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# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

## Programmed to hate!

Secular  
education  
or religious  
indoctrination  
– What do  
British  
Muslims  
*really* want  
for their  
children?



*Images like this, accompanied by exhortations to young Muslim in the West to wage jihad (Holy War) against the kufr (non-Muslim) are common to many Islamic websites, some British-based.*

– *See centrepage feature*

**Pure pants! This devout  
Christian monarch has  
discovered the source  
of all the world's ills**

– *Be amazed by his  
revelation on page 5*



Church of England says 'jump', New Labour asks: 'How High?'

– *see Keith Porteous Wood's report on employment regulations, page 4*



AH, Dr John, what a guy! Here's a man who makes the sort of sound that warms the blood and lifts the spirit – a truly innovative New Orleans jazz-and-blues musician whose versatility has become legend.

Then there is the other Dr John – Jeffrey John – who, in the last few weeks, we have come to associate with a very different sound – a cacophony of condemnation from a rag-tag of C of E conservatives and evangelicals who have been throwing their toys around the nursery with more than usual ferocity over his appointment to the post of Bishop of Reading.

Why has his appointment struck such sour note? Because Dr John is gay, and has been living with his lover for 27 years.

The conservatives and the evangelicals do, of course, have "Holy Scripture" on their side, but Scripture covers a multitude of sins other than homosexuality and I cannot help feeling that they are being a tad selective. For example, I wonder how indignant they might have been had they discovered that a bishop-to-be had a friend or relation who had suggested he try another religion. According to Deuteronomy 13:6, and 8-10, it would be his duty to "surely kill him".

And what if they discovered that their appointee was in the habit of kindling a fire on the Sabbath? Exodus 31:14 leaves no doubt that this is a capital offence: "Every one that defileth [the Sabbath day] shall surely be put to death."

The man may have contravened other laws that carried the death penalty – by eating fat, or eating blood. And if he had suffered an injury to his genitals, that would prevent him from entering heaven. And who would want a bishop saving souls when he knew his own was damned to hell? I could go on. The Bible is crammed with this sort of crap. But I think, as far as scripture is concerned, my point has been made.

With regard to the *morality* of Dr John's detractors, I can do no better than draw readers' attention to Joan Smith's column in the *Independent on Sunday* (June 22). Smith, an honorary associate of the National Secular Society who was keynote speaker at the NSS conference last month (see page 7), wrote: "In the brief period before I was thrown out of the Brownies, I learnt that it was my duty to help other people every day. Solely with that exhortation in mind, I have some advice for the Church of England, which is currently tearing itself apart over the appointment of a gay priest as suffragan Bishop of Reading: stop worrying about what adults do in bed. I have seldom witnessed a more demeaning spectacle than that of Dr Jeffrey John being hounded into making public statements about his relationship with his male partner, as if it was anyone's business but his own. It hasn't even shut up his critics, who have continued their attacks on his appointment, even after he announced that the

relationship is no longer 'sexually expressed'.

"Why shouldn't it be? And wouldn't Christian churches around the world do us a favour if they worried more about priests having non-consensual relationships with children than about openly gay men such as Dr John? Contrast the shameful way he has been treated with the lenient response of bishops and archbishops to the activities of paedophile priests, many of whom were quietly moved to other parishes where they were able to go on abusing children ...

**Freethinker  
editor BARRY DUKE  
reflects on the unholy  
row over the new  
Bishop of Reading**



"If ever there was something to get worked up about, it is priests using their position to abuse children, yet what is the Church of England's current obsession? Whether Dr John has gone beyond what some of its bishops have called, in a typically mealy-mouthed open letter, 'the gift of same-sex friendship'. I just wish these guys, whose signatures sound like a mystery tour organised by Virgin Trains – Bradford, Carlisle, Chester, Chichester, Exeter, Liverpool, Rochester, Southwell and Winchester – would say what they mean for once. Gay sex! Body fluids! That's what they're horrified by, although they disguise it with a load of waffle about sexual intercourse outside marriage undermining the sign and beautiful expression of that union – a crime against language, as well as discriminating against lesbians and gay men. May God, if He exists, save us from the twin horrors of Anglican vocabulary and sacramental sex.

"And if the Church of England isn't homophobic, as Dr John's critics claim, it has to explain why the Archbishops' Council lobbied for – and finally got last week – the right to sack lesbians and gays. From December this year, when new employment regulations come into force, religious organisations will be entitled to dismiss employees whose sexual orientation offends them – including, I imagine, the new Bishop of Reading. Ironically, the regulations are the result of an EU directive outlawing discrimination in employment, but various religious organisations promptly demanded exemptions on the grounds of faith. 'How can it be sensible', asked Lord All in a little-reported House of Lords debate last week, 'that on the one hand the Church is about to appoint a gay bishop, and on the other it is about to sack gay staff?' The Labour peer described the new regulations as 'more like a provision dreamed up by the Taliban than one suitable for a mature democracy', but they became law all the same.

"According to Lord Lester, the Church will soon be able to fire a whole range of staff, including librarians and cleaners, simply

because they are gay. This is not discrimination, you understand, any more than the increasingly strident calls to save the citizens of Reading from Dr John and his partner of 27 years. It's not that the Church hierarchy has anything against gays or lesbians, just that they'd rather not have them in the vicarage or the bishop's lodgings. They don't even, it seems, want them wielding a mop and bucket, if more suitable candidates are available. I can't wait for the first job adverts to appear: church cleaner wanted, 12 hours a week, only heterosexuals need apply."

STILL on the subject of ignorance, bigotry and paranoia, I see that the Christian Institute is promoting a new book, *Libertarianism* by Philip Vander Elst. The blurb on their website says that "the profoundly anti-Christian nature of Marxism has been well-understood and well-exposed in Christian writing. In comparison very little has been written about the powerful new political ideology of Libertarianism. This has emerged from the political right, but its influence extends across the political spectrum.

"Libertarianism claims to promote freedom. But what does this mean in practice? Libertarians, like Communists, tend to be atheists, but does their hostility to God strengthen liberty or weaken it? Both also declare that marriage and other sexual lifestyles are equally valid. By contrast Christians know that a free society needs moral boundaries.

"Libertarianism turns liberty into licence ... its influence is reinforcing the cultural and social decay we see all around us. Liberty itself is in danger of committing suicide because the moral self-discipline required to sustain a free and civilised society is rapidly disappearing."

As anyone who has had any dealings with the CI will tell you, there is more mendacity than morality to be found in that particular organisation, and if it's common sense you're seeking, you'll find more an a chicken coop. Last month, for example, its Director, Colin Hart, was asked, in BBC Radio 4's *Moral Maze* programme, why the Christian Institute was so opposed to explicit sex education for British school children, when this had dramatically reduced teenage pregnancies in countries like Sweden and Finland.

This, he said smugly, was not due to sex education but to the "morning-after" pill which masked the true extent of teenage pregnancies in those countries. Ah, but how could the morning-after pill account for the fact that teenagers in the countries concerned had only a tiny fraction of the sexually transmitted diseases currently rife among British youngsters?

Mr Hart, who claims that there are some aspects of sex that children should be kept in ignorance of (oral sex, for example), was lost for a sensible answer.

Why am I not surprised?



# Death sentence is quashed because jury referred to the Bible

AN American judge has overturned a convicted murderer's death sentence because jurors consulted the Bible

Jury members stayed in a hotel during their deliberations, and court officials made sure newspapers were not delivered to their rooms. But the jurors did find Bibles provided by the hotel management.

Robert Harlan was convicted and sentenced to death in 1995 for the murder of Rhonda Maloney. He also shot and paralysed Jaquie Creazzo who tried to come to the murdered woman's aid.

While noting that Harlan's crimes "were among the most grievous, heinous and reprehensible" he had seen in 18 years on the bench, Adams County District Judge John J Vigil said last month that court officials failed to properly sequester the jury.

"The jury supervision performed in this

case was extremely negligent and appallingly lax," Vigil wrote in his ruling. "A jury resorting to biblical code has no place in constitutional death penalty proceedings," said the judge, who has not yet set a date for Harlan's re-sentencing.

In a five-day hearing last month, Harlan's attorneys argued that several jurors consulted biblical scripture during jury deliberations – in particular two Old Testament passages from Leviticus that read, "Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him." And, "Whoever kills an animal shall restore it, but whoever kills a man shall be put to death."

Prosecutors had argued that the sequestration order applied to news media coverage and that jurors should be allowed to draw upon their personal moral code, including the Bible, while rendering a verdict.

## Muslim's demand rejected US Court says no to veiled faces on drivers' licences

AMERICAN atheists have applauded the recent decision by a Circuit Court judge in Florida not to allow a Muslim woman to wear a veil for her driver's licence photograph.

Sultaana Freeman, who changed her name after converting to Islam, argued that her free exercise of religion would be "burdened" if she were required to show her face. The case is considered a test of the growing use of federal and state "special rights" laws (including the Religious Freedom Restoration Acts) which provide legal exemptions for the behaviour of religious groups and individuals.

"There should be no 'special rights' for any religious groups or individuals," said Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists.

"Government must remain neutral in respect to religious practices; and religious belief or affiliation should not exempt someone from the generally applicable laws and regulations that everyone else has to obey."

Johnson dismissed as "bogus" arguments by Freeman's attorneys that their client was concerned about "modesty". "Freeman, or any other Islamic woman who wants a driver's licence can be photographed with only women present if that's what it requires to allay these kinds of concerns."

Ron Barrier, Communications Director for American Atheists, said the broad statutes creating "special rights" for religious groups often vitiate equal enforcement and protection of civil law. "According to news reports and testimony, child welfare workers revealed that Mrs Freeman and her husband often used their religious beliefs and concerns over 'modesty' to prevent investigators looking into abuse charges in connection with their daughters," said Barrier. Religion should not be an obstacle to the equal and neutral enforcement of any law protecting us, especially where children are involved," he added.

## Muslim clerics urged to show compassion for AIDS victims

ISLAMIC religious leaders must radically rethink their attitude towards AIDS. Instead of condemning those millions of Muslims suffering from the disease, they should concentrate more on caring for the victims and passing on information about how it best can be avoided.

That was the message that emerged last month from a conference held in Malaysia to discuss ways of combating the HIV/AIDS scourge among Muslims. The Malaysian government said it would train imams and other religious leaders to relay information of the disease to their followers.

Abdul Hamid, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department said "We believe this is an important issue affecting the *ummah* in Malaysia and we are committed to ensuring that Muslim leaders in this country become well-educated about the disease and get involved in educating the people about it," he said when opening the second International Muslim Leaders Consultation on HIV/AIDS in Kuala Lumpur.

More than 200 people from 30 countries attended the five-day conference, co-organised by Jakim (the Malaysian Islamic Development Department) and the Malaysian Aids Council (MAC).

Abdul Hamid said local imams and other religious figures in the community nationwide would begin their training by the end of the year, adding that Jakim, together with the Health Ministry, MAC and others are in the process of developing a module for the training.

Abdul Hamid is reported in the *Malaysian Star* as saying that the involvement of the Muslim community in combating AIDS/HIV was still limited and unsatisfactory even though most of the infected people were Muslims.

He later told a press conference that there was a strong fear of the disease and of those infected by it among the community.

"There needs to be a comprehensive information and training for religious leaders in order to correct the perception on the disease and those suffering from it.

"If we know more about it, we will be more serious in tackling the issue," he said, adding that there had been cases when imams had refused to conduct burial rites and rejected requests for help from infected patients. They preferred to condemn rather than care," he said.

### Muslim shoot-out over mosque

RIVAL Sunni Muslim groups traded heavy gunfire in the Pakistan city of Karachi over control of a mosque, killing a 13-year-old boy caught in the crossfire, and wounding six people, including two policemen.

Dozens of armed militants belonging to one radical Islamic group attacked the mosque in northern Karachi in an attempt to seize it from their rivals.

The incident took place in May.





REGULATIONS to combat discrimination in employment on the grounds of Sexual Orientation. Religion and Belief have been ratified by the House of Lords. This could have been expected to be a moment of rejoicing but any welcome of the main thrust of the Regulations was drowned out by a crescendo of resentment at the extent of religious exemptions.

The Regulations, required by an EU Directive, were introduced into law through secondary legislation in the form of a Statutory Instrument. The procedure dictates that Parliament can only be accept or reject them *in toto* without amendment; but only after they have been the subject of a comprehensive consultation process involving interested parties and the public. The National Secular Society took part vigorously in this process.

After the Regulations were laid before Parliament, the Society, trade unions and discrimination lawyers expressed their dissatisfaction with the breadth of the religious exemptions they contained to parliamentary scrutiny committee. It normally deliberates on such matters in private, but the committee was so concerned about the representations that it called its first meeting open to the public since 1998 and summoned Government officials to explain the Regulations (especially the exemptions) and the way they had arrived at them.

Their answers under cross examination were less than satisfactory on several matters. The passage in the Regulations quoted in the box below only emerged after the public consultation process had ended. A Government lawyer admitted that those affected by this late amendment had not been consulted, evidently because the churches thought that the exemptions had not gone 'anywhere near far enough'. This was curious, given that the Church appeared almost to

The most contentious passage, **Sexual Orientation Regulation 7(3)** reads:

(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 – so as to comply with the doctrines of the religion, or 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.

The Church of England Archbishops' Council "strongly urged the Government to insert in the Regulations":

"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."

have dictated the changes directly to those drafting the regulations. He was also hesitant about whether the passage was necessary at all.

Campaigners were delighted when the Committee issued a report couched in the most censorious parliamentary language casting considerable doubt on several aspects of the Regulations, and in particular whether the passage in the box was *intra vires* under the Directive.

## NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reports on "a crescendo of resentment" over employment exemptions granted to religious organisations



Later, in the Commons debate, NSS Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris put the minister under huge pressure, suggesting that the scrutiny Committee's disapproval could hardly have been expressed more strongly. He draw attention to the full-scale opposition from the unions (and the Society also complained).

**As Lord Lester of Herne Hill was to say later, in the Lord's debate: "I predict with the utmost solemnity ... as a practising lawyer of almost 40 years' standing that the Government will face ultimate defeat and humiliation in the courts after costly and effective litigation."**

Shamefully, none of this was enough to persuade the Government to withdraw the Regulations, even if only briefly for re-consideration.

As is normal for the review of secondary legislation, the Commons proceedings took place in a Committee, and only those few MPs on the Committee were able to speak, making the mounting of effective opposition even more difficult. Fortunately "our" Dr Harris (LibDem) was on the Committee and was the only MP to mount any coherent opposition. He quoted from letters to officials from the Society giving detailed objections to the Regulations and asked why it had not been consulted about late changes to the Regulations.

The (Conservative) opposition was more preoccupied with not causing business any extra regulations, and even used up some of the limited time asking why the Government had signed the Treaty of Amsterdam, under whose social chapter the EU Directive had been drawn up—something wholly outside the

Committee's remit.

The Lord's debate was on the floor of the chamber and often passionate, even dramatic. As the Sexual Orientation Regulations were the more controversial, the battle for both was in effect fought in the debate to force a reconsideration of them. When this debate was lost, the Religion and Belief Regulations were simply waved through, almost without debate.

### Our proponents

Lord Lester opened with a motion to invite the Government to withdraw the Sexual Orientation Regulations as the regulations were *intra vires* (see box in column 1).

He opined: "To require a person applying for the position of a church cleaner to be heterosexual when that has absolutely nothing to do with whether he or she can wield a mop and bucket not only flies in the face of reason, but is contrary to the express terms of the directive. It is not just cleaners but librarians and a wide variety of others who will be affected – in both paid and unpaid, voluntary work."

As well as the excellent speech (just a small fragment of which appears above) by Lord Lester, as the architect of the debate challenge, there were powerful contributions from Lord Avebury (both LibDem). NSS Honorary Associate Baroness Turner of Camden (Lab) had hoped that these regulations would put right some of the injustices of treatment of homosexuals "but this does not appear to be the case". Humanist Baroness Whitaker (Lab) spoke about the importance of human rights and urged "the Government to think again".

### Our opponents

The rather elderly Lord Pilkington of Oxenford made perhaps the most offensive speech of the debate: "In Hitler's Germany, he destroyed faith communities, and the state decided who they could employ. It is a fundamental tenet of modern democracy that the communities within the state, be they trade unions or churches, can decide whom to admit. ... People do not have to be cleaners in the Anglican church or the Jewish synagogue. ... If we do not watch out, we will stray into the secularisation seen in France in the late 19th century, when the state started to dictate to the church what it could do. They could not have monks or things like that."

The Bishop of Blackburn responded that "the [Regulations], inevitably, raise particular issues for faith communities in their own internal affairs. That is not a code for saying that we seek special treatment. It is simply an echo of the assertion of the preamble of the European directive in relation to the status of churches, religious associations and communities, recognis[ing] that churches and faith communities need to maintain their character and identity and sometimes to be able to set requirements which should not arise in the



case of a secular employer. ... Religious organisations self-evidently need to be able to safeguard their identity and ethos without the fear of constant litigation which is such a feature of our modern society.

There has been a good deal of misrepresentation in the press about the position of a wide range of faith communities, to the extent of it suggesting that we are keen to dismiss gay clergy and staff. ... Churches and faith communities need to retain a broad measure of freedom to determine their own requirements in relation to the sexual conduct—not orientation – of those who wish to serve or represent them. ... I urge the House to recognise that there are genuine issues of religious liberty here. ... We do have some posts and orders where, irrespective of sexual orientation, be it heterosexual or homosexual, the requirement

**'I find it impossible to believe that the Government – one committed to fairness and equality – should seek to allow the continued discrimination against gay men and women if those who seek to discriminate against them believe in God. What an irony: if you are God-fearing, you can weed out, discriminate and persecute gay men and women, and, if you are not, you cannot.'** – Lord Ali

remains for marriage or abstinence. ... In particular the regulation is confined to employment for purposes of an organised religion. It fulfils a legitimate objective – protecting the right to religious freedom – and it is proportionate. It is emphatically not about pandering to prejudices. The provision comes into play only where doctrine and strongly held religious convictions are at stake. I cannot believe that that religious doctrine comes into play in the employment of cleaners or librarians [mentioned earlier].

Not to provide protection for genuine religious convictions would risk the law engaging in a collision course against the consciences of many who take a conservative view, with a small "c", on sexual ethics. That would be a very worrying development and not one that I believe would prove beneficial in the end to these regulations or to the well-being of the diversity, culture and religion of our nation.

Lady Miller of Hendon, speaking from the front bench on behalf Conservatives, supported the Regulations. She assured the House that "there are those who find homosexuality objectionable. I certainly do not include myself or, indeed, I think, anyone in this House. Although I am a very religious person I certainly would not accept the word 'abomination', which is used in Leviticus. I think that is quite disgraceful." [Perhaps she should

complain to the author?]

She had obtained the opposite legal view to Lord Lester's from Professor Leigh of the University of Durham, whom she described as a leading human rights academic. Having shared a platform with him at a university seminar, I would say he takes the view that religion should be given almost unfettered power. He had argued: "It is overly dogmatic to argue, as the Joint Committee has, that Regulation 7(3) is *ultra vires* the European Communities Act." That sounded to me not terribly different from: "I know it is *ultra vires* but I want everyone to ignore the fact."

It seemed that Lady Miller had reluctantly eschewed giving the Government a bloody nose by rejecting what she described as "badly drafted" regulations. Instead, she favoured accepting them, because her religious friends thought them too good to miss. This analysis was confirmed by her concluding words which quoted approvingly from a brief from the Evangelical Alliance. "Although we recognise that the Regulations as laid before may cause some difficulties to faith groups across the UK in coming years, we consider that the Sexual Orientation Regulations are the best we can hope for and expect at this present time."

#### The brave turncoats

Lord Alli told his fellow peers that his concern was "the role of the Church of England and other organised religions in this debate. I find it impossible to believe that the Government – one committed to fairness and equality – should seek to allow the continued discrimination against gay men and women if those who seek to discriminate against them believe in God. What an irony: if you are God-fearing, you can weed out, discriminate and persecute gay men and women, and, if you are not, you cannot. Frankly, the exceptions in Regulation 7(3) are a joke. They make a mockery of equality legislation.

"I believe in God and am fully prepared to put my head above the parapet. I do so to condemn those in the Church of England and other organised religions who seek to use the lives of ordinary gay men and women as a crucible in which to play out their own internal theological disputes. How can it be sensible that, on the one hand, the Church is about to appoint a gay bishop, and, on the other, it is about to sack gay staff.

"But I cannot accept that it is right for an organised religion to dictate that those in its employment should or should not be of a particular sexuality—no more than that they should or should not be of a particular race.

"It seems to me that the Church of England, whose representations to government appear to have been influential in bringing about the addition of Regulation 7(3), is seeking to do a dangerous thing. In its support of the extension of the circumstances in which it would be lawful to

discriminate on the basis of sexuality, it is effectively absenting itself from normal civil society.

"Not so long ago, being a Roman Catholic in this country led to persecution and execution. When we had a Roman Catholic monarchy, the same was true for Protestants. Thankfully, we now live in more tolerant times; but the church history of this country in the 16th century is still being played out in other parts of the world. How can we try to advocate decent civil society in other countries when we legitimise the practice of discrimination against gay men and women by religious institutions?

"What is the difference between an absolute right to remove someone from their job because they are gay and an absolute right to put somebody in jail because they are gay? ... The difference is in the degree of prejudice in the law. This feels more like a provision dreamed up by the Taliban than one suitable for a mature democracy.

... "Gay people may be a minority in society, but so too are those who actively profess a faith. Each is entitled to protection, but not at the expense of the rights and dignity of the other. That is what equality means. Today we have the opportunity to demonstrate that this House is a modern Chamber, one that acknowledges that religion has a place in the national debate, but not a dominant or superior one.

Perhaps the most moving contribution was from the Bishop of Worcester, who confessed that it was with some hesitation that he spoke out against the very strong representation of not only the Archbishops' Council of his own church but also the leadership of many other denominations and faith communities. "The representations made on behalf of my own Church are not proportionate to the problem with which they seek to deal", he said. He drew attention to the very great significance of the debates in the Church and in religious communities about sexual ethics, and even more important, about the "human rights tradition – a very important development in modern society. ... I find unacceptable the use of phrases such as 'beliefs' and 'significant number', which open the door to some kinds of campaigning about which all of us would wish to be ashamed.

"My second difficulty is that I do not believe that the rights of religious communities are unlimited in relation to the civil law of society. A balance must be struck, time and time again as a matter of fact, about whether religious communities may preserve their distinctive character or whether that distinctive character goes too far outside what the public good has come to see as right."

Despite the persuasive moral and legal arguments, the chamber filled, and Lord Lester's wrecking amendment was lost by 50 to 85 votes. Soon afterwards, at around 11 pm, both sets of Regulations were accepted without a division. Anyone for a Judicial Review?



HOT off the presses comes A C Grayling's new book *What is Good?*. In the present climate in which the daily news is full of stories demonstrating again and again the folly and cruelty of religious belief, the publication of this book is an event to be celebrated.

Dr Grayling is well known not just as a professional philosopher but also as an able and uncondescending populariser of philosophy. He pops up in all sorts of places, especially on the radio, where his measured, fluent and reasonable tones act as a kind of reassuring balm, contrasting well with his vigorous and strongly held views about religion (and much else). He is no friend of cant or confusion, and dissects the illucid ramblings of religious apologists with a forensic scalpel of remarkable sharpness. He is, naturally enough, not popular with those who do not share his views. A recent review of *What is Good?* in the *Spectator* made much of the height of his forehead and the floppiness of his hair. He must get

tired of such silly *ad-hominem* attacks.

He has, joy of joys, a website. It's at <http://www.acgrayling.com/index.html> and is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a model of clarity and accessibility. In addition to the usual brief academic biography and a helpful list of publications is a list of on-line papers and articles. At the time of writing there are 23 of these, all available free at the click of a mouse. Fans of his *Last Word* column from the *Guardian* will be pleased to find six of those little gems included.

## NORMAN PRIDMORE roots out internet sites of interest to freethinkers

On the subject of little gems, here's another. It's called Philosophy Radio and is at <http://www.angelfire.com/ego/philosophyradio/>. It gives links to a variety of audio debates, talks and lectures on a wide variety of philosophical subjects, with some very considerable and well-known figures. To hear the stuff requires that you have Real Player installed, and helpfully includes a link to the appropriate download site. Who's there to listen to? Well, Dr Grayling, of course. And Simon Blackburn, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Peter Singer, Ted Honderich ...

All the usual suspects, really. I've finished listening to James Randi being interviewed on why he's an atheist. Wonderful, edgy stuff. And for those who accuse philosophers of having no sense of humour, the site includes two Monty Python pieces – the football match between German and Greek philosophers, and *The Philosopher's Drinking Song*.

Go on, your computer has been begging you to! Mind you, to listen to everything will take some time given that there over one hundred items to choose from.

For some time I've been meaning to include a link to the really excellent web-watch site that Brett Humphries writes for the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA). I was going to include in this column the urls of sites relating to the Sea of Faith network, that group of radical/confused/disillusioned/desperate (delete as appropriate) Christians who seem no longer actually to believe in any Christian dogmas but can't actually bring themselves to leg it out of church.

Anyway, Brett has done all I was intending to, and much more besides. There are 25 columns on archive at <http://www.galha.org/gh/webwatch.html> and each one is rich in links, as well as being sharply written. Congratulations, too, to GALHA on choosing a presentation and text size that's so easy to read and navigate.

That's enough of the sublime. Now for a hearty dose of the ridiculous. Within five minutes' walk of my low hovel can be found a Spiritualist church, a Salvation Army Hall, an evangelical fundie meeting place, an Anglican parish church, a United Reform church, and joy of joys, a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall.

Every now and then denizens emanating from the last named plod their way down my mean street with fistfuls of tracts. Those who delight in gaudy hokum really should start a collection of these. They also make excellent fire-lighters.

Those not lucky enough to be visited by the Witnesses, however, should not despair. Instead, they should pay them a call by going to their website at <http://www.watchtower.org/>. It's great fun. In their "science" section, devoted to extolling the merits of "intelligent design" there is a paragraph entitled "Multifunctional, Miraculous Blubber". Never has an entire website been so concisely and pithily described. Oh yes, and you'll learn too why you should avoid that urgent transfusion.

"Multifunctional, Miraculous Blubber" also sums up another site called, lispily, "FaithFacts". It devotes an entire section to how best to lead JW's out of their dire heresy. This site is the work of a fundie couple called Charles and Cindy Meek who, judging by their photo, look highly confident of inheriting the earth. Unlike so many fundie sites, the tone is of sweet reasonableness. However, read the stuff there about abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Good old ethical fascism, folks. One does so love a Christian! The site at <http://www.gospelcom.net/faithfacts/index.html> is as slick as the arguments it contains.

Ever heard of Michael Cremo? No? He's a Hari Krishna, bless him, and in an effort to prove that it's not only nutty Christians that have flaky ideas about human origins he's been beavering away to prove that those wicked orthodox scientists have got it all wrong about human origins, the universe and everything. His site is at <http://www.mcremo.com/>.

Lastly, a little unadulterated gibberish from the *Observer Magazine's* "Barefoot Doctor" (find his column just a few pages in from that same publication's very wonderful horoscope....). Troubled by a hot spleen, weak liver energy or a tired kidney?

Well Barefoot's the man for you! Funnier than a Tony Blair explanation, this site will be found (as long as your Feng Shui is in good order) at <http://www.barefootdoctorglobal.com/home.html>.

Thanks for the suggestions. As ever, all new ones will be gratefully received at [norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk](mailto:norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk)

## Religious clash costs more lives in Nigeria

Report by Leo Igwe

AT least 15 people were confirmed dead and many more injured last month in a clash between Christians and Muslims in Numan in Adamawa state of Nigeria. The conflict was sparked off by the killing of a female Christian preacher by a Muslim water seller, Mohammed Salisu, following a disagreement over the price of water.

Several houses, shops, vehicles including four mosques and three churches were destroyed during the riot.

Unlike many states in Northern Nigeria, Adamawa has a significant number of Christian and is not implementing *sharia* (Islamic law).

But generally religious tension remains high in Northern Nigeria particularly in states with sizable Christian populations who regard the implementation of Islamic law as a marginalisation strategy.

Meanwhile the hearing of Amina Lawal's appeal against her death sentence for adultery has been adjourned to August 27. This is the second postponement this year. In March the case was adjourned due to the absence of judges in court.

Along with Amina Lawal, many other Nigerians are facing death by stoning, or amputation. In Bauchi state alone at least 12 people are awaiting the execution of their sentences.



## Heart of the Beholder: You can help get this film made

THE controversial true story of how a fanatical group of religious zealots blackmailed a City prosecutor into ruining the lives of a young American couple is to be made independently into a film.

Readers of the *Freethinker* will recall that in May we carried a report about the difficulties encountered by those trying to get *Heart of the Beholder* into production. Cowardice on the part of the US film industry was proving the stumbling block. For the last ten years, this film has been up and down development slates in Hollywood, with dozens of movie executives giving high marks to the screenplay, but unwilling to produce the film, claiming it would be too controversial. They insisted they did not want to anger religious groups.

But now the team who have been trying so hard to get the film made have decided to go it alone. Darlene Lieblich, a network television producer in Los Angeles, and a freethinker, is to produce the movie.

"Enough is enough," said Lieblich, who last month announced her plan to get the film into production. "We have \$200,000, which by Hollywood standards is nothing. But, by cutting every corner possible, and feeding the crew cold-cut sandwiches, we're going to begin filming next October in St Louis, Austin,

and Los Angeles."

More money is desperately needed – Lieblich wants to be able to hire recognisable star talent – and she has hit on the idea of raising cash by making it possible for supporters of the film to pre-buy a Collector's Edition DVD or video direct from the film's website where complete details can be found.



**Darlene Lieblich:** "Enough is enough"

The *Freethinker* is planning to collaborate with the producer by making it possible for those who do not have internet access to make donations towards the production costs and payments for the DVD or video via the magazine. We will publish the details as soon as they have been finalised.

*It is vital that this film be made. Failure to do so would send out a signal to the Christian zealots here and in the US that they can use intimidation to silence their critics. This would have a devastating effect on free speech.*

## National Secular Society stages a successful summer conference

Report by Jennifer Jaynes

NATIONAL Secular Society members, at the Society's AGM last year, voiced their desire for a conference on secularism. The NSS Council enthusiastically agreed, and last month saw a highly-successful conference, *Secularism and the Future*, staged at the Conway Hall in London.

Organised chiefly by Ian Andrews, Sue Lord, and myself, the event featured Joan Smith, the celebrated columnist, polemicist and NSS Honorary Associate as the keynote speaker, who revealed: "I've seen the Future and it's Secular."

Her talk comprised a wide ranging over-view of the world situation and through that Joan sought to show why potentially there was no future without secularism. She was of the strong opinion that religion seemed only capable of polarising the world and that such division was becoming increasingly more dangerous for us all.

Within this broad message there were, however, a number of specific issues addressed, not least the situation in Uzbekistan, where flagrant abuses of human rights were an everyday occurrence despite, or perhaps because of, huge quantities of American aid.

She also provided a more creditable reason why Clare Short had not resigned along with Robin Cook, and perhaps for some in the audience, this restored their belief that Ms Short represented the more ethical wing of the divided Labour Party. Joan seemed only at a loss in one respect; the Prime Minister she saw as a total enigma and an aberration both politically and religiously.

The keynote address was followed by a question and answer session, which allowed particular issues to be addressed in more detail.

Her most stimulating address was preceded by an opening address by Denis Cobell, President of the NSS, and followed by a detailed run-down of current NSS campaigns by the society's

(Continued on p13)

## Women in trousers are to blame for

SWAZILAND'S absolute monarch has singled out women wearing trousers as the cause of the world's ills in a state radio sermon that also condemned human rights as an "abomination before God."

King Mswati III is quoted in a Reuters report of June 2 as saying that "the Bible says a curse be unto a woman who wears pants, and those who wear their husband's clothes". "That is why the world is in such a state today", declared Mswati, ruler of the impoverished feudal nation of about one million.

The *Times* of Swaziland reported that the monarch, who reigns supreme in the landlocked country run by palace appointees, went on to criticise the human rights movement.

"What rights?" the king asked. "God created people, and He gave them their roles in society. You cannot change what God has created. This is an abomination before God," he told an audience of conservative church leaders.

Women on the streets of the capital Mbabane, were not impressed.

"The king says I am the cause of the world's problems because of my outfit. Never mind terrorism, government corruption, poverty and disease, it's me and my pants. I reject that," said an angry Thob'sile Dlamini.

Mswati ran into a spot of bother last year when he chose 17-year-old Zena Mahlangu to be his tenth wife. The girl's mother, Lindiwe Dlamini, objected to the marriage, claiming that Zena had been abducted from school by palace aides.

She applied to a court to have her daughter returned, but recently decided to postpone her lawsuit indefinitely after she was allowed to speak to her daughter by phone.

"She got the distinct impression from what her daughter said that she had resigned herself to her fate," said Ms Dlamini's lawyer Lucas Maziya.

Ms Dlamini's lawsuit was backed by opposition parties, trade unions and human rights groups, who said the practice of "abducting" future wives for the king was a violation of human rights. "It confirms that women are treated as minors and have no rights in this country," said Ntombi Nkosi from PUDEMO, the Opposition Party Women's league.

Now that the lawsuit has been put on hold, Africa's last absolute monarch, who came to the throne at the age of 18, has chosen an additional fiancée, destined to become wife number 11, after reviewing videos of topless maidens performing a traditional reed dance ceremony.



# Education or in what do British for their c

Barry Duke poses

If there is one thing everyone can agree on regarding the Islamic world it is this: The edge it once had over other civilisations in centuries past has long since disappeared, and, as each day passes, it falls further and further behind – culturally, ethically, morally, intellectually and technologically. Having lost the plot completely on all fronts bar the religious, it has become locked into a self-perpetuating cycle of ignorance, paralysis and unsustainable population growth – a combination which makes it impossible for it to attain the standards of living and quality of life which so many Muslims know exist in the West and which they desperately want for themselves.

There are many deep-rooted historical reasons for the inertia that has the Muslim world in its grip, but the greatest enemy of progress remains the current all-pervasive and debilitating Islamic idea that everything is the will of Allah. Islam, literally translated, means “surrender” or “submission” to the will of God, and it follows that if everything is in the hands of God, there can be little room for ideas of personal empowerment, self-reliance or assertive individuality.

The ancient Greek idea that “the mind of a child is a fire to be lit and not a vessel to be filled” is anathema to many of those responsible for the teaching of young Muslims. But it was not always so. As Professor V K Sinha, editor of *The Secularist* in India points out, “the period between the 9th and the 13th centuries AD – the Golden Age of Islam – witnessed one of the most glorious chapters in the history of man. It was the Muslim world alone which kept the lamps of learning burning when they had dimmed elsewhere. They not only preserved learning, but made significant

contributions to science, philosophy and medicine. Pervez Hoodbhoy points out that ‘science flourished [during this period] because there was within Islam a strong rationalist tradition, carried out by a group of Muslim thinkers known as the Mutazilites’. This tradition collapsed by the 14th century and the Muslim world was ‘choked in the vice-like grip of orthodoxy’.”

Today, it seems that most Muslim educationists want nothing more than to produce legions of the devout. But what possible use are rich reserves of piety when what is needed in the Muslim world is imagination, innovation and dynamism, free from the mind-numbing, spirit-crushing strait-jacket of a religion sunk in a mire of orthodoxy.

Yet there are Muslims in this country who believe that the orthodox educational methods that have so dramatically failed the young – girls in particular – in the Muslim world should actually be put into practice in Britain. Two such individuals are Iftikhar Ahmad, of the London School of Islamics, and Ibrahim Lawson, head teacher at the Nottingham Islamia School.

Central to Ahmad’s demands for Muslim teachers for Muslim children is that the British education system is fundamentally racist, and

this racism manifests itself in attempts to Anglicise and assimilate Muslim pupils. The results, he says, are generations of youngsters growing up not knowing who they are, and not understanding their Islamic culture.

Many would argue that the cultural confusion and the identity crises he says are blighting the lives of the Muslim young stems from the refusal of their parents, teachers and religious leaders to allow them to develop their critical faculties and to become fully integrated into British society.

In his open letter to Blunkett, Ahmad, who I understand was educated in Britain, reveals his own detachment from British society when he refers to Pakistan as “home”.

To what degree Ahmad’s views are shared by other British Muslims I have no idea. This is because Muslims who disagree with extremist views tend to keep very quiet, so terrified are they of expressing dissent. This was best demonstrated when, following the September 11 outrage, those who were appalled by this terrible manifestation of religious revenge kept very quiet, and the only voices heard were those of the fanatics who publicly celebrated the destruction of the twin towers, and made clear

**RUKHSANA Zia**, an education specialist and deputy permanent delegate of Pakistan to UNESCO questions the quality of the education dispensed by growing numbers of mosque schools, *madrasahs* (secondary level religious schools) and *maktabs* (primary level religious schools) in her country, very few of which offer “education in the 3Rs or modern courses of study”, focusing mainly on “rote learning of the Quran”.

– Report in *Prospects*, UNESCO’s quarterly education review, June 2003.

**“IT is rather unfortunate that the literacy rate in the Muslim world is among the lowest in the world. The outcome is that its economic growth is both slow and unsustainable. All this is due to lack of political will and vision on the part of decision-makers. One example of this lack of vision is that despite spending 7.1 per cent of their GDP on defence, Arab OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conferences) countries are dependent on the West for their own defence. One reason is that they are spending less than 0.2 per cent on research and development. The decision-makers, scientists and intellectuals of the Muslim world need to realise that their dependence on the advanced world will increase with the increasing gap in the scientific and technological advancements between them and the advanced countries.**

– Dr Atta-ur-Rahman, Coordinator-General of the Pakistan-based COMSTECH organisation, which exists to promote science and technology in OIC countries.

**The majority of British Muslims are from the Indian sub-continent. It is a close-knit community living physically in the West but mentally living back at home, which is only seven hours from London ... Muslim children need state-funded Muslim schools with Muslim teachers. It will help to raise their standard of education as well as help them to understand and resolve the issues and problems of western society.**

– From an Open Letter to Home Secretary David Blunkett sent by Iftikhar Ahmad of the London School of Islamics, May 25, 2003.

**“A good Muslim can learn to be a good teacher, but a good teacher cannot become a good Muslim**

– Ibrahim Lawson, head teacher at the Nottingham Islamia School, which operates a Muslim-only teacher policy. Arguing the case on BBC’s Radio 4’s *Beyond Belief* programme (March 10, 2003) for more Muslim schools, he said the mission of schools such as his was to educate pupils using “an Islamised national curriculum”.



# indoctrination – h Muslims want children?

## poses the question

their view that a condition of being a “good” Muslim was to express hatred of the West.

But it was heartening to see that at least one Muslim teacher was prepared to challenge Iftikhar Ahmad’s views in print. In a letter to the *Daily Jang* last October, Rashid Ahmad made this point: “Our children are living in a multicultural society. They should face racism and learn how to cope with it at an early stage rather than at a later stage if they want to survive in such a society, as racism is experienced not only in schools but in the fields of higher education and employment as well. Education in a multicultural society is crucial for the mental, social and emotional development of a person. It helps to broaden the vision of the students by removing narrow-mindedness and prejudice on the one hand and develop tolerance towards others on the other.

“Mr Ahmad claims that there is a growing demand for Muslim schools. I disagree with him on this point as well. In my 30 years’ experience as a teacher in the UK, I found that a vast majority of Muslim parents are not in favour of handing over the state schools to Muslim charities and trusts. To give an example, some secondary schools in Tower Hamlets Education Authority, where the majority of pupils were Muslims, were given a chance a few years back, to opt out for Muslim schools. The parents objected to it strongly and were of the opinion that such a conversion would definitely lower the standard of education.”

Earlier, Professor Richard Dawkins of Oxford University, in an open letter to the then Education Secretary Estelle Morris, published in the *Observer* (December 30, 2001), said that the way to be fair to hitherto unsupported denominations was not to give them their own sectarian schools, but to remove the faith status of the existing schools (just as the fair way to balance the bishops in the Lords is not to invite mullahs, monsignors and rabbis to join them, but to throw the existing bishops out. Dawkins concluded that to persist with financing segregated religion in sectarian schools was “obstinate madness”.

Rashid Ahmad and Professor Dawkins clearly identified the dangers of the sort of educational apartheid advocated by Iftikhar Ahmad. Their observations, of course, refer to

the situation in Britain, but what of the wider world? Another writer who recognises faults in the way children are taught in the Muslim world posted his/her thoughts on the Islamic website [Albalagh.com](http://Albalagh.com). If there was the equivalent of a Nobel Prize for twisted logic, this unnamed author would win it hands down.

The writer asks “What is wrong with our [the Muslim world’s] education system?” The answer? “In science, we are teaching our students to look at the universe from the viewpoint of a person who does not know God. A proper study of science would make one appreciate both the Power, Majesty, and Grandeur of Allah’s creations and the humbleness and limitations of human knowledge and abilities.

“Today our science education, in its best form, gives exactly the opposite message. It also fails to enable students to separate scientists’ opinions from their facts. Let’s ask: In the wide Muslim world is there any Islamic school teaching science whose graduates can challenge Darwin’s Theory of Evolution on scientific grounds? As we teach science, are we teaching our children to put science in its proper place, to know its limitations? Can they competently question the ‘technological imperative’?”

“Why does our teaching of science not include a discussion of its limitations? Because, for the secular mindset, science is the ultimate tool, the supreme arbiter of Truth and Falsehood. Without even realising it, we have accepted the proposition and our science education reflects that assumption.

“In fact, our schools and colleges have been the main agency for secularisation of Islamic societies. They have been effectively teaching that Islam is irrelevant to understanding this world or to solving its problems. Many of their graduates develop misunderstandings and doubts about their faith. But even when they are strong practising Muslims, they have not been trained and educated to detect and challenge the secular dogmas that have been integrated into their curriculums.”

If it were true that the Muslim world was secularising its teaching methods, then surely it would have shown some signs of catching up with the West. After all, the author makes it quite clear that secularisation in the West is the reason why it is so far ahead by stating that “the West, during its ‘Renaissance’, threw away its religious dogmas – which had become a burden – and found a speedy path to

material progress using a-religious or secular approaches ...”.

“Muslims,” adds the writer, “surrendered intellectual leadership to the West and failed to keep pace with scientific developments there. They found themselves in a no-win situation. If they accepted and taught the Western sciences, they would also be teaching anti-Islamic dogmas. If they stayed isolated, they would be left behind in science and material progress.

“We cannot move forward without revamping our education. We cannot fully establish Islam in our societies without producing educated citizens and leaders needed for an Islamic society. The time is now to develop integrated Islamic curriculums and remove secular biases from all of our education. Merely establishing more schools is not the answer. Developing educational institutions that can teach every subject in the wholesome Islamic context is. It is a monumental task. But without it we’ll continue to spread ignorance in the name of education.”

Bafflingly, his (or her) solution to this vexing conundrum is *more* religion – and more religion is precisely what many countries are now dishing out. According to the latest edition of *Prospects*, UNESCO’s quarterly education review, religious education appears to be on the rise in public school systems around the world and has become a key issue for education policy-makers in many countries.

Entitled *Education and Religion*, the June 2003 edition presents an overview of intended teaching time to be allocated to religion, as reflected in official curricular timetables from about 140 states. It also analyses the evolution of religious teaching over the last century in France, Israel, Pakistan and the Russian Federation. According to the preliminary analysis, carried out by UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education, religious education appears as a compulsory subject in the timetables of 73 of the countries surveyed on at least one occasion during the first nine years of schooling. In 54 of these countries, the time to be devoted to religious instruction during the first six years of education amounts to an average of 388.4 hours or approximately 8.1 percent of total intended teaching time.

The authors say this indicates a “visible increase” in the proportion of time dedicated to this subject since previous research published a decade ago, and a reversal of the decline in religious teaching which that research showed had marked most of the past century.

In the new data assembled by the IBE, two Muslim countries stand out: Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where respectively 31 percent (1,458 hours) and 28.2 percent (1,104 hours) of total intended time for academic instruction during the first six years is given to religious instruction. This is, on average, three times more than the time allocated in other countries.



IF and when Prince Charles ascends the throne he will assume the title "Defender of the Faith". It was originally conferred on his predecessor Henry VIII by Pope Leo X in 1521. Henry, tired of papal influence and with a view to Church properties, subsequently ditched the faith but hung on to the title. Prince Charles has said that he would like to alter it to "Defender of Faith" (or perhaps "Faiths"). He has said many things, some of which I agree with, but I wonder if in this case he has quite thought it through.

One can hardly defend a faith without defending its practices. Thus, presumably, HRH is happy with the custom (for example) of plunging an obsidian knife into the chest of sacrificial victims and tearing out the heart, so that the blood may placate the gods. For without this, the world would come to an end. It may be said that the Aztec faith is no longer extant, destroyed by another scarcely less bloodthirsty. (Like the Monty Python team, the Aztecs didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition.) Perhaps the Prince was referring only to current faiths. But there would still be problems. He would have to go along with the ritual mutilation of all boys, and indeed the far more horrendous female circumcision.

LISTENERS to Radio Four's *Sunday Programme* on May 26 might have heard Christian worrywort Anne Atkins trying to defend the proposition that there can be no adequate morality that is not god-given. Ms Atkins, a kind of "Daily Mail made flesh" did not do terribly well.

Facing her was psychotherapist ex-Baptist minister-turned-humanist Fergus Stokes.

As a way of giving some substance to a potentially rather abstract debate, Atkins was asked about slavery. It was pointed out that the Church, for most of its existence, had no problem with the idea. She countered with the argument that it was the Church, in the form of "Bible-believing Christians" (one assumes she means all of the Bible and not just selected bits) like Wilberforce, that were the main instruments of slavery's abolition. So that's all right, then. Similar argument to the one that says - "Yes m'Lud, I beat him senseless. But I did phone for an ambulance ..."

The point was made again that slavery is a Bible-sanctioned system. Atkins answer was something of a classic.

"That was a very different kind of slavery" she opined, "more like the relations between employers and employees ...". She concluded this nugget with the resounding argument - "Let's not get stuck on slavery ...". Quite right too, Atkins: we hate to see facts stand in the way of truth. Perhaps she's not very well up on her ancient history. A quick trip to her local library would soon disabuse her of her rose-

He would have to insist on all men wearing beards, and also allow them not to. He would have to forbid, but allow, blood transfusions.

**Heir to the British throne, Prince Charles, sees himself as 'Defender of Faith' (or 'Faiths'). But, asks John Radford, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at University of East London, has he properly thought this through?**

He would have to believe (as in fact he does) that Jesus Christ was divine, and also condemn it as blasphemous, for there is no God but God, or Allah. And at the same time he must accept the multiple gods of Hinduism and the no god of Buddhism. He would have to be happy with some of God's little jokes, such as the fact that the Islamic all-enveloping female costume can result in vitamin D deficiency from lack of natural light, or that the incense so widely used to honour him has been found to be highly carcinogenic. The joke is that in each case the more devout one is, the greater the risk of a nasty illness. Then, not to stretch it out too long, there is

## Atkins 0 - humanists 1

tinted illusions. Or maybe not.

The point was made to her that most people, most of the time, behave with a degree of decency and seem to agree on some basic ideas of what constitutes "moral" behaviour - even those god-forsaken humanists.

**'Christian worrywort' Anne Atkins comes unravelled in the face of rational argument. NORMAN PRIDMORE was on hand to hear it.**

Atkins, somewhat uncomfortably, agreed. "All societies do have a certain amount of agreement on the basics ..." she said. But this was not enough for her. It was not really clear why this was not enough, and she did not produce any argument in support except to reprise a bit of circular blather that led her back to her original contention.

In such discussions it's often the case that the religionist has the last word. Not in this case, though. Throughout the discussion Fergus Stokes had made an intelligent and coherent case for a rational and purely secular ethics. He finished with a neat flourish. "Absolutes," he said, "founded on myth ... are clearly the wrong absolutes to have."

Which is food for thought for all. Unless,

David Icke. His faith tells him that the Royal Family are in reality nine foot tall green lizards. Possibly HRH has had his own suspicions about one or two...

And so on, and so forth. Perhaps, then, he meant merely that faith in something is better than none. And indeed there is evidence that a degree of faith has benefits. A recent American study found that lung cancer patients who used moderate levels of religious coping, such as prayer or seeking comfort from fellow church members, were less depressed than those who used religion either more or less. However this may reflect more fundamental differences in personality or lifestyle. Similarly, it is well established that suicide rates are much lower among religious groups than in the general population. But one has to consider that it may not be faith as such, but rather the support and counselling that churches often provide that is important. Again, suicide is closely related to depression. Sufferers tend to avoid all social groups including religious ones, making the religious population untypical. The same factor may apply to some who find religions hostile, such as homosexuals, who are at risk due to general social attitudes.

like Atkins, they are already sated with the ghostly gruel of their own pious platitudes.

Atkins, of course, prefers being cocooned in Radio 4's *Thought for the Day Studio*, where she can witter on without fear of interruption or contradiction. But that safe position, enjoyed by Atkins and other religionists, is being eroded by Warwickshire humanist Roy Saich, who has taken to challenging TfD speakers by posting replies on the net. "The BBC bans all but religious believers from its *Thought for the Day* slot, which is embedded in the *Today* programme on Radio 4. "It is only by public statements that a reply can be given to these broadcast sermons," he asserts.

So, when Atkins recently used her privileged position as a contributor to the TfD to ask, "Without God where do we find absolutes of right and wrong?" back came Saich's retort: "The answer to Atkin's question is clear to those of us in the humanist ethical tradition. It is our human feelings of pleasure and pain that provide the standards of right and wrong. The greater the pain the more wrong something is, and the more pleasure produced the more right an action or a policy is. This objective standard was expressed by Epicurus, and amplified by John Stuart Mill in the famous principle of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

"Atkins' question reflects badly on our education system when public lecturers are unaware of this, and confuse religion with morality", Saich concluded.



*There was a faith healer named Peel / Who said, although pain isn't real, / When I sit on a pin / And it punctures my skin, / I dislike what I fancy I feel.*

Healing by faith alone is improbable to say the least, and those who offer it are con-artists, whether consciously or not. But faith in the sense of confident belief can play a part in therapeutic processes. The effect of a good "bedside manner" is more than just anecdote.

And there is no doubt that faith can be one of the most powerful of motivating forces. It has inspired, if that is the word, some of the most brutal wars and savage repression, as well as acts of almost incredible courage and self-sacrifice. Somewhere in between we can presumably place the motivation of Messrs Bush and Blair in the recent Iraqi conflict, since both are devout Christians and pray reg-

ularly. But then Tariq Aziz is also a Christian yet devoted himself to supporting Saddam Hussein.

This is precisely the problem with faith. It does not discriminate between what most of us would want to call good and evil. Faith is a powerful motivator but a very poor basis for decision. Mark Twain remarked that faith "means believing what you know ain't so", but this, while witty, is not the case. People of faith do not accept that what they believe is or could be "not so". Of course they happily ignore the facts: first that others are equally certain that they possess the truth, a quite different one. That is relatively easy: everyone is wrong except us, a widely popular view. Second that their own faith has changed over time, usually slowly. Even the Roman Catholic faith has admitted that the earth goes

round the sun. It can happen quickly, as when the end of the world is prophesied, and when this does not occur the official date is hastily postponed. The more dogmatic followers of Christianity and Islam specifically proclaim that there are two sources of truth: revelation and science. If there is conflict, the first (their own of course) prevails. In fact, revelation is at best a random source of truth, since it boils down to the individual imagination. And it is, by definition, untestable since we know in advance that it cannot be wrong. If the Bible (for example) appears to be nonsense, as it so often does, this can only be a mistake on our part. This is, ultimately, a barrier to real understanding.

It is, I have to accept, somewhat unlikely that Prince Charles will come across the above remarks. But I'd really be quite interested in his comments.

## Battle over Walthamstow cinema hots up

Public opposition to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God has increased in Walthamstow, east London, after the church staged a massive demonstration to drum up support for its bid to transform the historic EMD cinema into a place of worship (See *Freethinker* report, February 2003).

Saturday traffic in Hoe Street, where the cinema is situated, was brought to a standstill when members of the Reclaim our Cinema group and the UCKG members – including a number of pastors – came face-to-face.

### 'Get out of our town' residents tell the miracles-for-money UCKG

A protest by the Reclaim our Cinema group, intent on saving the EMD for community use, had been planned for many weeks and began in the town square, but campaigners were shocked when they discovered that the UCKG had brought in several hundred supporters from other areas to meet the marchers.

The UCKG members filled both sides of Hoe Street in front of the cinema and at times overflowed into the roadway, blocking the paths of pedestrians and drivers.

They sang hymns, using a sound system to enhance the volume, and started at least half-an-hour before the Reclaim the Cinema (ROC) group was due to set off.

People passing by were handed glossy leaflets entitled *UCKG Says: The Cinema is Yours*, and were invited to hear about "miracles" the church had performed. They were also offered videos for sale.

After consultation with police, the local pro-

testors decided to march as planned, ask the church leaders to let them inside to inspect the building, then turn round peacefully and leave.

As they left the square, a UCKG official informed his colleagues on a walkie talkie that the group was on its way.

Singing "let us in, let us in" the marchers proceeded up Hoe Street until they ended up in a noisy but non-violent standoff with the singing church supporters.

UCKG members paid no attention to the ROC demand to see inside the listed cinema, which it is believed has suffered serious damage since its purchase last year by the church.

As the marchers left, a group of dancing and singing UCKG members attempted to follow them, but were stopped by police after a few yards.

They continued to sing outside the cinema for another hour until the police made them switch off the sound system. They then made their way back to the tube station in huge numbers.

The church claims to have 1,300 members in Waltham Forest, but no-one the local newspaper, the *Guardian*, spoke to was local.

A spokeswoman for ROC said: "We are amazed and even quite flattered by this huge over-reaction from the church.

"Judging by the reaction of shoppers who



Photo courtesy Walthamstow Anarchist Group

Noisy UCKG protesters outside the historical art deco EMD cinema which they want to turn into a place of worship

spoke to us, the church did themselves no favours on Saturday. In fact their bizarre behaviour demonstrated clearly why they should not be welcome in Walthamstow, and especially in our cinema."

In the leaflet they handed out to passers-by the UCKG claimed to "work alongside" leading national charities like Oxfam, the British Red Cross, Scope and the National Blood Transfusion Service.

Contacted by the *Guardian*, all of these denied the relationship and two said they were considering whether to take action against the church.



HISTORY, Henry Ford reputedly said, is bunk. According to Spengler and Toynbee there is rather more to it. According to them, history moves in cycles of rise and decline. Others have thought that it is more like a spiral staircase in which earlier patterns repeat, but at ever higher levels. Plato was sure that history revealed an inexorable decline from a "golden age". This is a view shared in the present by the *Daily Mail*, according to which newspaper we've been going downhill ever since our Cro Magnon ancestors relaxed the rules on immigration and let in those damn Beaker People. Or something like that, anyway.

There's also a Newtonian view which holds that in history, as in physics, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Thus, for example, the liberating effects of the French Revolution had as their inevitable consequence the Terror and the rise of Napoleon.

There is also the widespread and common-sense view that history is just one damn thing after another.

If it is anything at all, history is at the very least an attempt to determine causes, to understand how and why C followed B which followed A. At this level it sounds simple. Simple, though, it is not. As the historian's microscope focuses ever more closely upon specifics, causation becomes ever more difficult to determine. Which event, which personality, holds which particular key? This was Tolstoy's problem, the one in partial response to which he wrote *War and Peace*. He knew, and did not underestimate, the problems inherent in attaining even an approximation of truth.

Karen Armstrong has addressed many of the troubling issues arising from contemporary religious fundamentalism by writing a history that is both a broad sweep and a focused examination of the subject. One of its many virtues is that her book manages to keep in sight both the minute particulars and the bigger picture. Though in no sense an academic history, and reliant in the main upon secondary sources, the book is a brilliant achievement – "popular" history at its best. Its 40 pages of notes and bibliography attest the careful labour that has gone into its writing.

Modern fundamentalism, she suggests, and shows convincingly, has deep roots and it is a more complex phenomenon than is generally admitted. The form taken by the contemporary "war on terror", for example, with its simplistic vocabulary and its denials of the possibility of moral ambiguity, supports her contention remarkably well. She holds that the forms of fundamentalism that derive from the "religions of the book" (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are strongly determined by, and share many of the characteristics of, modern currents of thought – political, social and scientific.

No description of Karen Armstrong would be

complete without including the phrase "ex-nun". I'm not sure, in the context of this work at least, how important this is. If it is, it may simply be because her appreciation of the hold that religion has upon individuals is stronger than that of more academic historians and that she is less inclined, as a result, to diminish the role that committed individuals play in shaping events.

**NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews**  
***The Battle for God* by Karen Armstrong.** Published by Harper Collins, 2000. ISBN 0006383483. £8.99 paperback.

That said, she certainly does not minimise the effects of such things as the social, political and economic consequences of colonialism, of the West's attempts to control, manipulate and exploit the human and material resources of (especially) the Near and Middle East. Nor does she gloss over the effects of religious hatreds and anxieties. Christian hostility to the "Christ-murdering" Jews, the complex and difficult relationship between Judaism and Islam, the effects of the fear of the "other", with all its incumbent racial connotations, are examined with acute insight and considerable precision.

To repeat – the roots of fundamentalism are deep. It could be argued that a Christianity (say) that is not fundamentalist is a betrayal of its essence. Certainly we see in the letters of Paul the fundamentalist world-view delineated in all its oppressive vacuity – the eschatological longings, the insistence on separateness, the rife sexual anxiety, the sense of divine self-righteousness. I would have liked to have seen perhaps more discussion of this. After all, it is a view that is central to much of secularism's attitude to religion. It is also a view that so-called moderate religion and its apologists try to avoid addressing. Are they fearful, perhaps, of wearing such ancient armour? Still, it's a long enough book anyway and to have delved into this murky world would have required labours bordering on ... the supernatural.

Ms Armstrong, then, very wisely does not attempt to delve into the distant origins of fundamentalism. Instead, she begins in Spain with that watershed year of 1492. In that momentous year occurred the three events which, she says, were "characteristic of the

new society that was coming to birth in Western Europe". These events were the re-conquest of Granada from Islam, the signing of the Edict of Expulsion (of Spanish Jewry), and the sailing from Spain of Columbus.

From the outset, she writes, "for some people, modernity was empowering, liberating and enthralling. Others experienced it – and would continue to experience it – as coercive, invasive and destructive". If her book has a thesis, then that statement is it.

She proceeds to examine how the "religions of the book" responded to change and to the challenges that change brought in its wake. Each of the three traditions responded in ways that had much in common. It is a testament to Ms Armstrong's descriptive skills that she manages to show this so clearly without losing sight of the deep differences – differences that, as circumstances changed, became ever more crucial in determining the shapes that modern-day fundamentalism has taken.

More than half of the book concentrates on the period from 1900 to the present. Her outline of the growth of Christian fundamentalism, with its conflicts between those concerned to preach a "social gospel", for whom matters of belief were less important than "practice", and those for whom "right belief" (upon which depended one's post-mortem fate) was the only real issue, is exceptionally illuminating. So too are her examinations of the often intricate developments within Judaism and Islam. Given the bewildering nature of the beliefs involved, their frequently stupefying banality and sheer preposterousness, Ms Armstrong has performed an extraordinary service in exposing them to the possibility of rational criticism.

There are some of her interpretations with which secularists may wish to take issue. Chief among these is her insistence that "compassion" is a virtue "which all faiths have insisted is essential to the religious life and to any experience of the numinous". There is, I suggest, a case for disputing this. We may point to the fact that to believe in a perfect, all-wise omnipotent god involves a denial, a diminution, of the value of human life and a distortion of our relationship to the natural world. We may wish to suggest that religion, in confronting fallible, frail and mortal humans with an impossible ideal of perfection, can cause only guilt, fear and anxiety, and that the human personality is damaged by this. If we know religion by its fruits, how can religion explain why so much of its fruit is bitter, or rotten, or poisonous?

Even so, *The Battle for God* is a work of real value and substantial importance. The story it tells is one we need to hear.

## Freethoughts

BARBARA Smoker's excellent collection of writings for the *Freethinker* over a period of 35 years are contained in a paperback volume entitled *Freethoughts*. The book is available directly from Barbara, who has just celebrated her 80th birthday, at 51 Farmfield Road, Downham, Bromley BR1 4NF. The book is priced at £9.95 plus £1.00 p&p.



## Jonathan Edwards

MY "cant alert" antennae began to quiver when I read John C Beyer's letter about Jonathan Edwards (*Points of View*, June). He wrote that "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".

I suppose "natural justice" in this context is just a hifalutin' euphemism for fairness. At least, I hope so – for if Mr Beyer is suggesting that there is a non-euphemistic meaning to the term then he's on dangerous ground. After all, the practice of Christian morality as historically portrayed in the "holy" book is pretty well entirely antithetical to the whole notion. Christian "morality" is dependent upon revealed laws and upon the fear of divine retribution. Christian behaviour over the centuries certainly demonstrates very little "natural justice". Rather the reverse, in fact. Ask the Jews, women, gays, heretics and the rest. They'd have loved a bit of "natural justice". Indeed, in many places where certain styles of the Christian ethos hold sway, they still would.

And how can one person (or even two or three) hope to represent or speak for the "Christian community"? After all, Christian opinion is not uniform. Ultra-liberals inhabit one end of the spectrum and dogmatic funda-

mentalists inhabit the other. Why support and rejoice in the selection of a socially conservative evangelical? Is he supposed to represent some acceptable mid-point? Who are these people trying to kid?

Mr Beyer also writes that "the religious point of view, in our multicultural society, is as valid as any other ..." So let's get the Raelians, Scientologists, Wiccans, Satanists, Mormons and the rest on board then, if that's the case. Why not, if Mr Beyer means what he says?

And, finally, what does he mean when he says that one point of view is as "valid" as another? Equally right? Worthy of equal consideration even if not right? This appeal to the "validity" of different points of view is really nothing more than an opportunistic ruse – a (not very) cunning attempt to attain a position of power and influence. The sad thing is, it seems to have worked. For now, at least.

NORMAN PRIDMORE  
Lincolnshire

## "Aspies" & Freethinkers

I WAS very impressed by the article in the June edition of the *Freethinker* from Paul Stevenson ("Aspies and freethinking – is there a link?"). In part, this was because only the day before reading the article, I outlined in a social discussion the completely opposite hypothesis. Following some very limited observations I had noted that there might be a link between Asperger's Syndrome and religious affiliation. Actually, I suspect that the conclusions from both Paul and myself reinforce each other, although I should add that my observations were based on female Aspies rather than male.

There is, however, a more fundamental point arising from this, which is that within humanity there is a wide spectrum of behaviours, based on the natural variations in the genome. Sadly such variations are sometimes excepted or vilified depending on the social setting, a reality that applies not just to neurology but also sexuality. Indeed, the real point arising from the article is not that those with Asperger's Syndrome might have faulty wiring but that they have different wiring. So whilst it is proper that we should seek to understand Asperger's Syndrome, it should not be as a condition meriting treatment, but rather as part of the human condition. So whilst it might be appropriate to talk of it as being within the Autistic spectrum, it is also part of the broader spectrum of human behaviour, and should be celebrated as part of our diversity.

Indeed, I believe that one aspect of being a freethinker is not just to celebrate but to champion our diversity, painful though that may be at times! Well done Paul for writing the article, and the *Freethinker* for publishing it.

IAN G ANDREWS  
Rochdale

PAUL Stevenson may have something, with his suggested involvement of Asperger's to some degree in the freethinking mentality. Clearly, there must be something rather fundamentally different – and probably neurologically hardwired – about people who can stand up against majority (if generally soft) opinion about eg the transcendental, because they "kann nicht anders". (I was intrigued to be able to tick off nearly all the items in the "Aspies" column, although I happen to have very neat handwriting and no history of scientific hobbies).

After all, attention to others' sensitivities and observance of social hierarchy have been common human traits since at least our simian stage of evolution and for most people must be more or less instinctive. This suggests they must have had a high adaptive value. Presumably, the ability to discount this group solidarity is a rogue by-product of the explosion of cerebral development in Neolithic times. As societies became larger and more atomised, individuals with this complex of characteristics would have been increasingly accepted, especially as their power to see through to the essence of a problem and to innovate would have been of great advantage. Defiance of the strictures of the priests, for example, was vital for the release of the second scientific revolution.

This idea links up with a thought I have been nursing for some time: that a whole new cerebral circuitry can develop once a thinker is forced to drop the God paradigm completely through intellectual honesty. And that the spreading of this epocal genetic mutation through the population would allow human thought to leap ahead, in the latest phase of our evolution – the cultural one. Provided, of course, that we didn't become too "dehumanised" in the less intellectual areas of our personalities.

BRIAN KING  
Cornwall

PAUL Stevenson's article about Aspies is very interesting and explains the seemingly eccentric behaviour of some people I have met. However, to suggest a link between Asperger's Syndrome and freethinking seems rather far-fetched.

Some Aspie characteristics could equally well apply to religious people. For instance, Aspies are said to take everything literally. So do Christian fundamentalists who believe that every word of the Bible is God's literal truth.

Again, Aspies "often have an obsession with rigid routines and suffer severe anxiety if deprived". Many believers find comfort in the familiar rituals of the church and become quite upset if changes are made.

Conversely, "Compromise is always an option for NTs" (non-Aspies). The faithful

## NSS Conference

(Continued from p7)

Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood.

The conference also featured a delightful interlude, described as "Secular hors d'oeuvres", when Derek Lennard recited from writings of the American freethinker, Robert G Ingersoll.

Derek nobly struggled with a throat infection and an American accent but as usual Ingersoll's careful account of the timings necessary for the various animal pairs to trek to the Ark from their natural habitat, particularly the sloths who started before the world began, provoked much amusement.

The afternoon session was almost entirely made up of short presentations.

Ian Andrews, current acting NSS treasurer, gave the conference his considered views, based particularly on demography, as to the future course of education in this country.

The final presentation was from the NSS Vice-president Terry Sanderson who dealt with media relations.

An Open Forum question-and-answer session proved a satisfying ending to the highly-successful event.



would say that their beliefs come directly from God, with whom there can be no compromise. Religious wars are caused by a failure to compromise.

Finally, to compare male/female ratios among Aspies and freethinkers proves nothing. One could equally well argue that because most bishops are men, some of them must be Aspies.

ANNE MILLS  
Buckinghamshire

MY mind is open as to whether Paul Stevenson and Norman Pridmore, (*Points of View*, same issue), were writing totally seriously or partly tongue-in-cheek. While the points they make have some, though only a narrow and limited, relevance to the factors disposing individuals towards secularism or religion, they would be of less than no help in promoting the spread of secularism and would be best kept in the realm of secularist in-jokes. To take only one point from each; if insensitivity to the feelings and reactions of one's fellow humans is a necessary pre-qualification for secularism, secularism will be a dubious benefit, and if any hankering for religion, past or present, is to be defined as a form of insanity we are likely to send the debate off along a cul-de-sac with no turning space at the end.

On present information it is unlikely that any particular gene stamped "religion" will be found. It is far more likely that religion is merely one aspect of a much wider complex of human behavioural inadequacies centring on the inclination, often amounting to determination, to believe whatever is comforting or in one's own interests. Secularists happen to be immune to the religious aspect of this inadequacy by nature, nurture, or a mixture of both, but observation of their behaviour and that of their organisations suggests that they are by no means immune to other aspects of the same inadequacy.

That general inadequacy accounts for the truth of Bertrand Russell's remark that "New doctrines that have any success must bear some relation to the circumstances of their age, but old doctrines can persist for centuries without any such relation of any kind." The inadequacy is potentially disastrous for humanity because, unless it can be conquered or at least appreciably reduced, it seriously limits the adaptability of the species, especially in light of the species' ability to manipulate and control its own culture in order to resist response to change.

The ever-accelerating changes which humanity's intellectual and technological talents have brought about on the planet and in human societies are threatening to create a situation to which its more limited and much less flexible behavioural talents cannot adequately respond. In this context religion is a very real threat to the future of humanity. In its errors of

fact and reasoning and refusal to face those errors it is far from unique among human attitudes and institutions. But in its elevation of faith above reason and evidence, and indeed above conduct, its emphasis on 'spirituality' and its insistence that morality and virtue must be based on these characteristics, it sanctifies the general human inadequacy described above and is a major obstacle to any attempt to ameliorate or cure it.

Religion is not insane and is unlikely to be noticeably undermined by the wider spread of traits associated with autism. Its historical origins are quite understandable, however mistaken in the light of hindsight. Its continuance is a reflection of human adaptive failure. Whether humanity in general is capable of the degree and nature of the adaptation it now needs is open to considerable doubt. There is much to suggest that its adaptive capacities are far from unlimited and the process would surely be a long and slow one, but the continuance of religion and its support by governments and prestigious institutions acts as a roadblock in the way of beginning that adaptation.

I suggest that debate and campaigning based on the propositions I have outlined is likely to be a good deal more fruitful than attempts to draw standardised character profiles of the secularist and the religious individual.

JIM ROSS  
Perth

## Unfit Parents

OUR local state primary school has always been C of E controlled. The vicar and several of his cohorts sit on the board of governors. When the grant-maintained status ended the options were for reversion to local authority control or to become voluntary-aided. I am told that the parent governors tried to get information about the options in order to make an objective decision but were in effect over-ruled by the religious contingent who had already decided that the school must be voluntary-aided, with the church being the volunteer.

I am informed that the vicar told the parent governors that since they did not attend his church they were not fit to have any say in the education of their children. Understandably, but regrettably, all but one of the parent governors resigned on the spot. Inevitably the vicar then had his way and the school is now voluntary-aided by his church. This is a disgrace of course, but beyond that the amount of money that the church provides to the school is minor and could easily be supplanted by a different volunteer(s). Can anyone tell me how to go about getting the "volunteer" changed please? Or is it a permanent situation? A reply on these pages would be appreciated or otherwise to my email.

TIM BOYCE  
Hampshire

timboyceoflaburnum@hotmail.com

## Religious discrimination

I FIND myself completely disagreeing with Rasjidah St John (*Freethinking Allowed*, June) on her support for religious schools and hospitals etc to discriminate against employees on religious grounds, or in some cases, as I would see it, on racist grounds. As some religions conduct their services and social occasions in a language native to themselves, others are *de facto* excluded. To use a modern description, they practise institutional racism. As a white Londoner married to a Sikh woman I knew that racism had no validity for individuals, but I was able to see how some religious cultures enforce it.

Rasjidah may well sympathise with people who wish to be surrounded by those similar to themselves but that is something that has to be sacrificed in order to avoid causing disadvantage to others, and if it undermines the religious and racial purity of the establishment then some might think that a good thing.

I note that she seems to think it is normal for employees to allow their beliefs to affect their work, and one wonders if this reflects her own inclinations. Certainly the two Muslim nurses who pestered her in hospital should simply have been reported and disciplined, while her concern about meat-eating cleaners in a vegetarian hospice borders on paranoia!

As a manager on the London Underground I once had a Muslim fundamentalist working for me in a ticket office who advised a Muslim woman buying a ticket that she was wearing the wrong colour headscarf. She complained and he was given a written caution not to repeat his impertinence. (He was later convicted over a racial hatred offence reported recently in the *Freethinker*). But separate ticket offices for different religions/races was not something I ever considered.

Rasjidah's astonishment that the secretary of a union leader could be a Conservative but still do her job is also revealing. Managers too, are employees and need help from trades unions, and I was once a branch secretary representing managers of all races, religions, and politics. In a modern Western society most people do have to follow their job description, not their own whims, and it may well involve them leaving their own opinions at home. Christian teaching may be to treat others as you yourself would want to be treated, but Quality Management teaches that you treat customers the way they want! However, I must hasten to add that this does not allow most employers to pander to their religious or racist whims with regard to who serves them.

Again I struggle to follow the logic in condemning non-religious architects and builders of mosques, temples, or segregated shopping centres in Saudi. I'm never happy to see new mosques built and attractive women hidden under black sacks, but the buildings are not





torture chambers or stadiums to stage executions, and they will be used by consenting adults. We cannot prevent their construction, so if it takes money out of those religions then that is probably the best we can hope for.

But once religious authorities here are allowed to practise discrimination in employment and recruitment it will spread further and further. More work for the religious boys and the relatives abroad! Maybe even contractors will be forced to discriminate against their employees to retain work at the religious hospital, school, welfare centre, printing works, wine warehouse, restaurant, food wholesaler or hospice. I can just imagine "Sorry, but our old Hindu folks don't like seeing white people in here - makes them feel they may be subject to a racist attack!"

If my old mum talks about black people like that I hide her false teeth!

Surely there is enough religious and racial segregation in this country already, and it needs to be reduced, not increased.

CLIVE GREEDUS  
Ilford

### Historicity of Jesus

IF you can bear more on the subject of Jesus' historicity, can I just point out to Stewart R Valdar (*Points of View*, June) that I have never described Jesus as "Jesus the Christ"; not even as "Mr Christ". I can also tell him that, although I have not seen Geddes and Grosset's *Dictionary of the Bible*, the extract he quotes does not encourage me to see it. Their superficial and somewhat arbitrary comments hardly do justice to the subject, which is far more complicated than they appear to believe. Evidently it was not written by a historian.

I welcome David M Porter's sensible comments.

STUART CAMPBELL  
Edinburgh

WHEN considering the Christian evidence for the historical existence of Jesus, or Christian evidence for anything at all for that matter, it is worth considering the advice given to Christians by Paul who played a bigger part in the creation of Christianity than most.

In Paul's spiel about becoming all things to all men "...If through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?" (Romans 3.7-8). Paul is in fact telling Christians that if you cannot find any proof or evidence to support your superstitions then simply lie through your teeth. Paul is not implying that it is permissible to lie, cheat, interpolate and confuse with sophisticated argument, he is actually advocating it as best practice. Christians did not castigate Paul for this reprehensible advice -

they made him a saint.

What chance has mere integrity when it is in competition with the striving drive to be one of the few who are chosen for eternal bliss as opposed to one of the many who are condemned to eternal punishment.

JIM CASS  
Co Durham

### CIVIS

I CANNOT understand why Nelly Moia (*Points of View*, May) was upset at a Civis Newsletter quoting a Catholic who was against vivisection. At least, this time, he was on the right side.

Am I to walk out of CND because religious people are in it? We would not join anything except the Secular Society if we only mixed with atheists.

Civis is not against science, but it is for *real* science. The doctors and scientists who write for Civis say that testing on animals is unscientific, and is done so that anything can be passed off as safe in order to make money. The real guinea pigs are the people in the clinical trials of new drugs, and official figures are kept of the number of people killed by "properly prescribed" drugs.

That is what Civis is against, this fake science. It is for real science, and what does it matter if the people in it are religious? I would rather religion vanished off the face of the earth, but until it does, I will work with religious people if the cause is good.

JEAN FAWCETT  
Suffolk.

NELLY Moia appears to have let her anger run away with her, resulting in condemnation of those who are helping to stop the cause of her anguish - cruelty to animals. If, as she states, a Catholic professor of theology condemned vivisection in the pages of a CIVIS newsletter, then he is to be applauded for his courage in standing almost alone in the Catholic cult. Nelly cannot call his criticisms of vivisection "pious ravings" without seeming to agree with those the theologian opposed. The man spoke out in the only way he knew.

CIVIS founder, Hans Ruesch, in his book *Slaughter of the Innocent* gives religionists' views, both for and against, cruelty to animals, in the chapter headed "Dehumanization". He starts the book with the words, "A dog is crucified in order to study the duration of the agony of Christ". As this experiment can only have originated from religionists, it doesn't sound as though Ruesch is seeking converts to Christianity. He was among the first to bring to the attention of the world the Pope's approval of the cruelty of an enthusiastic vivisector who wants to try his transplant skills on paralysed patients. This friend of the Pope now wants to transplant a paralysed patient's head on to a

corpse. This will result in the patient having healthier organs, although s/he will still be paralysed.

Hans Ruesch, in his bulletins, has shown dismay that key supporters of his cause have gone off to follow a guru. He has never attempted to force his supporters into having "beliefs" about religion and, as his book shows, he is also against science professors forcing their followers into having irrational "beliefs" about sadism passing as scientific education.

Most people will not have read *Slaughter of the Innocent* because it was suppressed soon after it arrived in the UK. Perhaps Nelly should be attacking those who brought this about and who want to prevent freedom of thought in this country, when that freedom reduces profit.

Using Nelly's argument, I could stop taking *Freethinker* because the editor's and contributors' opinions are not 100 per cent exactly the same as mine!

BARBARA BARRETT  
Berkshire

## The Free thinker

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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](http://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, July 11, 7.30pm. Mansell Stimson: *The Career of Dirk Bogarde*.

**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, August 7, 8pm. Leonora Fane: *The Life of an Opera Singer*.

**Humanist Association Dorset:** Information and summer programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428502.

**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](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Dundee Group:** Information: Terry Martin. Tel: 01250 874742. E-mail: [terrymartin@dalcruie.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:terrymartin@dalcruie.fsnet.co.uk).

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: [alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto: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](mailto: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](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, July 31, 8pm – Barbara Smoker: *My First 80 Years*.

**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, July 2, 8pm. Ian Crow: *Dealing with crime – Retribution or Restoration?* Wednesday, August 6, 8pm. AGM.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Literature and information stall at the following events, 11am till 5pm. 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](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto: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](mailto:melgin@waitrose.com).

**Ulster Humanist Association.** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: (028) 9267 7264.

E-mail: [brian@mcclinton.to](mailto:brian@mcclinton.to)  
website: [www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com](http://www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com)

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

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