aware they don't care.
- Are often at the losing end of a social exchange. Do not realise when they are being teased. Are often picked on or bullied.
- In social situations find difficulty in choosing suitable things to talk about. See small talk and chatting as worthless and trivial. Often don't listen properly in the company of NTs. Have difficulty talking about emotions.
- Enjoy using puns but usually take words in a very precise and scalpel-like way. Can be verbose but directness is more common. Can be perceived by NTs as humourless.
- Have difficulty making eye contact. Sometimes have nervous tics and repetitive speech.
- Typically use a very formal manner in everyday communications.
- Lack inborn skills to automatically determine unwritten rules of personal conduct and body language indicating how they are being received.
- Have little interest in the social hierarchy of the group. Do not understand what a personal image is. Just do their own thing. Dance to their own drum. Are often found at the bottom of the social pile.
- Are not team players – indeed, are often clumsy or unco-ordinated, eg have poor handwriting, can't catch or trip or fall a lot. May be good on endurance – eg cycling, swimming.
- Do *not* enjoy being alone but often have long histories of disastrous personal relation attempts. Solitude is necessary to de-stress in overload situations.
- Often of very high intelligence, and language skills far in excess of the norm are common, particularly vocabulary. Often, if children, talk like adults, or if adult, over others' heads.
- Score very highly on perseverance with a special interest, eg computers, dinosaurs, extinct Australian marsupials. In boys very commonly transport or computers. Are often classed as "one-track minded" or little professors. Collect sets of things. Are punctilious with detail.
- Often have an obsession with rigid routines and suffer severe anxiety if disrupted. Have problems sequencing tasks – eg forget things to take when going out.
- Dislike loud noise, lots of people, competing voices, flashing or bright lights can overload the mind. – "meltdown". Get stressed with need to calm down. Prefer quiet. May be claustro- or agora-phobic.
- Abhor inaccuracy and imprecision. Find dishonesty and deception alien. Hold the highest ideals. Are dedicated to, and love, truth. Hate compromise.
- Often have fathers or grandfathers who were engineers, mathematicians or scientists.
- Are highly loyal and accepting of difference – do not respond to pure domination or shouting. Calm and rational wins.
- Have a talent to accurately assess themselves and others in a factual but not mind-reading sense – folk observers?
- Have a high incidence of depression – close to 100 per cent.
- Are often innovators and entrepreneurs.
- Possibly share the arrogant, eccentric, strange, intelligent, perceptive, genius characteristics of Newton, Wittgenstein, Turing, Einstein, Wiles, Gates etc.

NTs:

- Have a roundabout style, aware of effect on listeners, discursive and "soft". Are capable of conveying meaning and nuance without actually "saying it". Make frequent use of innuendo, hints and hidden meanings. Often employ a sub-text (spin!). Commonly use cliché. The medium *is* the message.
- Have a hard time understanding Aspies because NT's are unused to decoding without the social nuances. Often refuse to believe there is no hidden meaning or that comments they interpret as rude or harsh are meant to be helpful.
- Are strong on intuition and do not need to have everything spelled out. Care greatly how others see them.
- Shrug shoulders and say "so what?" if they do happen to lose out. Have high confidence, thick skin, and a "more fool you" attitude. Resilient.
- Make small talk as a social lubricant – emotional considerations dominate – eg "Didn't you notice the way they were looking at each other?". Are good listeners and have intuitive understanding of other NTs but not of Aspies.
- Can use language in a self deprecating and non-literal way for jokes and social approbation.
- Are body language and "touchy-feely" experts, eg "You're looking fed-up today."
- Have fluency with informality – think the formality of Aspies is "odd".
- Have early facility to pick up and reuse non-verbal cues, eg facial expression.
- Love popularity, applause, status, "coolness", image. Are likely to take on group behaviour which brings these rewards. Therefore they are rather chameleon-like. Often unconsciously dances to other people's drums.
- Are accepted by one or many of the social cliques. Are good team players or cheer leaders. Are sought-after companions.
- Like company, but not all the time.
- Normal range of IQ and verbal scores. Will not deliberately talk above the level of their peers even if they have the vocabulary.
- Never experience this. Can seemingly operate on several tracks in parallel or at once. Have interests generally espoused by the group – eg films, records, football, skateboards. These are more "experienced" than "learn" and can be group discussed afterwards. See the big picture before the detail.
- Variety is seen as attractive – spice of life. Holidays or changes in routine are looked forward to.
- Are happy to bob away in a club all night or do homework with the headphones on. If alone for any length of time, seek alternatives.
- Find white lies and deceptions feasible if they oil the wheels of social affairs. Value good feelings more than good logic. Find compromise is always an option.
- Parental background covers the full occupational spectrum.
- Group dynamics can result in taking on board prejudice, group consensus and a degree of shifting loyalty. Labile.
- – Folk participants?
- Have depression at the normal incidence.
- Possibly are the rest of the human race. (Please – this is not meant to sound arrogant.)

can be seen in skin blemish detail. (They probably need an Aspie to program the computer graphics credits though!) Good feelings are valued more than good logic.

But freethinkers are different.

Do freethinkers pay little or no attention to social hierarchies, and are they highly tolerant of difference? Are they uninterested in soap-opera plots? Do they feel it absolutely necessary to call religious ideas stupid – to the archbishop's face if necessary? Do they use plain, clear language and get slated for being rude and offending people? If the answers are all yes, then they are not at fault. They are just being Aspie-like. Thus they are likely to value the truth above all and are not saddled with the needs to conform to the group or to pussy-foot verbally. They are also excellent at using scalpel-sharp language and hate beating about the bush. I suspect also many of us suffer from depression (understandably) but have evolved coping strategies. I suspect also the need to take time out to "decompress". (It is usually just after a news programme on radio or TV in my case.) All the above are essential characteristics of Aspies.

Is my case for congruency of characteristics between freethinkers and Aspies getting stronger?

Let me also pull other related facts together. What is the male/female ratio amongst *Freethinker* readers? I would hypothesise that it is close to that found amongst Aspies (10:1) and the *FT* letters columns bear this out.

Where are all the female freethinkers?

The dearth of contributions from female writers proved a source of irritation to the *Freethinker's* editor, who addressed the issue in the April edition. To him I would say this: You have no need to apologise or account for yourself. I am absolutely convinced that women contributors are treated equally and without bias. It is just that you are short of female contributions. I used to teach physics in a school for girls, and in spite of the best teaching it was rare for a girl to want to study physics at university: and universities had absolutely no anti-female bias in physics departments – quite the opposite.

Why the apparent female lack of interest? The answer is complicated, real and deep, and I am sure this is the case also with female reluctance to "get serious" about freethinking and "anti-theism". Interestingly I never felt I was wasting my time teaching physics to females. I have a strong suspicion that the physics and freethought case are not unconnected. Both require the absolute subservience of emotion to logic. Females like to keep their emotions "balanced", exercised and functional (am I wrong here?) and particularly do not like offending people. I find being a freethinker makes me very angry and depressed and alone but I do not mind offending people in the

cause of rationality – would your average female cut herself off like that to serve truth?

A further strand I would like to draw in concerns politicians and religious leaders. Politicians are supremely important decision takers in how religious groups are treated by the state. Hence my concern with them. How many Aspies do you think there are in Parliament? Close to zero I would suggest – they wouldn't last a minute – Aspies are far too truthful, logical, scornful of hierarchies, mouldable moralities, team games and cheer



Do Aspies share the arrogant, eccentric, strange, intelligent, perceptive, genius characteristics of individuals like Turing (above), Newton, Wittgenstein, Einstein, Wiles, and Bill Gates?

leading. There can be no Aspies in Parliament – surely? Also, listening to the way politicians "perform" on TV and radio, do you not find yourself feeling that you are on a different planet from them, mentally? How can you possibly "really" start communicating with them when they seem to have completely different ideas of logic, truth, and even what words mean or how arguments are supposed to work. The reason you might feel like this is because you are close to the Aspie end of the spectrum and they are NTs.

I use the word "perform" intentionally because it could be maintained that politicians and religious leaders are performance artists. Let me direct you to one of the NT characteristics in the table – *NTs love popularity, applause, status, "coolness", image, and are likely to take on group behaviour which is seen to bring these rewards. Therefore they are rather chameleon-like.*

These are precisely the characteristics of a performance artist. Now consider how politicians get elected – they have to get people to like them – (you can take courses on it) – good eye contact, firm handshake, smile with sparkly teeth, listen intently while nodding head, empathise etc. These are all things NTs are automatically good at and Aspies poor. One of

the biggest positives a minister (both senses) must have these days is "does s/he come across well on TV?" and that of course means – "Can s/he complete the programme without offending anyone while staying 'on message'?" They have to be "good with people". "Good" here is, of course, a prejudicial word.

My conclusion is that politicians, captains of industry and religious leaders will end up being drawn from an "exaggerated NT" group with all that that implies.

The situation is actually worse than appears because I would maintain that if their desire for "performance returns" is too high (the desire for popularity, applause, status, coolness, image) then truth and trustworthiness may come under extreme pressure and be potential casualties. *Compromise is always an option* with NTs. "Spin" is a concept now firmly attached to politicians and I believe the word to be a formalising of the presence of a subtext and the process of convincing people that things are other than they are. NTs are the instinctive spin doctors, not Aspies or freethinkers. Applause is extremely addictive (my thespian wife tells me!) and you might well fudge and lie for your next fix.

These then are the traits of the people that freethinkers are having to argue against, *and they do not understand you.* They do not understand you because they are NT and you are Aspie-like. Just like adult Aspies with their own NTs, you will have to work very hard to learn how to interact with politicians and religious people to a level of mutual satisfaction – at the end of it they probably still won't understand you and they almost certainly will not like you. Remember, NTs meet the Aspie or freethinker rarely and so they don't have to learn how to think your way, whereas you meet NTs all the time and have plenty of experience of their woolly thought and slippery behaviour. With this experience you learn and try hard to communicate enough to convince. The result is that you are likely to find much frustration and disappointment in the interactions. There is no symmetry here and that is unfortunate.

With NTs, feeling is more important than logic, group is more important than individual integrity and truth is malleable.

Of course if I am wrong and Aspie characteristics do not correlate well with the characteristics of those on the subscription list to the *Freethinker* then I am happy to reconsider, but the parallels at the moment seem striking. I am also aware of the danger of attaching the Aspie label to what is in part a complex continuous spectrum of human abilities anyway – labels are binary, the spectrum is not. In defence of a label I would just say that maybe it is used because it has enough truth in it to save a lot of verbiage. Perhaps it is better regarded as a fuzzy set or signpost. Once it is agreed to exist, though, it allows the discussion to go fractal and operate

higher up and that is why I use it.

I am indebted to another internet offering for the quote below⁵ by Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in *History of Western Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell. It seems relevant if freethinkers have a high incidence of depression like Aspies. Fundamental knowledge about human kind can bring depression to the minds of some people but these are rarely scientists, who I believe are comfortable with the awe, wonder and complexity they work with.

"The tragedy is that we cannot believe the dogmas of religion and metaphysics if we have the strict methods of truth in heart and head, but on the other hand, we have become through the development of humanity so tenderly sensitively suffering that we need the highest kinds of means of salvation and consolation: whence arises the danger that man may bleed to death through the truth that he recognises. Byron expressed this in immortal lines:

"Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth, The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life".

Aspies and freethinkers must feel the last line from time to time as they watch the world of the commonplace. Thomas Mann also addressed this issue in *Tonio Kroger* – in that book it was an artist who felt outside of normal society and "life". To lift the danger of gloom, and as a counter to this quote, it is clear to me that the scientific method as a way of generating knowledge and creating information (in the sense of removing uncertainty) works beautifully in improving the conditions and culture of humankind and is a shared, global, open-ended,

recursive and exciting enterprise. A benefit Byron did not see much of. One of the things that Aspies and freethinkers do universally see value in is the scientific method, and that is where their strength lies. Such universal attachment is not found in the NT population – indeed, there are disturbing signs recently of outright hostility to science.

To ensure a future – Go hug your local science teacher!

Tony Attwood has it: *"There's work to do in the new century – diseases to cure, environments to save, freedoms to preserve. Fortunately there are people with minds capable of the challenge, with the ability to focus and persevere. They possess perspectives and talents unique enough to solve the biggest of problems, or enhance the most challenging projects. They are Aspies"* ⁶ I would append "and they are freethinkers".

I hope my article does not come across as arrogant – it is certainly not meant to be. Rather, it is an Aspie's attempt to tell and sell what he sees as the truth.

I look forward to any feedback (e-mail stevensonpw@onetel.net.uk)

References:

1. This term seems to have been first used in self-reference by Liane Holliday-Willey in her book *Pretending to be Normal*, 1999. See www.aspie.com.
2. www.nas.org.uk – The National Autistic Society
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Hammer. *Advances in Infancy Research* Vol 11, 1997.

4. This term is quoted by Jane Meyerding in *Thoughts on Finding Myself Differently Brained*, 2002 <http://staff.Washington.edu/njane> and seems to have originated in an essay by Judy Singer, *Why Can't You be Normal for Once in Your Life*.

5. Jane Meyerding 2002 <http://staff.Washington.edu/njane> under the heading "Discourse".

6. Tony Attwood, *The Morning News* (Australia) Volume 11, N03 and www.TonyAttwood.com/paper4.htm

PAUL Stevenson is 62, retired, and lives in Norfolk. He is married with two grown-up children and is a self-diagnosed Aspie.

After an initial Physics degree he took a Cert.Ed. and taught for seven years in Leeds, reaching Head of Department. He left at the age of 30 to carry out PhD work in man-machine systems at the University of Essex. This continued for seven years until money and prospects called a halt at which point he returned to schools to head the Physics, Electronics and Computing department at Norwich High School for Girls. In 1989 he joined Norwich Union as an IT Consultant, training programmers. He retired from this post in 2000.

He was brought up "in a religious ghetto, so has inside knowledge of its bigotry and methods". He says he is "sad that he had to waste his young brain on it, and sadder still that religion continues corroding children". His own science education began "switching on the lights", and after a long period he would admit now to having *no respect at all* for religious viewpoints. "They are simply wrong," he asserts.

Muslim countries derail United Nations gay rights resolution

A UN vote on homosexual human rights was yesterday derailed at the last minute by an alliance of disapproving Muslim countries.

The UN had been due to vote on the matter for the first time in its almost 60-year history, but five Muslim countries delayed the vote in April and introduced amendments designed to kill it off.

According to a *Guardian* report, "the amendments remove all references to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and render the resolution meaningless".

UN sources said Pakistan, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia were doing everything they could to stop the resolution.

"I suspect they want to stall as much as possible and lobby other countries to win support for their amendments," a source told the newspaper.

The historic resolution on "human rights and sexual orientation" was originally tabled by Brazil at the UN commission on human rights, in Geneva, with the support of 19 other countries including Britain. It calls on all UN member states to promote and protect the human rights "of all persons regardless of their sexual orientation".

But the sentiments are anathema to many UN states; almost half outlaw gay sexual relations and more than 70 countries keep a total ban on homosexuality – in some cases it is punished by death.

The British gay rights campaigner, Peter Tatchell, said: "The vote has been derailed and delayed by Islamic fundamentalist states where gay people are either jailed, flogged or beheaded." He said those countries' records of gay human rights abuses showed why the resolution was urgently needed.

Scottish "Taliban-style" school closed after damning report

SCOTLAND'S only Muslim secondary school has been temporarily closed following a damning inspectors' report that uncovered allegations of bullying and bad teaching practice. The boarding and secondary section of Iqra Academy in Glasgow has been shut down by the trust which now runs the school.

Members of the Iqra Charitable Trust, which formerly managed the school, claim they had to step in to seize control of the institution after deteriorating standards under the previous regime were picked up in the report. Locals claimed that under the old management regime it focused on religion to the detriment of academic subjects. One concerned Muslim told *The Glasgow Herald*: "The school had become too Muslim. It was like a Taliban school. Everything was to be done the Islamic way. It made things very hard, especially after September 11. There was too much focus on religion."

I found the early chapters of this book boring (although I became more engrossed later). Why? Because as a historian I am aware that religion stands or falls on the veracity of a Bible that, among its other 19,000 demonstrable false statements, says in fourteen places that the Earth is flat. I no more need further evidence that the claims of religion are indefensible, than an astronaut needs further proof that the Earth is round.

But dogmatic religion is one thing. Deism, the belief that an intelligent designer wound up the universe and since then has operated on a strict "hands-off" policy, is something else. The former can be disproven simply by opening a Bible. The latter can only be rebutted by the logical arguments presented in this book.

Several chapters are written by believers in Intelligent Design. The authors are not Deists. Rather, they are religious practitioners who (presumably) believe that, if they can show the plausibility of Deism, validating revelation religion will be a logical next step. That does not eliminate the necessity of rebutting them. Personally, I could not have detected the flaws in their logic. Fortunately, every pro-ID chapter is followed by a specific rebuttal by a scientist who does have the relevant expertise. It took a century to get through to all but incurable creationists that the opening chapters of Genesis are fiction. We can only hope that the flaws in arguments for Intelligent Design are recognized much more quickly.

An effective rebuttal of Intelligent Design is presented by Massimo Pigliucci. Perhaps his most telling argument is "The criticism of sub-optimal design has often been advanced by evolutionists who ask why God would do such a sloppy job with creation that even a mere human engineer can easily determine where the flaws are ... If you assume that we were 'intelligently' designed, the answer must be that the designer was rather incompetent ... However, the imperfections of living organisms, already pointed out by Darwin, do away with the idea that they were created by an omnipotent and omnibenevolent creator, who surely would not be limited by laws that he himself made up from scratch."

Eugenie Scott, in a chapter devoted to symposia aimed at reaching a *rapprochement* between science and religion, states, "almost half of Americans deny that evolution occurred". Since the only way to maintain such scientific illiteracy is to put one's brain in permanent OFF, that would explain why there has been no grassroots campaign to impeach a treasonously appointed, morally, intellectually, educationally and rationally handicapped unelected pseudo-president whose pithicene mindset differs only quantitatively from the half of the population who may be *homo* but are certainly not *sapiens*.

Further to the equation of ignorance with a virtue called "faith" in so many minds, Barry Palevitz notes that "A recent survey of

Pennsylvania High School teachers showed that nearly 40 percent agreed that creationism should be taught in the public schools.... According to the survey's author, "This inability or refusal to judge information on its scientific validity is chilling."

Canadian William Harwood reviews *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* edited by Paul Kurtz *et alia*. Prometheus, 2003, ISBN 1-59102-064-6, 368 pp, paperback, \$20.

Neil Tyson states, "Let there be no doubt that as they are currently practiced, there is no common ground between science and religion ... I have yet to see a successful prediction about the physical world that was inferred or extrapolated from the content of any religious document ... Whenever people have used religious documents to make detailed predictions about the physical world they have been famously wrong."

The biggest difference between science and religion is in their respective methodologies. Science starts from the evidence and follows wherever it leads. Religion/theology starts from predetermined conclusions, and distorts the evidence to whatever degree is necessary in order to make it fit. In a chapter by Daniel Dennett, that otherwise seems out of place in a book about the comparative status of religion and science, an issue Dennett barely skirts, he writes: "But where are the examples of religious orthodoxy being simply abandoned in the face of irresistible evidence? Again and again in science, yesterday's heresies have become today's new orthodoxies. No religion exhibits that pattern in its history."

Actually that is not quite accurate. For its first three centuries, Christianity was monotheistic, with Jesus a mere king and a holy spirit a mere state of mind. Today all but one or two Christian sects have three paramount gods (and thousands of minor gods, called angels, devils and saints), and the monotheism of the early Christians is considered heresy. The reason Dennett was justified in not mentioning this kind of exception is that religious orthodoxy did not change as a consequence of new discoveries, but simply by the triumph of different dogmatists.

When religion does try to take the discoveries of science into consideration, the result is either the deistic Intelligent Design hypothesis, or unmitigated doublethink. Paul Kurtz writes in his introduction: "The Pope maintains that reason and scientific inquiry support rather than hinder faith in Christian revelation and Catholic doctrine. Skeptics might agree with the Pope's defense of reason and scientific inquiry, yet question whether these do indeed support his own beliefs."

On claims of divine intervention in human

affairs, Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg echoes virtually every person capable of objective analysis of evidence when he writes "The evidence for all these miracles seems to me to be considerably weaker than the evidence for cold fusion, and I don't believe in cold fusion." And on the pretence that religion fosters morality, the same writer states "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion."

Arthur Clarke expresses the view that "The greatest tragedy in mankind's entire history may be the hijacking of morality by religion. However valuable – even necessary – that may have been in enforcing good behavior on primitive peoples, their association is now counter-productive. Yet at the very moment when they should be decoupled, sanctimonious nitwits are calling for a return to morals based on superstition." On a more optimistic note, he repeats a prediction that "the rise of 'statistical theology' would prove that there is no supernatural intervention in human affairs." In other words, while several competent studies have shown that no more patients recovered or improved in a prayed-for group than in a control group (studies flawed by dirty-test-tube effects have reached the opposite conclusion), Clarke expects the day to come when repeated replications of the same result reach a level of significance where no statistician can dispute them.

Re-examination of alleged positive results of the efficacy of prayer led Tesman and Tesman to the conclusion "The tests of Harris *et al*, taken in their entirety, fail to show any significant benefit of intercessory prayer." But the general public is effectively prevented from learning that truth. As Mortin Hunt observes, "We often read in the news of some adorable child dying of inoperable cancer who was marvelously cured when the whole town prayed – but never of the cases in which equally fervent praying did not save the lives of equally adorable children." Are the alleged "news" media common prostitutes, publishing only information that will sell papers or secure ratings? Or are they self-deluded to the point of believing that, if they can suppress reality, it will go away? That is a question none of the book's authors tackles.

On an essentially religious belief that claims to offer observable physical manifestations, Paul Kurtz observes "What is so curious is that people who see ghosts usually see them clothed. It is one thing to say that a discarnate soul has survived, but that his or her clothing and other physical objects have survived is both amusing and contrary to the laws of physics!" One is reminded of alien abduction claimants, who never once reported being subjected to non-consensual mating by aliens – until someone did. Will ghost sighters start reporting naked ghosts? If the first such report is greeted favorably by the ignoranti, undoubtedly.

Belief in religion is highest among the less educated and lowest among natural scientists, with other scientific practitioners falling midway between the two. There is good reason for this. Scientists who deal directly with a reality that falsifies biblical myths do not need "belief." An astronomer knows that the universe is billions of years old, and not the few thousand years claimed by bibles, as surely as an astronaut knows that the earth is round. As Jerome Elbert explains, "Although some people succeed in holding both scientific and religious views, it is difficult to reconcile the two. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the percentage of American scientists who are religious is much smaller than the corresponding fraction of all Americans."

The surprisingly high rate of believers among all persons classified as scientists (about 40 percent, compared to about 20 percent among natural scientists) is more than adequately explained by Vern Bullough: "Individual scientists know more and more about less and less. Many, in my opinion, even lack an overall view of science. I think it is no accident that those scientists who are most active in criticizing evolution, usually from a fundamentalist Christian perspective, are engineers or physicians or other professionals, who have a scientific background but confine themselves to working in a very narrow specialty and not thinking about the larger issues."

Probably on the ground that the opinions of a scientist of the stature of Stephen Jay Gould could not legitimately be ignored, Kurtz chose to include in his book a chapter in which Gould introduced his theory of Non-overlapping Magisteria (NOMA), the hypothesis that science and religion govern different areas of knowledge and are not incompatible. Either to avoid repulsing the reader with incompetent nonsense, or to salvage what is left of Gould's reputation, the chapter chosen for inclusion was excerpted from Gould's earlier book, *Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms*, written before he degenerated into permanent brain-death, rather than from *Rocks of Ages*, in which he spelled out his NOMA hypothesis in sufficient detail to reveal that it was written after that event. Gould's most indefensible error was his classifying morality/ethics under the *magisterium* of religion, instead of identifying it as a third *magisterium* derived from neither science nor religion. As Paul Kurtz argues "I submit that there ought to be a separation between ethics and religion."

Richard Dawkins rebuts Gould's doublethink/imbecility/cowardice/political correctness/bovine excrement in a chapter aptly titled, "You Can't Have It Both Ways." After "a brief aside on the claim that religion has some special expertise to offer us on moral questions", in which he points out that religion can only be cited as a force for good by selective quotations

from a book that also endorses atrocities even Hitler did not equal, Dawkins makes his real point: "It is completely unrealistic to claim, as Gould and many others do, that religion keeps itself away from science's turf, restricting itself to morals and values ... Either Mary's body decayed when she died, or it was physically removed from this planet to heaven ... I am not, here, saying that the doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin is necessarily false (although of course I think it is). I am simply rebutting the claim that it is outside the domain of science ... There is something dishonestly self-serving in the tactic of claiming that all religious beliefs are outside the domain of science ... Given a choice between honest-to-goodness fundamentalism on the one hand, and the obscurantist, disingenuous doublethink of the Roman Catholic Church on the other, I know which I prefer."

Science has never claimed to be a religion. The most dogmatic religion does claim to be science. Vern Bullough effectively shoots down that claim: "Only the most rigid dogmatists ... have claimed to speak in the name of science, attempting to elevate creationism to the rank of a scientific discipline. Why couldn't they just ignore scientific explanations and indicate that their belief is based on faith? The fact that they refuse to do so and claim that their biblical literalism is a science is what makes for antagonisms between religion and science." He might have added that those same dogmatists pretend that science is itself a religion, tacitly acknowledging that religion is nonsense in order to denigrate the alleged religion of science as nonsense.

Taner Edis's chapter, "A World Designed by God," can be summarized in the one sentence "It is fairly safe to say that the state of science in the Muslim world is dismal."

The essential evil of religion is addressed by Sir Hermann Bondi in his chapter, "Uniting the World - Or Dividing It." He writes that "many believers (including the leadership of most institutionalized religions) regard their faith, based on revelation, as 'The Truth,' applicable to all people everywhere and at all times. These persons view everyone who does not share their particular faith as 'in error.' The monstrous arrogance of this outlook is hard to stomach ... To assert for one's own faith possession of the universal truth is to assume an attitude of superiority that in other contexts would be viewed as disgusting ... Yet for some reason a religious statement of alleged superiority is not viewed with the same outraged disgust as would a claim of national or racial superiority."

As Bondi observes: "The true contrast between science and religion is that science unites the world and makes it possible for people of widely differing backgrounds to work together and cooperate. Religion, on the other hand, by its very claim to know 'The Truth'

through 'revelation,' is inherently divisive and a creator of separatism and hostility."

In a chapter about the acquisition or abandonment of religious beliefs, Paul Kurtz writes "The process of deconversion was predominantly a slow, cognitive process; and that of conversion was a rather rapid emotional transformation." In other words, people become addicted to religion for emotional reasons, and cure themselves by thinking.

On the problem of evil, Matt Young writes: "Let us make a distinction between evil (that is, the deliberate infliction of harm on one human by another) and misfortune. Both are a problem for those who believe in a benevolent God. Evil, oddly, is less of a problem: You can argue that evil is an unfortunate but necessary side effect of your having been granted freewill, but it is hard to justify debilitating diseases by the same argument. The Bible gives no answers to the problems of evil and misfortune."

One really irritating point: More than one author used the words *atheist* and *unbeliever* in their original non-pejorative sense. But to the ignoranti who greatly outnumber the educated, both words *are* pejorative. I strongly urge persons still using the equivalent of "secondhand" to switch to *non-theist* and *nonbeliever* - at least until those words go the way of "used" and themselves need to be replaced.

On the other hand, I was delighted to see someone else stressing a point that I have been trying to get through to the brainwashed for a considerable time. Steven Pinker writes "The Ten Commandments, read in context, prohibit murder, lying, and theft only within the tribe, not against outsiders."

My personal reaction to attempts to harmonize religion with science is perhaps exemplified by an experience from my days as a high-school teacher. When another teacher informed me that he sent his children to a "Christian school" (oxymoron), I warily suggested that science and religion are incompatible. He answered, "Then science is wrong." Fear of economic repercussions at the time prevented me from giving the response I would certainly use today: "If you actually believe that, you are certifiably insane."

Other books have considered the question of whether science and religion are compatible, but never so effectively. If I was reviewing *Science and Religion* for an online bookseller, I would rate it at five stars. For readers of a magazine designed for the relevantly educated, I cannot guarantee that it will give you factual information you did not already know. But it will certainly give you material you will want to quote against the nonsense addicts infesting this planet. Buy it or borrow it, but read it.

* William Harwood, PhD, M Litt (Cambridge) is a member of the editorial board of *Free Inquiry*, a contributing editor of *American Rationalist*, and the author of 18 books.

The 'hierarchy' of irrationality

IN his interesting article (*Freethinker*, May 2003) Graham Newbery makes some very important observations about the links between "abnormal" mental states and the origin and development of religious ideas.

I'd take issue with just one of his statements – that concerning the "hierarchy" of irrationality as manifested in the most common mental illnesses. Graham wrote: "The most irrational way of thinking is manifested by those suffering bi-polar disorder, or psychotic depression. Then comes schizophrenia. Intermediate on the continuum between schizophrenic-type thinking and what too unclearly is called normality is magical, or schizotypal, thinking."

The first point to make is that psychiatric diagnosis is largely a matter of how a particular psychiatrist interprets symptoms. In the case of the major psychoses it can be very hard to determine what a diagnosis should be in this or that particular case. Hallucinations, delusions, and the construction of paranoid systems are common to schizophrenia, bi-polar, and psychotic depression.

The second point is that, on the whole, those affected by schizophrenia tend to exhibit more bizarre and chronic symptoms than those suffering from bi-polar or depressive conditions. In other words, the irrationality of the schizophrenic is usually the more profound and intractable.

It seems to me most likely that many of the ideas taught by the so-called "revealed religions" have their origins in systematic fantasies best characterised by the label "schizophrenic". The most illuminating modern example I can think of is the ravings of L Ron Hubbard.

Many of the works of the so-called mystics are clearly written by individuals who have known both deep depression and extraordinary elation. My hunch is, therefore, that though the origin of revealed religions lies in the territory of schizophrenia, much subsequent important development has been as a result of bi-polar and depressive interpretation.

It is notable that the religious establishment (Jewish, Islamic and Christian) does not even try to address this apparent fact, but instead strives continuously to ignore it. Given that the denial of one's disorder is a prime symptom of psychosis, it seems reasonable to reach that conclusion which freethinkers have long entertained – that belief in religion is nothing short of sheer madness.

NORMAN PRIDMORE
Sleaford.

Keeping our heads down

I HAVE explained in your columns previously, and need not do so again, why I consider Brian King totally mistaken in his view (*Points of View*, May), that keeping our heads below the

parapet and our message *sotto voce* will restrain the Government's authoritarian tendencies.

A supplementary point is that secularists/humanists are by no means the only group fighting those tendencies. Even if Brian were right in his supposition that the soft word will turn away the authoritarian, the tactic would not work unless the other protesters against the views of Government agreed to follow it, which I hope and believe they have not the slightest intention of doing.

JIM ROSS
Perth

Historicity of Jesus

WE are regularly being reprimanded by Steuart Cambell (*Points of View*, April 2003) for failing to accept the historicity of Jesus the Christ (he wasn't Mr Christ). Jesus the Son of God is another matter altogether.

However, I wonder if he's seen the 1995 *Dictionary of the Bible*, Geddes & Grosset, New Lanark, in his native Scotland? It was published by Brockhampton Press, London, a year before his own work, *The Rise and Fall of Jesus*.

The scholarly authors of the former work had better sources than I have, or may I suggest, my namesake. In their case, at least, they had the added motive to find historical support for the Jesus myth, yet failed.

They complain: "It is impossible to put together an orderly account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew and Luke say Bethlehem) from the pages of the Gospels" ... "almost nothing is known of his earthly life" ... "The name *Jesus* was quite common, being the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua*, meaning 'God is salvation' ... "It is impossible to identify many of his disciples by name" ... "For the most part, we can neither make a map of his journeys nor time-chart of events".

Steuart Campbell suggests that only "historians" can speak with authority on the matter of the historicity of Jesus, and that doesn't include Professor G A Wells. May I suggest that competence in Jewish mythology or even rationalist reason would suffice.

STEWART R VALDAR
London

IF Patrick Gormley (*Points of View*, May) is claiming that, while the historical existence of everyone is uncertain, some are more uncertain than others, then he is certainly correct. The more data we have on a historical character, the more likely it is that that person really existed. So it can be claimed, as Mr Gormley did, that the historicity of Jesus is not as certain as, say, that of Hitler. Nevertheless, there are enough data on Jesus (not just from the Gospels) to justify belief in his historicity.

Mythicists should be aware that claiming that allegedly historical characters did not exist

imposes an obligation on them to show how (otherwise) belief in their existence came about and how (otherwise) we can explain accounts of the lives of such persons. This can be a daunting task, usually making belief in historicity simpler.

Mr Gormley should note that Jesus did not claim to be God (an impossibility for any Jew); nor did he claim to be "the Son of God" (whatever that means). He claimed (obliquely in the third person) that he was "the Son of Man", an Aramaicism simply meaning "a man", but also a phrase from the Jewish scriptures describing the Messiah. In effect it was a coded claim to be the expected Messiah of the Jews.

It was the Early Church which claimed divinity for Jesus, elevating him as a replacement for Mithras. All this is explained in my book.

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

I AM not sure who first said "when the legend is bigger than the truth, print the legend". The story of Jesus Christ may well be "the greatest legend ever told"; no open-minded investigator will deny that much fictitious material was incorporated into the gospel narratives. The nub of the dispute, between your correspondents Steuart Campbell, Patrick Gormley, and Derek Roberts, is whether or not there is a historical "hook" upon which this legend hangs.

I have read G A Wells, and I respect his scholarship, but I am not persuaded by his argument against Jesus' existence. For one thing, the execution of their founder on a Roman cross was a serious embarrassment to an early Church striving for respectability in the Roman empire: why would this have been invented? St Paul's failure to furnish details of Jesus' biography or teaching in his letters (the earliest extant Christian documents) is explicable, if such detail would not have supported Paul's own "spin" on the Christian message.

For opponents of Christianity to nail their colours to the Jesus-never-existed mast is a risky tactic, as this position is too easily overturned by a new discovery (such as the recent finding of the remains of Jesus' brother James, if these are proved genuine.) Also, paradoxically, the denial of Jesus as a historical figure may make it easier to be a Christian. By which I mean this: taken uncritically, as a whole and in itself, the traditional story of Christ's life and passion can be seen as a deeply moving metaphor for the human condition, and as a comforting "myth".

However, as Patrick Gormley said, Christians feel they need to believe that Jesus existed, and that he made unique claims which were "proved" by miracles. The historical context given for Christ's earthly existence means we are not just sceptical of the miracles; we also become aware of anachronistic interpolations in the gospel story. In particular, we find

it implausible that a first-century Jew would claim to be God or the only Son of God, as distinct from a possible claim to be a Messiah in the original Jewish sense, a mortal human but with a special mission from God.

DAVID M PORTER
London

Gender imbalance

I HESITATE to trespass in the garden of feminism – especially since, like the former Soviet Steppes, it appears to be suffering from over-fertilisation and I haven't yet launched myself into cyberspace. But I'm led to the former action by the ongoing controversy among Sue Lord, her supporters and opponents, including my old colleague, Bill McIlroy.

The secular/humanist movement promoted female suffrage and the Married Women's Property Act, and has always believed people should be judged by their individual worth and not by sexual and other category descriptions. It has been fortunate to attract, throughout its history, outstanding female activists who have risen to prominence in its ranks: two presidents, several vice-presidents and executive members of the National Secular Society, editor of the *Secular Chronicle*, one editor of the *Freethinker* and co-editor of the *National Reformer*.

Today, as "A Shaw" points out (*Points of View*, March), women are some of the most effective exponents of our cause.

To come to Sue Lord's research into the breakdown of *Freethinker* contributors by sex, I long ago wrote in *The Rise of the Mediocracy* (1975-6) that "sociology becomes an expensive way of ... telling the world what everybody already knows" – the converse to Disraeli's "lies, damned lies and statistics".

Despite what we agree to be outstanding contributions by individual women in the movement, the facts are that religion is chiefly supported and perpetuated by women as churchgoers and mothers, and the philosophical basis on which atheism, materialism, determinism and other manifestations of freethought rest has almost entirely been created by men. The *Freethinker* is simply reflecting the world at large.

It is a shame that the editor was manipulated into the same pointless exercise as Sue Lord. I made no male:female analysis of contributors to the dozens of freethought publications I processed for *100 Years of Freethought* and *President Charles Bradlaugh, MP*, but my clear impression is that men predominated in all of them, and more so in the past than today. Over the decades I have also read a lot of theology, which is almost entirely written by men.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

Editor's note: Correspondence on this topic is now at an end.

Palestinians and Jews

WRITING of Israelis and Palestinians, Ms Rasjidah St John (*Points of View*, May) mentions a small, cranky organisation "Jews for Justice for the Palestinians". Does she know whether, in the entire Arab World, which outnumbers Israelis 100 to one, there is any organisation seeking to bring justice to the Israelis?

If not, why not? The Israelis have suffered and are suffering injustices as great as any in the entire history of the human race. In 1948, in 1967 and 1973 they suffered unprovoked aggression from the entire Arab world which was seeking their destruction. They are being subjected to anti-Semitic propaganda which would do credit to Dr Goebbels, and to daily terror from Arabs in Gaza and the West Bank who seek to murder and maim as many non-combatants as possible. The Israelis who control the strongest army in the region do their duty to protect their citizens with remarkable restraint, and constantly seek peace.

If the Arabs who call themselves "Palestinians" lack a state it is entirely of their own choosing. Do the Palestinians exist? No one had ever heard of them when Jordan and Egypt were in occupation of Gaza and the West Bank before 1967. Palestine is merely a geographical area, like the Sahara or Siberia, and its inhabitants include, and have always included, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Circassians, Druses and Arabs – all entitled to live there.

The *Freethinker*, an organ of secularism, must surely afford a voice to the Israelis and Jews, and not publish letters only from their enemies.

DEREK WILKES
London

Jonathan Edwards

IT is flattering to find reference to our campaign in the May 2003 issue of the *Freethinker*. However, the charge that Mary Whitehouse sought to "control what is broadcast" is not true. Having worked alongside her for many years I can reassure your readers that this has never been the case. The campaign, which as you say "is very much alive", is founded on the statutory requirements laid upon the broadcasters by Parliament. Securing that programmes "do not offend good taste or decency" has been a requirement for ITV since the Television Act 1954 became law some years before the "Clean-Up Campaign" was launched.

It remains the case that programming is not determined by regulatory committees nor is it determined by "lobbying from the outside". Choosing what to watch on TV is limited to programming that is already prescribed by the broadcasters according to priorities that have little to do with adventure or creativity. In our opinion there is much on TV that is excellent, but there is already much that is "infantile"

despite the need for programming that is intellectually edifying.

There is also much that fails to meet public expectation or parliamentary intention. The Communications Bill introduces a range of new tests for regulators to apply, including that of meeting "generally accepted standards" and protection from "the inclusion of offensive and harmful material".

Your premature criticism of Jonathan Edwards revives intolerance from a bygone age. It is surely a matter of civil rights and natural justice for the Christian community to be represented on the part-time, nine-member Content Board.

The religious point of view, in our multi-faith, multicultural society, is as valid as any other and it is regrettable that the NSS has made such discriminatory, prejudiced and selective remarks. I dread to think what you would have said had my application to the Content Board been accepted!

JOHN C BEYER
Director
Mediawatch-uk

The Freethinker

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Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, July 5, 4.30pm. AGM.

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

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: B Mercer, "Amber", Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Tel. 01209 890690.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel 01242 528743.

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, June 13, 7.30pm. Andrew Barrow: *Quentin and Philip*.

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: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, May 1, 8pm. Emyline Godfrey: *The Victorians and Self-Defence*. Thursday, July 3, 8pm. Ron Latchford: *Death – The Last Taboo*.

Humanist Association Dorset: Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, Bournemouth. Saturday, June 7, 2.30pm. David Warden: *The Case Against Alpha*.

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.

Perth Group: Information: Terry Martin, Tel: 01250 874742. Email: terrymartin@dalcruie.fsnet.co.uk.

Leeds & District Humanist Group: Information Robert Tee on 0113 2577009.

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://homepages.stayfree.co.uk/lss>. 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, June 26, 8pm. AGM.

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, June 4, 8pm. Public meeting.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Literature and information stall at the following events, 11am till 5pm. Sheffield Green Fair, St Mary's Community Centre, Bramall Lane, Saturday, June 28. South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley Village, Saturday, July 5. Sharrow festival, Saturday, July 12, Mount Pleasant Park, Sitwell Road, Sheffield.

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: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

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.freesevers.com

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

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