

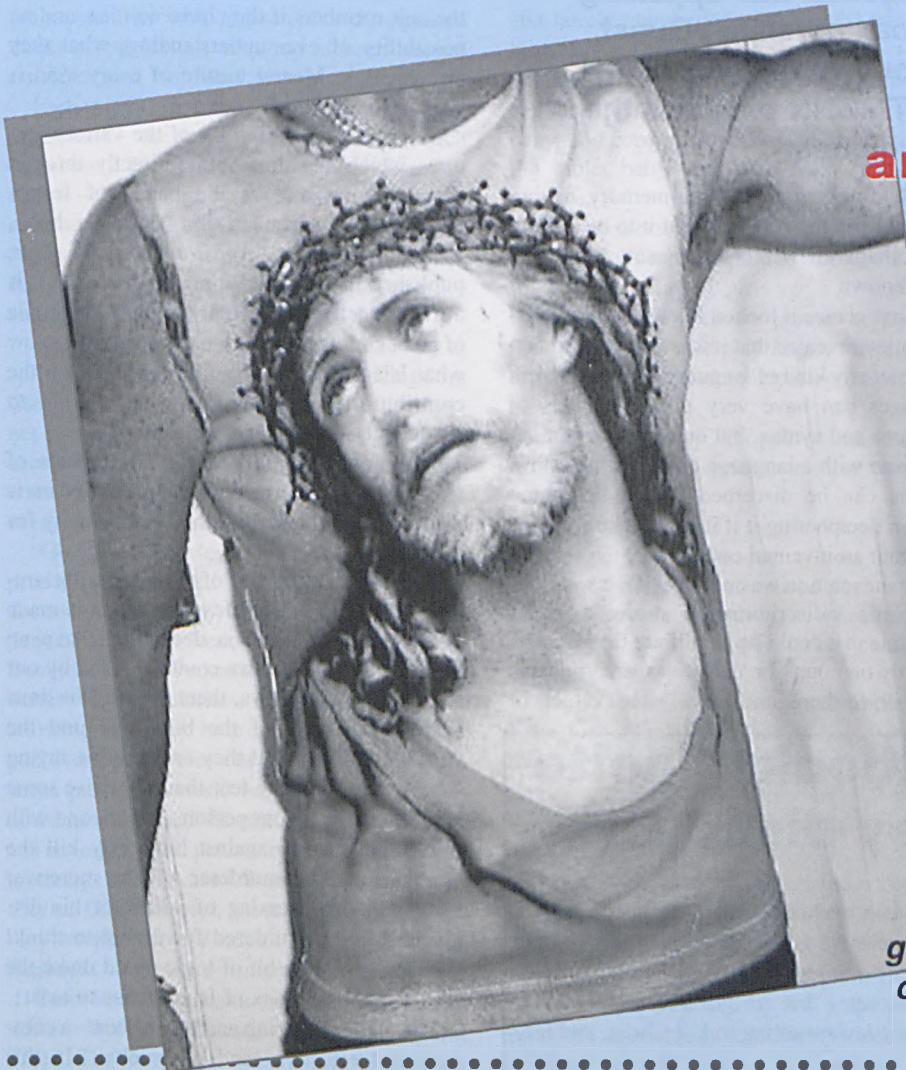
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The

Vol 123 No 8
Aug 2003

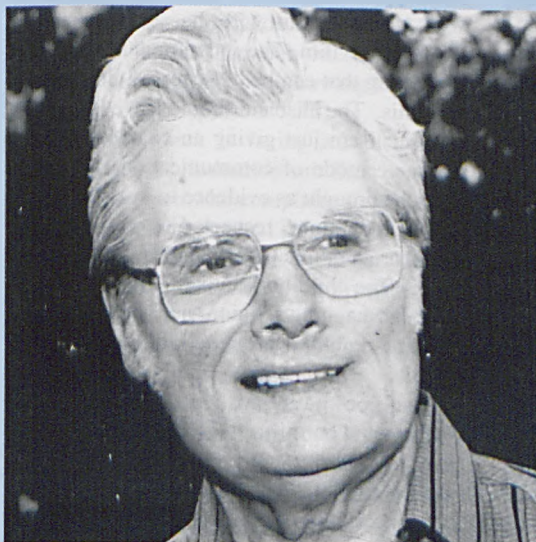
Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881



Though Christian art has some merit, much is garish, gory, tacky or kitsch enough to feature on a clubber's T-shirt. But how do non-believers rate in the artistic stakes? – See Peter Richards' report on page 10

The Jesus T shirt, with sparkly green sequins sewn into the crown of thorns, is sold by Clone Zone at branches throughout the UK



Colin McCall: 1919 – 2003

Bill McIlroy pays tribute to a dedicated freethinker who died this summer

– See obituary on page 5

Also in this issue:

Islam and Charity, a special centre-page report by David Carr-Allinson

“THE concepts ‘beyond’, ‘Last Judgment’, ‘immortality of the soul’, and ‘soul’ itself are instruments of torture, systems of cruelties by virtue of which the priest became master, remained master.”

Thus spake Friedrich Nietzsche.

But there are additional reasons why mosques not only can be, but should be, regarded today as institutes for torture. Muslim children are obliged to learn the Quran by heart, parts of it or preferably all of it. Many Muslims do not know Arabic at all, their native language being Urdu or English or Indonesian or some other language. The meaning of the Arabic text is usually not explained. It is meritorious to learn to recite the book correctly – or so it is supposed – in the original language as this is how it was delivered by God to Muhammad. (Odd that God can understand only one language.) Even for many people who do understand Arabic, quite a lot of the Quran is gibberish, and there are a huge number of contradictions, eg in one verse, “There is no compulsion in religion,” in many other verses the believers are ordered to kill unbelievers wherever they find them. But, to someone who does not understand Arabic, the whole thing is of course gibberish.

Now this is mental torture of an exquisite kind. In my work with adult survivors of child sexual abuse I was contacted by a young man who had been brought up in a group which practised organised and systematic abuse of children and adults, and also conducted

various ceremonies and rituals during their meetings. This young man sent me several pages of an incantation which he had been forced, when he was a child, with blows and other punishments when he made a mistake, to learn by heart.

Fear, rather than conviction, is what holds together the ‘appalling hoax of Islam’. Guest contributor RASJIDAH ST JOHN presents the argument

He had written it out from memory, having escaped from the cult, and sent it to me asking if I perhaps knew what it meant, as he had never known.

At first glance it looked like Latin. But closer scrutiny revealed that it was not Latin. In fact it was not any kind of language at all. Different languages can have very different kinds of structures and syntax, but on careful examination, even with a language one does not know, patterns can be discerned, and a beginning made in deciphering it if it is not a known language but an invented code.

This incantation was not in code, it was simply words indiscriminately strung together, with none that could be identified, for instance, as verbs or nouns or adjectives or pronouns. Interspersed here and there were names of

pagan gods like Ashtaroath, Astarte, Behemoth, Moloch, Beelzebub and so on, gods with horrifying associations.

The invention of incantations which are literally mumbo-jumbo, ie which have no meaning, is recommended by Alistair Crowley in his book *Magic*, where he gives advice on how to run a satanic cult. Crowley says it is the *best* kind of language to use. It is known from experience that it is more terrifying for the cult members if they have no idea, and no possibility of ever understanding, what they are chanting. Mental torture of every kind is used in these groups.

Many more descriptions of the various tortures which Muslims suffer directly through their religion and at the hands of fellow Muslims are given in Ibn Warraq’s book, *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*, published in 2003 by Prometheus Books. It is a truly excellent book, put together by people of great courage. Everyone who wants to know what Islam is today should read it. Since the contributors are all risking their lives to produce it, it is the least we can do.

The most egregious of the instruments of torture which is permanently in use in Islam is the law which prescribes the death penalty for apostasy.

To our European way of thinking, a declaration, or a vow, or a confession, which is made under threat of death is deemed to have no validity. So in a way we could say that, by our standards, by our laws, there *are* no Muslims. Every single one of the billion around the world who claim that they are, may be saying so only because they fear that otherwise some hypocritically devout person, or someone with a personal grudge against him, may kill the apostate, and the murderer will be moreover assured of the blessing of Allah for his disgusting deed. Murdered for daring to think! Would that a little bit of logic could make the whole appalling hoax of Islam cease to exist!

The Quran is boring and repetitious – a common and effective kind of cruelty. In this country, a husband still sometimes gets away with murdering his wife, because, he claims, she nagged him. The judge understands how provoking that can be. Of course I don’t agree with this. The husband should leave if he can’t stand it. I am just giving an example of how the same mode of communication can sometimes be brought as evidence to justify murder, and at other times respected as a god-fearing ritual, or an ethnic tradition, or even as a Holy Book. The child born into Islam is not free to leave her nagging religion, nor is she allowed, by claiming provocation, to kill the imam. She submits.

What goes on in mosques is not just quaint customs and harmless nonsense, which will go away if we pay no attention. It is unrelenting, extreme torture.

Islamic school textbooks ‘incite hatred’ a US survey discovers

A RECENT survey carried out by the New York *Daily News* revealed that six textbooks used in Islamic academies in New York City and surrounding areas were rife with anti-Semitism and misinformation about Christianity.

The *Daily News* report said the textbooks “contain passages that are blatantly anti-Semitic, condemning Jews as a people, repeating old canards about Jews wanting to kill Christ, and faking their Holy Scriptures to mock God.”

One book, *What Islam Is All About*, states that Jews “subscribe to the belief in racial superiority” and that their religion “even teaches them to call down curses upon the worship places of non-Jews whenever they pass them.” The same book, for children in grades six to eight, asserts “Christians also worship statues.”

The book goes on to allege that “many” Christians and Jews “lead such decadent and immoral lives that lying, alcohol, nudity, pornography, racism, foul language, premarital sex, homosexuality and everything else is accepted in their society, churches and synagogues.”

New York City has 15 private Islamic schools, serving between 3,000 and 4,000 children.

Dr Abidullah al-Ansari Ghazi, founder of a Chicago-based publishing firm called International Education Foundation, Inc, wrote some of the books in question, and agreed that some of the rhetoric should be dropped.

He said the books had been written ten to 20 years ago, and were based on sources from classical Islamic scholarship “which are much harsher than what I wrote here”.

But another publisher, the Islamic Foundation of North America, stood by its books.

“Islam, like any belief system, believes its programme is better than others,” said Yahiya Emerick, head of the Foundation.

“I don’t feel embarrassed to say that.”

Cover up quick – the Christians are coming!

WAL-MART, the American retail giant which has a large presence in the UK, has come over all coy in its pursuit of the devout dollar – and among the first casualties are several top magazine titles which have either disappeared under prophylactic packaging or been banned outright from Wal-Mart shelves

Earlier this year the \$244-billion-dollar-a-year chain – the world's largest retailer which has about 2,800 stores and 500 warehouse club stores – signed up to a Christian Merchants scheme operated by Kingdom Ventures, which targets the godly via a direct mail catalogue. Kingdom Ventures plans to launch free websites for every Christian church in the US.

The Christian Merchants will be allowed to sell their wares through the Kingdom Catalogue and through **iExalt.com**, the internet portal for the faithful. This gives Wal-Mart access to millions of church-going consumers, who spend hundreds of billions of dollars every year.

"Our Christian Merchants' initiative aims at providing approved companies with easy access to Christians," Gene Jackson, the president of Kingdom Ventures told the magazine *Business Wire*. "Personally, I would feel much better buying clothes, gas, or computers, knowing that they help increase the church's positive influence in our country. In fact, the items purchased could remind us of our relationship with God," he said.

The magazines placed by Wal-Mart under modesty blinds are *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Glamour* and, most bizarre of all, the very conservative *Ladies Home Journal*-ish *Redbook*.

Before cracking down on the women's magazines, Wal-Mart banned *Maxim*, *Stuff*, and *FHM*. The purported reason for the ban on these magazines was "customer complaints". However, the ban co-incided with Wal-Mart's nomination to the Christian Merchants programme, and customers are drawing their own conclusion.

Wal-Mart, which is facing a multi-billion dollar sexual discrimination suit filed by seven California women who complained of a pattern of harassment and unequal pay and promotion scales, made the national news just before Christmas last year when it removed a pregnant doll from its shelves.

The pregnant version of Midge, Barbie's best friend, was removed from Wal-Mart shelves across the US following complaints from customers, according to a company spokeswoman. The entire "Happy Family" set, which includes pregnant Midge, husband Alan

and 3-year-old son Ryan, were withdrawn from shelves.

Midge was introduced in 1963, a freckle-faced redhead and the first of a slew of friends and family members for Barbie, the blue-eyed blonde. The pregnant Midge, who wears a tiny white wedding ring, has a detachable magnetic stomach that allows easy "delivery" of the baby, and comes with tiny crib, cradle, changing table, baby toys and even a tiny baby monitor.

The makers, Mattel, say the "Happy Family" dolls are designed to satisfy the desire for nurturing play by girls age 5 to 8, and can be "a wonderful prop for parents to use with their children to role-play family situations — especially in families anticipating the arrival of a new sibling."

However, angry shoppers claimed that Midge would only encourage more unwanted teenage pregnancies.

Meanwhile, from Denmark comes news of another "offensive" product – Jesus and Mary flip-flop sandals – that caused such a furore among Christian shoppers that it has had to be withdrawn by the supermarket chain that stocked them.

The sandals, which come in child and adult sizes, feature images of the two holy figures on the upper sole along with a blue or pink background. Despite selling more than 4,000 pairs, Coop Danmark, the company that owns the Kvikly chain selling the sandals, decided to withdraw them after receiving more than 200 complaints.

"It was never our intention to offend people's beliefs, but apparently that was the case, and we were surprised by the scale of these protests," spokesman Jens Juul Nielsen said.

"Some priests believe that one steps on Jesus and the Virgin Mary when putting on the sandal," he said.

Protesters at a Kvikly shop in Aarhus, about 125 miles from Copenhagen, destroyed several pairs of the sandals only hours after they went on sale, and a local Catholic priest filed charges against the store for blasphemy.

"We Catholics pray to Jesus and Mary and now they want us to walk all over them," an outraged Johannes Gram Kulis told French news agency AFP. "That's blasphemy and a serious and indecent violation of the religious sentiments of believers."

Although around 84 per cent of Danes belong to the Lutheran Church, statistics say that less than 5 per cent attend church regularly. Fewer than one per cent of Danes belong to the Catholic Church, according to AFP.

'God's law' enforced with a sharp sword

A MAN who whose job it is to carry out beheadings in Saudi Arabia – sometimes on a daily basis – has revealed in a rare interview how much he loves his work as an agent of "God's law".

Saudi Arabia's top executioner Muhammad Saad Al-Beshi told *Arab News*: "In this country we have a society that understands God's law."

He revealed that he is sometimes called upon daily to administer capital punishment with a sword. Some days he has to behead more than one person found guilty of a capital offence. Public executions are common in Saudi Arabia, where offenders can be executed by the sword for crimes like murder, rape, drug-smuggling, armed robbery, homosexuality and practising witchcraft. Many offenders receive the death sentence for contravening religious laws.

Men are beheaded with a single stroke of the sword, but women offenders have the choice of being shot instead. Only men are executed in public.

"It doesn't matter to me – two, four, ten – as long as I am doing God's will, it doesn't matter to me how many people I execute, said Al-Beshi.

Al-Beshi would not reveal how much he is paid, but did reveal that his sword was very valuable. He keeps it razor sharp, and his children sometimes help him clean it after each execution. The 42-year-old said he was very proud of his position and was now grooming his 22-year-old son to be an executioner.

Muslim rapist issues terrorist death threat

A SERIAL rapist serving a 55-year jail sentence in Australia has been charged with sending a threatening letter to New South Wales Corrective Services Commissioner Ron Woodham.

Bilal Skaf, 21, leader of a pack that gang-raped women in Sydney in 2000, is charged with writing the unsigned letter, which demands in the name of "Allah the most gracious, the most merciful" the release of all Muslim prisoners from NSW jails.

The letter says that if the demands are not met "we will attack and bomb the people of Australia". The letter was found in an internal jail mailbox in the high-security Super Max prison at Goulburn Jail. The charge stated that Skaf's letter "was likely to be a danger to the safety of Corrective Services Commissioner Ron Woodham and certain property". The case will be heard by a magistrate in September.



CANON Jeffrey John has been colourfully described as "his hokey-cokey, the in-out bishop of Reading". This sorry affair, and the endless analysis it has provoked, has some relevance to secularists.

It has been clear for a while that the power wielded by the evangelicals has been very much in the ascendant. According to a *Guardian* article "Evangelicals have become this century's witch-burners" with their "narrow theological chauvinism and rightwing Christian fundamentalism". What the evangelicals "really want is a return to the world of anti-Catholicism and heresy trials ... to the Anglican church of the 16th Century". Even if only half of this were correct, the C of E is in the deepest mire ever. The writer, the Vicar of Putney, bemoans evangelism's evolution to this state from that which he is convinced motivated (Elizabeth) Fry and Howard in their crucial welfare work in prisons and Shaftesbury's for the miners, as well as Wilberforce's fight against slavery.

This battle is about much more than one man becoming a bishop. It is one of (highly selective) biblical literalists pitted against those more prepared to interpret their texts in the light of modern knowledge and prevailing conditions and culture. The former couldn't care less that between a quarter and a third of the clergy are gay, and without them the church would fall apart. Why then is Rowan Williams, being allegedly of the liberal tendency and having already given the go-ahead to the promotion of the canon, widely thought to have later forced him to stand down, especially as Fraser reckons that only 33 out of 16,000 churches are signed up to the major evangelical literalist group, confusingly named Reform. Could such a small number of parishes really be rocking the boat to the point of capsizing it?

The short answer is, probably, yes. On a worldwide basis there are millions more Anglican literalists, especially in Africa and Asia, where the Church is growing. It is widely speculated that the reversal, some would say betrayal, was as a result of threats of schism, voiced most loudly in Nigeria, where – as in Islam – homosexuality seems to be even more publicly reviled than murder, albeit by all accounts practised not uncommonly. There are dark rumours of American fundamentalists bankrolling an efficiently organised

Subsidising the C of E

A HIDDEN subsidy paid by UK tax-payers to the Church of England amounts to £52-million a year. C of E members contributed £282 million in 2001, a figure augmented by "£52 million if tax recovered is added to the equation", according to Stuart Bell MP in the Commons. The £282 million rose from £244 million in 1998.

worldwide campaign putting pressure on Williams and his underlings, many of whom are place men (always men) of his little lamented evangelical predecessor, George Carey. Even the Queen was said to be dismayed at the row and doubtless keen to advocate putting the finger in the dyke, so to speak. But perhaps the final nail was that the evangelicals are the part of the church that is grow-

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reflects on the sorry affair of Canon Jeffrey John



ing, albeit from a small base, and putting *per capita* by far the most money in the kitty.

A major plank in their attack strategy (gentle Jesus, meek and mild?) was to demonstrate well-advanced plans to hold on to collections from parishioners at local level, and withhold contributions to the central funds. For all their feeble protestations, Church House (the Church's HQ) is effectively bust, and this must force them into announcing additions to the growing list of redundancies there.

I doubt if the moderates will win; it is not in their nature to shout so loud and be as ruthless – but there is a real chance that the others will end up running the asylum – **and taking control of the assets**. The other possibility is a war of attrition. Preventing the latest squabble from developing to a full-blown schism is clearly beyond Williams, and probably anyone else too.

Not just the Anglicans

There is a similar issue developing in the RC Church, with arch-conservatives joining secretive organisations like *Opus Dei*, which even the late Cardinal Basil Hume seemed to find sinister. In my work for the Society, I have become aware of many astonishingly influential people who are believed to be members or have strong links to such organisations. Their agenda is in marked contrast to that of the vast numbers of liberal Catholics who consider their Church's teaching on contraception, and much more besides, to be ridiculous. Quite a few of these liberals worry about what their hierarchy do in their name. The main reason that there is no equivalent fracas in the RC Church is that it is much more autocratic, centralised and, in theory, disciplined – well, frightened to voice disagreements in publicly, anyway – than the Anglican churches. This results in an institutionalised hypocrisy where the clergy do just about whatever they want, as long as they keep quiet about it. It means that there is a growing chasm between what happens at parish level and the poisonous doctrinal bilge emanating from public statements. Papal bull indeed.

This same polarisation is being experienced

in Judaism. The Chief Rabbi, in the middle of the doctrinal road, traditionally spoke for all Jews – but no more. He is beached with the Orthodox, supporting the ultra-Orthodox in one direction and the liberals in the other, not to mention the high proportion of Jews marrying out of the faith altogether.

So we have the erection of the eruv in north west London by those convinced that the erection of a few pieces of fishing line between poles permits them to carry keys (which they define as work) on a Saturday. Even they have been upstaged by an even more "devout" (you may think of other adjectives) group claiming the eruv users are cheating on halachic law. I find it difficult to care about what they do with fishing line, but secular Jews are convinced, and saddened, that the objective is a display of religious triumphalism and, understandably, fear for the effect on community relations.

Meanwhile, the moderates in Islam remain quiet, seemingly frightened to speak out.

What has all this to do with us?

The common factor is that the religious Right in all these religions are gaining a huge amount of power. It is increasingly they who speak with the loudest voices or wield influence behind the scenes. They are well organised and funded. Christian Action Research and Education (CARE), for example, encourages their supporters to attend councillors' surgeries and meetings, get to know their councillor and organise church consultations. They have offices in London and Scotland from which letter-writing campaigns and parliamentary lobbying are initiated. They even boast contacts and successful campaigns at the EU and UN.

The Christian Institute has a similar agenda and *modus operandi*. It was a rare moment indeed when in the middle of last month champagne corks were being popped in Red Lion Square – at the same time as the Christian Institute was struggling to re-insert theirs in Newcastle. This was when the notorious Section 28 (forbidding the so-called promotion of homosexuality) was thrown out by an overwhelming majority in the Lords, following an over-confident prediction of success by the Christian Institute.

As the Institute understandably pointed out in mitigation, though, their view had prevailed over the Employment Directive (see July issue) – a much bigger prize. Their missive concluded with an entreaty for their supporters to become school governors, so we may be looking forward to yet more evangelical Christian influence in our publicly-funded schools.

Our next step towards a theocracy?

If only that were as far as it went. We have just learned, however, that the Government has recently convened what it describes as a high-level Steering Group to "look at

Government's interface with the faith communities". Its terms of reference are "to consider the most effective means of achieving greater involvement of the faith communities in policy-making and delivery across Whitehall ...".

Ms Fiona Mactaggart, Minister for Race Equality, Community Policy and Civic Renewal assured the Commons that "the Prime Minister is aware of [these] plans and attaches considerable importance to this Review. It will lay the foundations for the effective long-term involvement of the faith communities' perspectives and needs in policy development across Government."

Ms Mactaggart will chair the Group which includes six ministers or high ranking government politicians and nine senior religious representatives (if you include in the count the representative of the Baha'is of whom there appear to be only 6,000 adherents in the UK). Although Mr Blair is not on the list, he will be there in spirit, for the Steering group also includes the No 10 Appointments Secretary, as well as Blair's "religious czar" John Battle MP (a back-bench MP who is keen on Catholic internships and, according to the BBC, originally trained to be a Roman Catholic priest).

Thought for the Day

And now to the on-going *Thought for the Day* saga. The BBC Governors' Programme Complaints Committee referred this matter to the full Board of Governors for consideration. As feared, however, the Board simply endorsed the report prepared by an executive in the department responsible for *TfiD*, echoing that this was a religious programme to which it was inappropriate for the non-religious to contribute. There was, they managed to conclude, no discrimination—because non-believers' voices were heard on other programmes.

That it was not specifically called a religious programme, and that it was a didactic spot planted within a high-audience programme without any remote equivalent for the non-religious seemed to cut no ice with them. Nor the fact that it regularly comprised (biased) comment on current affairs. Neither Barbara Smoker, in whose name the complaint was formally made, nor the Society, consider the complaint to have been satisfactorily answered, and lawyers and others will be consulted as to possible next steps.

On a more positive note, Dr Evan Harris MP spoke on the Communications Bill, identifying himself as an NSS Honorary Associate. He emphasised the importance of safeguards over religious content. He told the Commons "It should not be right that people with atheistic, agnostic or purely secular beliefs should be excluded from participating in, for example, reserved slots such as *Thought for the Day*, which is not described as religious broadcasting. ... When discrimination is cited, one must consider whether religious organisations or the law

around religion seeks to discriminate against those without religion.

"Humanism and atheism are a belief pattern. Indeed, an earlier Government amendment expands religion to include both religion and belief, thus including people who do not have a theistic faith but have atheistic beliefs.

"It is reasonable that there should not be exclusivity and discrimination in any of those areas. Indeed, that can be seen in programmes that fall outside the category of so-called

religious slots. One cannot turn on the radio without hearing bishops and clerics arguing with one another about various important issues of the day.

"I do not want to overstress that point, but would like gently to urge honourable Members to consider the point that, in their effort to avoid being discriminated against, religious organisations should look carefully at themselves and the surrounding legislation to see whether they discriminate against people without religion."

Colin McCall – a lifelong freethinker – dies on his 84th birthday

COLIN McCall, who died on June 27, his 84th birthday, was something of a rarity among leading freethinkers in that he had never been on nodding terms with religion. But it was his choice to follow in his freethinking parents' footsteps. They eschewed indoctrination, and their son's inherent good sense enabled him to develop his own code for living without religion.

Although generally regarded as a Mancunian, Colin McCall was born in Barrow-in-Furness where his father was temporarily employed. But the family roots were in Manchester, where they were active in Labour politics and the secularist movement.

In addition to freethought interests, Manchester had much to offer. Colin was a teenage member of the Zoological Society. He attended the city's theatres and concerts by the Halle Orchestra. He was a fan of Manchester United football team and Lancashire Cricket club.

Although an English graduate, Colin was a polymath and could well have graduated in philosophy, history, or politics. When wartime restrictions were lifted, he travelled in Europe – Paris and Rome were his favourite cities – visiting art galleries and studying architecture.

Between his first contribution to the *Freethinker* in 1939 and his last in April this year, Colin McCall wrote hundreds of articles and reviews for the paper. In 1957 he joined the editorial board and was the obvious choice to be appointed editor of the (then weekly) *Freethinker*. He doubled as general secretary of the National Secular Society till 1963 and continued as editor till 1965. His measured and balanced conduct in both roles was exemplary. Most importantly, he resisted efforts by a clique to reduce the NSS to the level of a secularist Orange Lodge. Colin McCall's commitment and tenacity probably saved the NSS from disintegration. But the sniping and harassment had taken their toll and in September 1963 he relinquished his full-time post.

On leaving the Society's employment, Colin took up an appointment with the Tothill Press, working on an architectural journal. Later he wrote in a freelance capacity, before becoming deputy editor of *Yours*, a campaigning magazine published by Help the Aged.

In September 1990, Colin was back in the *Freethinker* with a wise and perceptive article entitled "Old Men Remember". Since then, till his last illness, he wrote book reviews and the *Down to Earth* column. In the April issue he concluded a valedictory article on miscarriages of justice, including executions in the USA, with the warning: "Life is uncertain these days with Republican fundamentalists at the helm in Washington DC. And not just in America itself."

Colin and June, his wife of 44 years, shared freethought principles and a range of interests. They enjoyed travel, the theatre – Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop was a particular favourite – literature and art.

Colin underwent an operation in March and remained in hospital till his death. There was a simple secular ceremony at the West Hertfordshire Crematorium on July 4.

– Bill McIlroy



Colin, centre, pictured in the NSS office in late 1950s

AS a regular *Thought for the Day* listener. I am well aware of the devious devices used by its providers in their varied endeavours to reach an early morning climax within two minutes. As I see it, these devices come in five guises – rhetoric, omission, metaphor, lies and scriptural interpretation, where the last piece of religious spin arises from the speaker's assumed authority to claim "inside knowledge" not available to an ordinary Bible-basher like me.

Of course, such knowledge is unavailable because it doesn't exist outside the speaker's self-opinionated head but, when asserted with the practiced confidence of a professional propagandist, the unwary are readily won over. By applying these five tricks of the trade, claims can be and are made for which there is little, no or even contradictory evidence.

Yet, in stark contrast to the rest of Radio 4's *Today* programme, there is never a hint of criticism, merely a respectful word of thanks for that day's nonsensical offering. Why these particular thoughts should be treated so differently from all others is a mystery that should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Of course, such strong criticism of the *TfiD* requires a good supporting example and, from many candidates, I have selected the one broadcast on April 11 during which the speaker, to whom I will refer as "Dr S", makes frequent use of the aforementioned verbal trickery. However, exposing his craft requires patience and attention to biblical detail so if you have a Bible then I rec-

George W Bush 'more religious than Saddam Hussein'

AUTHOR Martin Amis, writing in the *Guardian* in March this year, said: "Although there is no Bible on Capital Hill written in the blood of George Bush, we are obliged to accept the fact that Bush is more religious than Saddam: of the two presidents, he is, in this respect, the more psychologically primitive ..."

"Unbelievably, born-again doctrine insists that Israel must be blindly supported, not because it is the only semi-democracy in the crescent, but because it is due to host the Second Coming."

A few months later, on June 27, the Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, reported a conversation Bush had had with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas at the recent Aquaba conference.

According to Abbas, Bush revealed that "God told me to strike at Al Qaeda, and I struck them, then He instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem of the Middle East."

ommend you consult it. Only then will you fully appreciate the "inexactitudes" in the talk. And you might even find the detective work entertaining. So, let us begin.

Dr S is telling us about the Passover and says: "For me it's summed up in the moment when Moses addresses the Israelites on the brink of the exodus; it's there in Exodus chapters 12 and 13".

ARTHUR LEDGER has a confession: he is a keen listener to *Thought for the Day* – but only because he enjoys subjecting the 'nonsense' each broadcast contains to critical analysis

These are the only chapters needed to compare Dr S's distortions with their true content and, of course, to decide on the fairness of my comments.

Dr S: "Freedom, Moses was saying, doesn't come in a day, it's the work of a lifetime, many lifetimes, and what counts is the story we tell our children". Comment: Moses makes no reference to the time needed for freedom to come. This is pure invention. And what story does Dr S urge children to be told? It is one of mass slaughter of animals which are to be eaten in a strange ritualistic manner and whose blood must be daubed on doorposts in order to avoid a plague that later kills all first-born in Egypt.

After this I imagine Dr S entertains his children with videos of *Dracula* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for light relief. I find it astonishing that anyone should be allowed to urge us in a radio programme to indoctrinate children with such barbarous rubbish. Yet, unabashed, Dr S calls this story "one of the deepest of all insights into what it is to make a free society". I can't comment on these words because I find them totally incomprehensible. Dr S: "Moses does a surprising thing. He doesn't talk about liberation or about a golden future, the land flowing with milk and honey".

Comment: Let's first consider the "liberation" idea which, according to Dr S, Moses *doesn't* talk about. To me, "And on that day you will explain to your son, 'This is because of what Yahweh did for me when I came out of Egypt'" is liberation talk, as is "By sheer power Yahweh brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery". Similarly, "Keep this day in remembrance, the day you came but of Egypt, from the house of slavery!"

Surely, in anybody's language, these three quotes from Moses' speeches show he is talk-

ing "liberation" of his people. If you were told you were being taken out of slavery wouldn't you call it liberation talk? Those Israelis must have been unbelievably stupid not to have realised they were being liberated. And even Dr S himself has the temerity to refer earlier in his piece to the Passover as "the festival in which we re-enact another moment of liberation 3,300 years ago ...". I rest my case.

Dr S also claims above that Moses does not tell his people about "a golden future, the land flowing with milk and honey". Yet, in Exodus 13.5 Moses says "And it shall be when the Lord shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites which he swore unto thy fathers to give thee *a land flowing with milk and honey* that thou shalt keep this service this month". I leave the reader to decide whether the denial of these words by someone who, by his office, must know Moses' words intimately merits the description of lie or one of the milder verbal transgressions mentioned earlier. My choice is easy.

Finally, Dr S claims that "Moses does a surprising thing" which he goes on to say is "the duty to hand the story on to future generations". But, in fact, what Moses does is 100 per cent unsurprising because these two chapters in Exodus, as you may have noticed, consist throughout of Yahweh directing Moses on what to tell his people and then Moses complying. And the big story that Moses is repeatedly instructed to pass on – apart from the gory details – is that Yahweh is all-powerful and must be worshipped for all time because it was he who liberated the Israelis. With the sort of reputation Yahweh enjoyed, it would have been astonishing if Moses had not followed Yahweh's orders. He would have been zapped on the spot for doing any other, as Dr S knows.

I could say more on this abysmal yet not untypical *TfiD*, like the claim by Dr S that Moses was saying "To defeat tyranny you need education" and "Don't just celebrate, educate". These were spoken by Dr S *not* by Moses (even remotely), as is easily verified. Note the giveaway "scriptural interpretation" clause "Moses was saying" rather than "Moses said".

Then there is Dr S's strange claim that in the world there is "too much rage and readiness to resort to violence". If we follow his urging to engage in annual child indoctrination on real or mythological bloody past events claiming them to be true, then surely we are increasing the likelihood of rage and violence.

But I hope I've said enough to highlight the verbal evasions of Dr S and his ilk. With his lugubrious presentation of so many porkies it would be appropriate to tell Dr S he should eat his words. However, because of the added burden of his religion's culinary superstitions, this might be too harsh. After all, Dr S happens to be the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks.

THE NSS is undertaking an intensive week of monitoring the output of BBC Radio 4. The purpose of this is to test the Beeb's claim that it is balanced in terms of the amount of air time it gives to religious and non-religious voices. The results, whatever they turn out to be, should make for interesting reading. The monitoring is set to run from June 19 to 25.

There might also be a case for looking at that organisations' TV programmes. I have in mind one recent example – a particularly gruesome and tendentious hour of hagiography concerning the life of top Christian fanatic "saint" Paul, broadcast on June 29.

I watched the programme with mounting outrage. I'm no bible scholar but I do know enough to say with confidence that this programme was not a fair-minded and objective examination of Paul's life and legacy. In fact, it was little more than an evangelical's wet-dream of what TV could be like if the fundies and their friends were in the driving seat. This partial and credulous accumulation of drivel was the TV equivalent of being stuck in a sweltering revivalists' tent with all the flaps tied shut during an "Old Time Bible Hour" session. If I had not been in such a trance of horror I'd have reached for the off switch.

The programme's presenter was the leaping evangelical Jonathan Edwards. This was like getting Uri Geller to front a programme on the paranormal – a criticism-free zone comes guaranteed.

In the course of following the Jonathan Edwards trail around the internet, I came across a few curious little sites. One of the oddest was the online magazine *Soon*. This magazine claims to offer (I quote) "advice on visiting Britain and visa problems, learning English, interviews, problems of life, sex, science, religion, stories and poems". It is, it claims, "an easy-English web magazine for the world". If you visit it at <http://www.soon.org.uk/> you will quickly discover that there's a little more to it than these innocent sounding claims suggest. Guess what – it's a full-on, red-hot evangelical tub-thumper! It may help language students

improve their English – but only at the cost of rotting their brains. I suppose its progenitors would claim that they're only fulfilling that old command to "preach to the world". To me though it seemed like just another example of Christian slyness.

NORMAN PRIDMORE scours the world wide web for sites of interest to freethinkers



How about another Jonathan Edwards? Go to <http://www.yale.edu/wje/> and check out the life and works of JE's 18th-century namesake. This JE was a very considerable figure indeed, and a very strange one – a highly intelligent and sophisticated thinker and writer who was at the same time a wickedly effective revivalist preacher and pastor. His influence remains active to the present day, and not only in his American homeland. Do not expect humour or uplift. The message of the old Edwards was as unrelentingly grim as that of the new one.

On the subject of nutters, check out this site. The useful home-grown site called 'Nutter Watch' is the work of a group called The Melon Farmers and contains news and information concerning free-speech and censorship issues pertaining to TV, film and video. To be found at <http://www.melonfarmers.co.uk/index.htm>, it is lively and informative and very irreverent indeed.

Those who feel that the *Freethinker* is at times a little too rude and boisterous should take a look at "Why Christians Suck" at <http://www.satan2000.com/christians/whysuck.htm>. It contains a selection of provocative rants and tirades against Christian beliefs that at the very least must have been highly therapeutic to write. And as sometimes

happens with anger, the heat that is generated does now and then turn into light. In the case of this site it's a light that is very clear, very hard, and very unforgiving.

The recent and ongoing furore within Anglicanism about gays in the ministry resembles a fight in an abattoir for the dubious privilege of priority – all the beasts are doomed, but some are more doomed than others. The central, if slightly ghostly, figure in the debate has been that of Rowan Williams. Like the Pope, his sermons, papers and statements are also available on line. Go to <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org> and take a look. See the withering effect of religion upon an obviously decent mind, and despair.

Care for a little satire? Being in need of a laugh I was inordinately grateful to be given the URL of the satirical online magazine The Brains Trust. It's at <http://www.thebrains.trust.co.uk/> and should not be missed. Those of puritanical inclination or who find any combination of nuns and black latex tasteless should avoid the feature on Christian pornography.

In a recent webwatch I listed a few URLs for sites at which hard-to-find freethought writings were available. Here's another. It's the work of New Zealand rationalists and is quite exemplary in its presentation and ease of use. It's called the "Freethought Archives" and can be found at <http://homepages.paradise.net.nz/freethought/>. I especially relished what I read of "Good Sense" by Baron D'Holbach. There are five books on line, with more planned. This is surely what the internet is for!

Finally, back to the good old Church of England. *The Church of England Newspaper* may sound a little dull, but it's full of fascinating little nuggets. I loved the story of the Wetherby church organist sacked because he'd been "living in sin" with the estimable "Joyce". Read all about it at <http://www.churchnewspaper.com> and wonder at the exciting lives these Christians sometimes lead.

As ever I'm grateful for all suggestions. New ones, please, to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk

A FORMER nun and head teacher of a London Catholic state-subsidised school has been convicted of siphoning off around £500,000 of public money from school funds for designer clothes, jewellery and holidays.

While the shelves of the library at St John Rigby college in West Wickham, south London, were half empty, Colleen McCabe's wardrobes were packed with designer outfits and a collection of shoes which would have "made Imelda Marcos proud".

During her two-month trial at Southwark crown court the jury was told how in five years McCabe, 50, stripped the Catholic state school of resources. Prosecuting, Andrew Wilcken said that in December 1994 McCabe began her spending

Ex-nun stole from Catholic school

spree. Over the next five years she bought 90 pairs of shoes costing more than £7,000, and spent almost £6,000 during 25 visits to one jewellery shop alone. She spent huge amounts on cosmetics, furniture and electrical goods, bought her mother an expensive bracelet and paid for an Orient Express trip for her parents.

On one occasion the college chaplain, Father Richard Plunkett, accompanied McCabe on three expenses-paid holidays to Malta.

McCabe's offences began after the 1,100-pupil school opted out of local education and

diocesan control and became grant-maintained. Mr Wilcken said there had been almost no financial controls during McCabe's reign. Despite an exhaustive police investigation, the extent of her dishonesty is not known but the crown suggested she cheated the school out of £500,000.

McCabe was a nun for 15 years before becoming a teacher. She moved to St John Rigby in 1989 and two years later was appointed principal. A former teacher, Dan Tranter, said: "She was a despot and under her what was once a thriving school suffered immeasurably."

McCabe will be sentenced later this month. Judge Christopher Elwen told her to expect a long prison sentence "for this really disgraceful breach of trust."

Where was Islam the Palestinians

Charity, we are told, is the most virtuous of all qualities. It says so in the Bible, in the New Testament. Corinthians 13:1 – “And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity.”

It is high on the list of exigencies for all people of moral purpose. The doing of charitable deeds is the very cornerstone of Freemasonry.

It says so also in the Koran. Indeed, it is one of the five tenets upon which a good Muslim builds his life, the giving of 10 per cent of his income for charitable purposes. But I have to confess that there are still some things about the current Islamic attitude towards charity which confuse me.

For example: a few months ago there was a very interesting series on BBC television about Islam, during which various followers were asked to explain what their religion meant to them. I was struck by a particularly forceful explanation offered by the boxer Prince Naseem, who obviously sincerely believes that one day Islam will dominate the world, and that the world will be far better off for it.

There was a gleam in his eyes as he pointed out that at the present rate of conversions, by the year 2020 one third of the world's population, that is two billion people, will be Muslim. I cannot say that his obvious satisfaction with that future state of affairs struck a reciprocal chord in me, in fact I experienced one of those attacks of *deja-vu* accompanied by a *frisson* of fear. Some hours later I recalled what it had reminded me of.

Years ago at the height of the cold war I was working in Germany, visiting Berlin. My course one evening took me close to the infamous wall. On one section someone had written “Visit the Soviet Union”. and underneath in a different hand, someone else had written “... Before the Soviet Union visits you”. In those days the collapse of the Soviet Union under the weight of its own anomalies was not something you would have put money on. Hence the *frisson*. Hence the sense of *deja-vu*.

But to get back to the question of charity, Naseem confirmed the importance with which he and all Muslims view this requirement. He went on, very proudly, to mention a mosque to which he belonged which received so much money every month from its members, that they were unable to find enough needy Muslims in their area to take it all up! It had to be sent to other mosques in other areas which had members in need of charitable assistance which they (the other mosques) were not able to provide. Wonderful! But then you begin to question whether or not there might have been, in the area covered by Naseem's mosque, some unfortunate Buddhists, or Hindus, or Christians who were momentarily

in dire need of help. But apparently no attempt was made to investigate this possibility.

Does that mean then that only Muslims are worthy of receiving Islamic charity? Is there a sign on Naseem's mosque saying “Infidels need not apply”? Or is this a matter which is understood silently by all good Muslims, but not talked about publicly?

DAVID CARR-ALLINSON examines a a much-vaunted facet of Islam – charity – and exposes some serious short-comings

It is just as well that the British taxpayer, whether Christian, Jew or Atheist, is not so particular, isn't it? After all, many Muslims arrived in the UK as refugees requiring urgent financial help. And still, years after their arrival, some of their religious leaders, even those apparently on close terms with the fundamentalists apparently dedicated to destroying us, continue to live and raise their families at the taxpayer's expense. Whether it is called “Unemployment Benefit” or “Income Support” or whatever, it is still a form of charity, provided by the people of this country to those who have not previously worked in the United Kingdom or put anything into the communal kitty.

Now, before anyone writes in to draw my attention to the orphanages being set up by Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, which provide a much-needed home for orphans of any nationality and any religious faith, I would say yes, I am willing to be impressed. But I am also willing to bet that whatever the faith of the orphans who go in, by the time they come out they will be devout Muslims. So, how much is genuine charity, and how much is simply recruitment of future “martyrs”?

In 1979, Idi Amin, the dictator of Uganda who had succeeded in reducing his country to desolation in eight terrible years of genocide and slaughter, was finally forced to flee. This corrupt and brutal creature, whose blood-lust and depravity equalled and surpassed that of any monster thrown up by history, was accused, amongst other things, of cannibalism and of the murder with his own hands of innumerable victims – including Archbishop Luwum and Mrs Dora Bloch, a crippled British passenger on the hi-jacked airliner which landed at Entebbe in 1976. Amin escaped international justice, and was given “sanctuary” in Saudi Arabia. When the King

was asked to hand him over so that he could be charged with crimes against humanity he declined, giving as his reason “He is a fellow Muslim”. And so today he lives out his exile in comfort and peace. Not the end he had allowed to his victims, many of whom were also Muslims, but of course they were poor Muslims. They hadn't had their hands on the country's treasury. So is charity for a rich thief and murderer who claims to be a Muslim more important than justice for poor Muslims? Or am I missing something?

Curiously enough, this particular “act of Islamic charity” is paralleled by one on the international Marxist scene. In 1974 the Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was deposed and murdered after a coup led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was reported as saying “I am going to install a one-party Marxist state here even if it takes a million dead to do it”.

Well, he had his million dead and many more besides, and when eventually he was deposed in his turn, he fled to Zimbabwe where he was received in friendship by Robert Mugabe, who didn't bother to reply to demands from the International Court of Justice in the Hague that Mengistu be turned over for trial. No doubt they will grow old together in great comfort, their only complaint being that there were never enough victims to be sacrificed to their half-witted ideas.

So, should we place Marxist charity on the same level as Islamic charity?

In May 1948, Palestine was part of Trans-Jordan and a British protectorate. The decision to establish the Israeli homeland there was a United Nation's decision, not a unilateral US decision. The US voted in its favour, certainly, but so did the USSR (however dubious its motives) and so did the huge majority of other states which were members of the UN at the time. The British representative, under pressure from the Arabists in the Foreign Office, abstained from voting, although it had been Britain which had first proposed the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine over 30 years previously.

On Friday, May 14, David Ben Gurion declared the existence of the State of Israel and on Saturday, May 15, as British troops moved out, “Liberation” Armies from four neighbouring Arab countries invaded. It was to be, in the broadcast words of the secretary-general of the Arab League, Azzam Pasha, “a war of extermination, and a momentous massacre!”.

Well, it didn't exactly turn out that way. In the following weeks before a UN organised

nic charity when needed it most?

Feature

cease-fire finally held, many Jews were killed, and many Arabs also. And so the Palestinian refugee problem was born.

When the Arab armies arrived, firing at anything that moved, and the Israelis struck back, the Palestine-born Arabs found themselves between a rock and a hard place, and gathering up their moveable possessions, took to the roads to find what they hoped would be a safer spot, either elsewhere in Palestine or in one of the neighbouring Arab states. They succumbed to a propaganda war, choosing to believe their Arab brothers who warned them that the Jews were systematically slaughtering Palestinians in their beds, and to ignore Jewish reassurances for their safety. And so they became refugees.



Idi Amin, the murderous Ugandan tyrant and a brother in Islam. The 80-year-old lapsed into a coma just as the Freethinker was going to press

According to UN figures issued at the time, some 650,000 Palestinian Arabs fled from Israeli-held territory: approximately 280,000 went to the West Bank, 180,000 to the Gaza Strip, 70,000 to Transjordan, 34,000 to Lebanon, 4,000 to Iraq, 75,000 to Syria and 7,000 to Egypt.

Roughly parallel with this movement, although far less well-publicised, Jews who had been living in Jewish communities, some of which had been in existence for as long as 2,500 years, in Arab countries, were driven out of their homes, or encouraged to leave precipitously. The vast majority, some 570,000 according to the UN, made their way to Israel.

It is the difference in the way these two groups of refugees were treated which makes for such tragic reading.

Despite the difficulties of the times, the Jews were welcomed, taken into the existing

community, found homes, given work, assimilated fully into the life of the new nation.

The Palestinians were herded into camps, given the bare minimum for survival and left to rot, year after year, in the most abysmal squalor, denied all rights and denied all dignity. And this was done to them by their "friends", not their enemies.

And on those occasions, and there were many, during the following 40+ years, when Israel invited the Palestinians to return and start to rebuild their lives in their homeland, to take part side by side with the Jews in the economic miracle that was happening, the offers were always summarily dismissed – not by the Palestinians, who were not allowed to speak for themselves, but by their Arab "brothers".

Even as recently as this year, during an International Peace Conference, Israel proposed a plan of co-operation to which the Palestinians reacted positively. But once again, the representatives of Hamas and the other terrorist groups rejected it out of hand.

Now, you don't have to be a financial genius to see that if, during the last 50-odd years, the Arab oil-producing states had contributed not 10 per cent but say just one per cent of their annual profits to the Palestinians, together with a little positive thinking, we would have an entirely different situation on our hands. For example, the West Bank and Gaza could have been transformed into a group of model towns, providing a high quality of life, and high levels of education and employment for their inhabitants. It could have become a shining example to the world of Arab altruism and Arab ingenuity. It could have been a new blossoming of that "golden age" which Muslims like to tell us about, some thousand or so years ago when they laid down their scimitars for a while and took up more peaceful pursuits, like astronomy, architecture and translating the works of Aristotle.

But they blew it. So full of unreasoning hatred were they that they missed their opportunity, and instead, the Palestinians were left to rot in camps so utterly soul-destroying as to defy description. Generations were born into inhuman poverty, and deliberately left to suffer without hope. As Cairo radio put it on more than one occasion "The Palestinians are the cornerstone of the Arab struggle against Israel. *They are the armaments of the Arabs and Arab nationalism*". No-one bothered to ask the Palestinians if this was what they wanted, of course. The only contribution demanded of them was that they should suffer, hate and die. *Intifada* may possibly have been a sponta-

neous movement by the Palestinian children, but it was very quickly appropriated by the Arab leaders and their tame terrorists who realised that by the judicious use of human sacrifice they could force Israel into a negative reaction which would lose them popular support: a propaganda coup at the cost of just a few dozen young lives!

And the vast wealth of the Arab nations, which they had done nothing to produce other than to nationalise the oil industries in their different countries, was squandered on maintaining several thousand members of Royal families and their hangers-on in limitless luxury, or acquiring weapons of ever more destructive power for tyrants and demagogues.

In September, 1993, the thinking world held its breath as Yitzhak Rabin signed the peace treaty which would allow the creation of an independent Palestinian authority inside Israel. It held its breath because his co-signatory Yasser Arafat, the man who first came to our notice as the architect of the strategy of blowing-up school buses with Jewish children inside them, had already given at least two very clear indicators of the contempt in which he held the laws of hospitality – once in the Lebanon and again in Jordan.

Offered a home by King Hussein, Arafat wound up attempting to seize full power, and, in 1970, Hussein had to lead his army into the field to block the coup and restore order, throwing the Palestinians out with heavy loss of life.

There was no way that a peace treaty signed by Arafat would have any value. He is completely in thrall to his Arab masters and frozen in fear of his own Palestinian extremists.

Today, although the Arabs have succeeded – to the delight of the lefty-trendy European press – in manoeuvring Israel into the role of oppressor, anyone who has lived through the last 50 years, knows that for the Palestinians to break out of this mindless cycle of killing and dying, to find peace and to build a life worth living, they will have to come to terms with the fact that their worst enemies are not the Jews but the other Arabs; their "brothers", who for four decades assigned them to the degradation of the refugee camps, and who, during the last decade, have promoted their children to the role of the walking dead.

Is this what Islam means by "charity"?

It is very probable that, in the near future, Osama bin Laden or a monumental religious crackpot like him will provide a bio-chemical or even nuclear weapon in such a form that an individual – or a very small group – will be able to get it into Israel and detonate it.

The problem is that this kind of weapon is not race selective. It will kill as many Palestinians as Jews.

Will this be Islam's final act of charity towards the Palestinians?

IT IS certainly true that Christianity has inspired, and indeed in some cases financed the production of truly great art. In literature there are such examples as John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to name just a few. Then of course there is the Bible. The King James Version of the Bible (1611) includes approximately 90 per cent of an earlier translation from the Greek and Hebrew by William Tyndale, who gave us many of our common phrases such as "the salt of the earth", "let there be light", and "the spirit is willing". His genius has been responsible for enriching the English language.

Michelangelo's ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome is probably the most celebrated work of art in history. His sculptures of biblical characters such as Moses and David are also of world renown.

Even television can lay claim to long running religious programmes such as *Songs of Praise*, which has featured over 12,500 hymns sung over the last 40 years.

The cinema has produced such spectacular epics as Cecil B De Mille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and when it comes to Gospel music, who could not be moved by the voice of Mahalia Jackson singing *Silent night*. In classical music, George Friederic Handel's *The Messiah* is the most well known and popular of sacred oratorios ever produced in the English language.

In popular music we have Cliff Richard, who has not only created a rock n'roll classic single *Move It*, but has a musical career that has survived for over four decades. Although his single *Jesus* only made no.35 in the charts in 1972, his Christian credentials are not in doubt.

Then there is architecture. We have St Peter's in Rome. St Paul's in London and Notre-Dame in Paris, but of course there are too many awe-inspiring cathedrals in Europe to mention every example. Christianity was undoubtedly the inspiration for all these incredible buildings.

My question is, do humanists, agnostics and atheists have an equally impressive range of great art to celebrate? I intend to answer that question with a resounding yes, by giving a number of examples in the various fields of artistic endeavour. I hope to show that atheists and agnostics have created great art on many occasions and that sometimes art can convey humanist sentiments and values, and that this art can be justifiably appropriated by humanists, irrespective of the artist's religious affiliation.

With reference to literature I would like to start with one of the best of the English poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), who is famous for such poems as *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*. The reason for his inclusion is that he achieved notoriety for being expelled from Oxford University for writing a

pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*.

Then there is the novelist E.M.Forster (1879-1970), whose most famous works include *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924). His humanist outlook was expressed in an essay entitled *What I Believe*, and he was active in the humanist movement in Britain becoming the president of the Cambridge Humanist group in 1959 and a member of the Advisory Council of the British Humanist Association in the 1960s.

PETER RICHARDS compares great Christian art with that produced by humanists, agnostics and atheists, and concludes that non-believers have contributed at least as much, if not more, over the centuries

We know the novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) questioned the existence of God because he wrote a poem entitled *God's Funeral*. He is most famous for his Wessex novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, in which his humanism guided the warmth of his approach to his characters and his love of the English countryside.

George Eliot (1819-1880), whose real name was Mary Ann (later Marian) Evans, lost her religious beliefs as a young woman, much to the disapproval of her strongly religious father. She went on to write such classic novels as *The Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

I have established that some of the greatest novels and poems ever written have either atheistic or agnostic authors, but is there anything to compare with the Bible?

I think the obvious answer to that is yes, and that is The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. The celebrated American author and academic professor Harold Bloom has said, "Shakespeare's works have been termed the secular scripture, or more simply the fixed center of the western canon".

Certainly Shakespeare's plays are not overtly religious and have much more to do with exploring the human condition. I think the following passage suggests that Shakespeare may have had atheistic tendencies.

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief
candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the
stage*

*And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

– Macbeth V v, 19-28

The English playwright and poet, Christopher Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare, was accused of being an atheist. We know this because the Queen's Privy Council issued a warrant for his arrest on a charge of atheism, the penalty for which was death. Born in 1564, the same year as Shakespeare, Marlowe was allegedly a member of Queen Elizabeth's Secret Service. His plays *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, *Dr. Faustus*, and *Tamberlaine the Great* (the first play ever written in English blank verse) are considered to be of such high quality that they must have been a major influence on Shakespeare's writing.

The informer Richard Baines had made a number of accusations against Marlowe "concerning his damnable judgment of religion and scorn of God's word" in a note to the Privy Council. Before he came to trial, Marlowe was killed in a brawl in a tavern in the town of Deptford in June 1593.

This is where it gets interesting for conspiracy theorists. In 1895 it was seriously suggested by an American, Wilbur Gleason Zeigler, that Marlowe had faked his own death to avoid facing capital charges and that he had created the name William Shakespeare as a *nom de plume*, to enable him to continue to write. Is it a coincidence that the name William Shakespeare is an anagram of "I'll make a wise phrase"? Justifications for this theory include the fact that no plays by William Shakespeare were published prior to the death of Christopher Marlowe, and that both Marlowe and Shakespeare used words that average 4.2 letters in length. The latter is apparently a method used by scholars to establish if two writers are the same individual. The unlikelihood of two literary geniuses being alive at the same time has also been commented on.

An alternative theory is that Marlowe was assassinated by hired agents of Sir Walter Raleigh, who feared that his own association with Marlowe could lead to capital charges being lodged against him. A colleague of Marlowe's Thomas Kyd had already been tortured because subversive writings had been found in a room he shared with Marlowe. These were dangerous times.

Even if we reject both of these theories, it would seem prudent for Shakespeare to have curbed any overtly atheistic statements in his writing, for his own good.

One thing is certain: Shakespeare's prime concern was to reflect human life on earth and human nature with all its diversity of manifestations. I think humanists can rightly claim

Shakespeare as one of theirs.

Atheistic novelists and writers are represented right across the political spectrum, from Jean-Paul Sartre on the existentialist left to Ayn Rand on the objectivist right.

Non-fiction too has its place. In 1950 Bertrand Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for "philosophical works...of service to moral civilization" and "in recognition of his many-sided and important work in which he has constantly stood forth as a champion of humanity and freedom of thought". He described himself as an agnostic and was a prolific writer who had more than one hundred books and pamphlets published on a wide variety of subjects during his long life.

John Keegan declares that Winston Churchill was not religious in his recently published book *Churchill* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002 p 10). He quotes Churchill's doctor Lord Moran, who said, "King and Country was about all the religion Winston had".

This is how Churchill once described death: "Some kind of velvety cool blackness. Of course, I admit I may be wrong. It is conceivable that I might well be reborn as a Chinese coolie. In such a case I should lodge a protest."

In 1953 Churchill was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature "for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values".

The Surrealist painters penetrated the depths of the unconscious in order to bring forth creative ideas. Salvador Dali, the pre-eminent surrealist famously said, "The only difference between myself and a madman is that I am not mad." One of his best-known paintings is entitled *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate, a Second before Waking Up*. Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis delved into the unconscious for scientific purposes. Freud was a religious skeptic and as his ideas are closely related to those of the surrealists, I claim surrealist visual art as an example of humanist art.

It is interesting to note that the jazz musician and entertainer, George Melly, a prominent figure in the British humanist communi-



Nowadays religious art like this – a detail from a Catholic Church stained glass window – can have very unfortunate connotations

ed connoisseur of surrealist art.

In the field of sculpture, my choice is Rodin's *The Thinker*. This is not because the French artist Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) was anti-religious, he was not; as a young man he was so traumatised by the death of his sister that he entered a sacred order. No, I choose *The Thinker* because it has become associated with the idea of philosophy, and philosophy is a common path to humanism.

Star Trek was launched in 1966 and went on to become the world's most successful television series ever. The humanist values of its creator, Gene Roddenberry can be detected in the show: all individuals are treated with equal dignity, irrespective of race and gender; there is no chaplain on board ship and there are no Christian funerals for characters that die.

The film *The Life of Brian*, produced by the Monty Python team in 1978, is a hilarious comedy about Brian Cohen, whose life closely resembles that of Jesus Christ. At the time of its release it caused considerable religious offence, especially amongst church leaders. I believe this film is a humanist classic and I think some excerpts from the song sung during the crucifixion scene, are worth repeating here.

Always Look on the Bright Side of Life

*If life seems jolly rotten
There's something you've forgotten,
And that's to laugh and smile and dance
and sing.
When you're feeling in the dumps
Don't be silly chumps,
Just purse your lips and whistle,
That's the thing.
Always look on the bright side of life
Always look on the bright side of life.*

*Life's a piece of shit
When you look at it
Life's a laugh and death's a joke it's true,
You'll see it's all a show
Keep 'em laughing as you go
Just remember that the last laugh's on you.*

*You know you came from nothing
You're going back to nothing.
What have you lost? Nothing.
Nothing will come from nothing.
Always look on the bright side of life
Always look on the bright side of life.*

If gospel music is music for Christians then the blues must surely be the music for humanists. One of many examples is *Death Don't Have No Mercy*, paradoxically sung by the Reverend Gary Davis, a deeply religious man. The song, a mournful blues number, is powerfully delivered with unrestrained emotional intensity, but the picture it conjures up is, in my view, one of a pitiless godless universe rather than one watched over by a benevolent deity.

From the world of pop music, I have chosen

the inimitable Van Morrison, who has had a successful recording career since the 1960s. Throughout much of this time he seems to have been on a spiritual quest. A track featured on the album *Days Like This* (1995) entitled *No religion* suggests he has found an answer.

Probably the best-known piece of classical music in the world is Beethoven's Symphony no.5 in C minor. This is generally accepted as being more humanistic than religious in its moral intentions and is therefore a suitable choice for our collection of secular art. E.M. Forster called it "the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man" (*Howards End*).

Whilst on the subject of classical music, I think Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* merits a mention. It was clearly inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's classic book of the same name, in which the hero famously utters the line "God is dead". It is indisputably an uplifting piece of music.

Finally we come to architecture and a remarkable feat of human endeavour. I pick the only remaining one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the pyramids and in particular the Great Pyramid. The purpose of the Great Pyramid at Giza is unknown. There are essentially no texts or inscriptions in or on it (apart from a few quarry marks) to give us any clues. It has been designated as the tomb of Khufu, a pharaoh of the fourth dynasty, but no body was ever found. This contention is pure guesswork. Whether the pyramid was used for ritual, ceremonial or religious purposes is not certain.

What we do know is that it is the largest pyramid in the world weighing something like six million tons. Its height above the ground is 480ft and it consists of more than 2.5 million blocks. The typical weight of each block is two tons with some weighing as much as 70 tons.

It lacks the ostentatious design one would expect for a royal or sacred building. In fact its austerity is more attune to a monument with a scientific function.

The Great Pyramid is perfectly aligned to the four cardinal points. Some theorists have convincingly suggested that the dimensions of the earth are encoded in the dimensions of the Great Pyramid. I think the fact that the Great Pyramid is a physical demonstration of durable human achievement is enough to justify claiming this wonder of the world as a great example of secular architecture.

I am well aware that someone else could come up with a completely different and yet equally impressive list of secular art, but I think I have made the point that humanists, agnostics, and atheists have an extensive array of great art to draw inspiration from and indeed that it matches, and on occasions surpasses, anything that Christianity has given us.

IF something can be clearly thought, then it can be clearly stated. Flannel and gobbledegook (components of what A C Grayling elegantly calls “the perfumed smokescreen”) are far too often simply an attempt to conceal the illucidity of a writer’s ideas. It is no coincidence that flannel and gobbledegook constitute the essence of theology.

Dr William Harwood will have no truck with vagueness, and this makes his writing consistently stimulating and urgent. He also largely eschews nuance and ornament. His directness is at times almost supercharged. This means that when confronted with a Harwood essay, letter, article or review the reader is able to deal without distraction with what is being said. His latest book, the imposing *A Humanist in the Bible Belt*, brings together a large number of Harwood pieces that were previously widely scattered and available only in newspapers and periodicals. In addition, readers will find in this volume substantial chunks of his fine (if strange) novel *The Autobiography of God* (reviewed in the January 2003 *Freethinker*). In producing this book the publisher 1stBooks has performed a very useful and undoubtedly important service.

This collection has many virtues. However, a word of warning is in order. Because what lies between the covers is such highly concentrated stuff it is perhaps advisable not to imbibe too much at a single sitting lest an overdose ensues. The material is best read, in my experience at least, a few items at a time. This method also reduces one’s occasional sense of *deja vu*. Dr Harwood has a number of favoured pithy phrases that pop up in different places and to read too many of these too often is sometimes disconcerting. Another virtue of the “little at a time” method is that the best of the points that Dr Harwood does repeat fold more easily into the memory. This is entirely to the good, as they are well worth remembering.

The term “polymath” is frequently misused. In Dr Harwood’s case, it is probably an accurate description. He knows a great many things, and knows about a great many things (there is a difference). In an age of intense specialisation there are very few who can or are prepared to venture with confidence beyond a relatively narrow field of expertise. Dr Harwood is not one of these. The fact that he is not a university academic (though eminently qualified to be one) may have some bearing on this.

He knows the languages of the Bible well enough to have undertaken a scholarly translation of significant portions of it (copiously annotated). He is at home in history, myth, and textual analysis. He is well acquainted (as anyone on the editorial board of that excellent magazine *Free Inquiry* should be) with modern secular humanist thinking over a wide range of issues. He is a contributing editor of *American Rationalist*. And he seems to know in mind-bending detail the whole spectrum of kooks and kookiness, from Ayurveda and alien abductions to Zero Point Energy. Oh, and don’t get him onto hypnotism. He was an advertising manager for hypnotic stage shows and will tell you very def-

initely that there’s no such thing – not as understood by most folk, anyway. He’s right, by the way.

The earliest piece in the book dates from 1974 and concerns the quality of education given to Canada’s future teachers. He deprecates the quality of the training they are given, and roundly castigates the intellectual standard of what is on offer. It is “puerile balderdash” and “unintelligible gibberish”, he says. Dr Harwood should know: himself an educator (in the widest sense of that word) he is well placed to make such an assessment.

NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews A Humanist in the Bible Belt by William Harwood. Published by 1stBooks, 2003, ISBN 1-4107 0985. Paperback.

From this robust beginning, Dr Harwood covers a vast amount of territory. Some readers may find his ideas about sex rather challenging, and any religious persons perusing the book will be appalled at these (and at much else besides). Religion, he believes, has twisted and depraved our normal human impulses to a degree that is not only scarcely believable but certainly unacceptable. A rational ethics, he suggests, would not place an arbitrary boundary around sexual behaviour and impose consequent limits, but would recognise and accept the legitimacy and importance of sexual experimentation and relations between young people (by which he means those presently considered to be below the “age of consent”). Those disturbed by his proposals will probably not be mollified by his carefully delineated scheme for ensuring that exploitation does not take place. In his ideas about sex Dr Harwood gets very close to saying the unsayable. Bravely and consistently, however, he follows the dictum that in the realm of ideas, there should be no holds barred. He ridicules “accepted” notions such as the innate harmfulness of “adultery” too. Unsurprisingly, he is not a fan of the Pope’s teachings concerning contraception. His anger is at times palpable.

Nor is he a fan of President George W Bush. Not only does he consider him an illegitimate usurper (he’s in the excellent company of Michael Moore and Gore Vidal here) – he also considers him to be one of history’s biggest mass murderers. This is based of course upon Bush’s record as Governor of Texas, during which time he had power to prevent, but did not prevent, the murder by the state of around 150 fellow humans. (Executions on this scale smack of human sacrifice, surely?).

In reading his analyses of what the Bible actually says (an extraordinary self-imposed task for someone who rates the book as being ethically on a par with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and De Sade’s *Justine*). I began to entertain a plausible but mildly disturbing fantasy. Certain pieces in this book would lend themselves to photocopying and to sending at suitable intervals to the professionally religious. For most of the time these paragons of dissimulation go about their ghostly

trade unopposed. A few Harwood “anti-tracts” sent in their direction could be just the thing they need to awaken their dormant critical faculties. It would probably be far too optimistic to expect that any would seriously alter their opinions, but any offer of food for thought to the mentally starved would be an act of charity. The confused Rowan Wilson, author of a recent sermon in which he “challenged” secularism to explain and justify itself, might be a worthy recipient of a Harwood sandwich.

When getting to grips with Dr Harwood’s biblical interpretations and analyses, I did have something of a problem. It’s not that I doubt his competence as a translator or analyst – it’s simply that I am not qualified to make any assessment based on the primary sources that he uses.

I fell to wondering as a consequence of this whether his ideas really did stand up to scrutiny. With this in mind I turned to that very useful and subversive book *The Unauthorised Version* by historian Robin Lane Fox (author of the equally useful *Pagans and Christians*). I was surprised at the extent to which Fox and Harwood supported each other – if not in detail, then at least in the general tenor of many of their conclusions. Any lingering doubts were removed when I turned to the work of M A Screech, classical scholar, Fellow of the British Academy, Emeritus Fellow of All Souls, Oxford, and, since 1993, Anglican priest. He describes most revealingly how even in the 16th century the internal inconsistencies and self-contradictions in the Bible were so well known that John Calvin (amongst others) felt obliged to cobble together so-called “Harmonies” in order to explain and justify the anomalies – and how they ceased to explain them (surprise, surprise!) as the work of critics became ever more sophisticated. I strongly suspect, as a result of this and a few other careful comparisons, that Dr Harwood is right. I turned also to Dr Harwood’s own very impressive *Mythology’s Last Gods*. It was reassuring to discover that where alternative points of view to those Dr Harwood posits are possible, he explicitly recognises the fact in the abundance of footnotes he offers. In this and in many other ways his work is lifted beyond the suspicion of being less than thoroughly scholarly.

Rationalism is not just for Christmas, but for life. In other words, everything is fair game. With this in mind Dr Harwood sets about UFOs, the alien abduction craze (as exemplified in the work of Harvard professor John “The Wack” Mack), and “psychics”. He also reflects with pungency on matters like “recovered memory” and “multiple personality disorder” (curiously enough, a little problem that the Christian god seems much affected by).

A little under half the book is composed of a collection of book reviews. This might sound like thin gruel, but in Dr Harwood’s hands a review is not simply a review. Instead, it frequently becomes an argument – or an exposé of some unfortunate’s dismal research or linguistic incapacity. Readers put off by the thought of ploughing through 200 pages of reviews should be



assured that all are readable, many are witty, and that in a good number a very entertaining display of fireworks is on offer. Some of his comments may be thought by some to be rude. All I can suggest to those who object is that they should perhaps re-read their Swift and Pope (Alexander, that is – not the fanatical bigot referred to earlier fading slowly away amidst the splendours of the Vatican).

If it is true (which it is) that in the realm of ideas there should be complete freedom of speech, then it is reasonable to insist that all ideas should be subject to criticism. Dr Harwood has no time for those who believe that ignoring the questionable and imbecilic is a sensible or reasonable strategy. This is an important point to remember when the argument is proposed that to debate such and such an idea only “gives it credibility”. Dr Harwood rightly will have none of this. He points out several times in various places that the effect of such a refusal is to lend credibility to the fatuous, malicious or devious by giving the (entirely false) impression that their claims cannot be countered. Those who believe, for example, that creationism or holocaust denial will be conquered or that they will somehow lose their power, appeal and influence by ignoring them should pay careful heed.

Dr Harwood’s aims are not trivial. He wants to change minds. And he goes about trying to do this in a very thorough way. He offers facts – especially the facts of history. He offers evidence in spades taken from the holy writings of the religious themselves. But he recognises too that, for some minds at least, this is not enough. So he brings in the artillery of logic. Those wanting a flavour of how he does this should take a look at section seven of this book – the one called “Is Religiosity a Form of Unsanity?”. It’s just one of many sections likely to give the deluded pious a few nasty moments – before they remember and head for that convenient refuge known as the Mystery of God...

And in case anyone is wondering about the use of the word “unsanity”, Dr Harwood gives some excellent reasons as to why it might be preferred to the more pejorative “insanity” when discussing religious beliefs. He also makes a good case for adopting the use of “non-theist” as opposed to “atheist”, on the grounds of both clarity and strict accuracy.

As I do with any author, I sought hard to disagree with Dr Harwood. Thirty years ago this would have been easy: I would have disagreed quite effortlessly with just about everything he said. Now older and wiser, for me to discover any bones of contention meant some hard digging. I finally found one bone in the form of his antipathy to what is loosely termed “sociobiology”. This came as rather a shock. He seems not only dismissive of, but hostile to, many of the ideas of Richard Dawkins and (especially) E O Wilson (the two he mentions by name). Surprisingly he offers little by way of argument in defence of his position. At one time the opinion was widely held that any acceptance of the conclusions of sociobiology must result in the acceptance of the imposition of an illiberal social

policy, this being the inevitable result of sociobiology’s implicit assertion of strong genetic determinism. This always was something of a straw-man argument, and is one which today simply cannot stand up to scrutiny. Given Dr Harwood’s commitment to the reality of the body and his acceptance of a completely non-transcendental naturalism, I would have expected a greater degree of sympathy to the “sociobiology project” – which at its simplest is about asserting the primacy and interconnectedness of the natural world. Perhaps any misunderstanding is mine. I feel sure, anyway, that should he choose to, he could provide a very cogent defence of his position. That said, it is astonishing (given his remarkable productivity) that there is even room for sociobiology on his radar.

The second bone of contention turned out not to be a bone at all. When I first read Dr Harwood’s brief article “Is This 1984 – Or What?” I did a double take when I read that 1984 was really about Anglicanism. Dr Harwood writes of “Orwell’s fictionalised Anglican religion (disguised as Russian communism)...”. Whoops – my mistake. It’s not about Anglicanism at all, and Dr Harwood knows it. He was making a point about the persistence of “The Big Lie” as propounded by religion – the lie

that “religion, specifically Christianity, is on the increase”. It’s typical of Dr Harwood that he’s able to illuminate an issue by drawing on an example that is apparently so remote. After the shock wears off, one realises that the “Big Lie” to which he refers really is thoroughly Orwellian in its insistence that, despite all the evidence, black is white, two and two really do make five, and that there really are two billion Christians in the world.

Inevitably, the experience of reading a collection such as this is ultimately less satisfying than reading a complete work would be. One is often left wanting more, to see how Dr Harwood might develop this or that idea, or to see better how various of his assertions fit together in a larger pattern. Nevertheless, given that Dr Harwood frequently manages to say in just a few pages what many other writers say (or fail to say, as Nietzsche said of his own work) in an entire book, the satisfactions that do remain are very considerable.

The work of William Harwood stands in a great tradition of rationalist writing. His is not, thankfully, a lone voice. But it is without doubt one of the strongest and most individual voices speaking today, and it is one well worth attending to.

A theological Romance

by Barbara Smoker

COMPARED with the sales of romantic fiction, the circulation of the *Freethinker* leaves much to be desired. I have therefore decided to try to bridge the gap by contributing romantic stories to the atheist journal.

The universal romantic theme has always been love and marriage, so that gives me the first component of my creative formula. Of course, nowadays sexuality must be added – the more explicit the better. For the rest, writers are always advised to write on whatever they actually know about – and one thing I know about is Catholic theology. Using this composite formula, here is the denouement of my first specimen romance.

“You know how much I love you, and I know you love me too – so why do you say you can’t marry me?”

“Because I can’t: you see, I’m a Catholic priest, and took a vow of lifelong celibacy at my ordination.”

“But you’re a woman! How could you possibly have been ordained a Catholic priest?”

“Oh, I was a man in those days. Until I had the operation.”

“I didn’t know!”

“Yes, I was always sort of half-and-half, and it was wearing a cassock that helped me to decide my true gender.”

“But you’re all woman!”

“Now I am – the surgeon was really wonderful. But I’m probably unable to bear children.”

“Possibly through IVF?”

“But that would involve your providing a sperm sample for the laboratory.”

“No problem!”

“Yes there is: the Church says it must not be obtained through masturbation, but in the course of the conjugal act; and collecting it would mean using a condom – which is, of course, forbidden.”

“Wait! I’ve read somewhere that condoms are allowed for that purpose provided they are pre-perforated.”

“Maybe. There would still be my vow of celibacy, though.”

“All right - I’d rather have a platonic marriage with you than none at all.”

“You’re thinking of chastity, not celibacy: the two are separate, and celibacy rules out marriage altogether.”

“Then let’s just live in sin.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Supporting the C of E

I SHOULD like to recommend freethinkers who reside in country civil parishes to challenge their local civil parish council's spending in support of the Church of England. It has certainly shocked me over the last year to discover, by reading minutes, attending meetings and asking questions (and then standing as an election candidate), how considerable a proportion of total spending goes to support the local parish church and how unaware of this are many, probably most, local electors.

In the year 2002/03 just ended the parish council where I live in West Kent has spent £1,277.48 on the mowing and hedgecutting of one of the two parish churchyards in its area and £1,014.10 on the other, a total of £2,291.58. £1,000 was donated to the building fund of one C of E primary school and another £1,000 to the other. A further £2,000 was earmarked for churchyard wall repairs and attention to trees.

Total burials in both churchyards make up only a minute proportion of the cremations and burials in municipal crematoriums and cemeteries (today's majority arrangement) and are, I believe, in practice the preserve of church worthies and not the council tax payers at large who, mostly unknowingly, contribute to their upkeep.

The typical monthly parish council meeting provides an opportunity for putting questions about 20 minutes after the start of proceedings (and there is no requirement to stay on to the meeting's end!). In my own experience criticism is not welcomed by the unpaid volunteers who sit on the council and are closely allied to the church officers, who in their turn are even more unused to criticism, but are the foot soldiers on whom the continued existence of the C of E as a significant force depends. Unsettling them therefore weakens the church's foundations and I like to think that this was the result of the critical election leaflet that I circulated for my candidacy at this year's May parish council elections. Though the same set of councillors secured re-election, the leaflet which was circulated to every address in the parish ward was a successful, but only too rare example, of locally mounted direct criticism of the local parish church and its activists.

NICK JENNER
Kent

Islam and Science

THE judgment of Ibn Warraq – as of most authorities – is that science and technology existed despite Islam. A warring business, Islam had to put up with them and took them where it found them – in the earliest days, from the Greek-Byzantine, Greek-Persian and, not least, nearby Jewish legacies.

But, yes, there was, as you say in your article about Islam (*Freethinker*, July), the foray into Mutazilism. From early in the eighth

century, this school argued that there was a position between belief and unbelief and drew heavily – of course – on non-islamic inspiration, in this case a revived Hellenism. It had a hard time, dying off in Sunna circles in the early tenth century. For the rest, the necessities of war meant, until you get into the Tanzimat period of fairly recent Ottoman history, you picked up any useful bits lying around. In the heartlands they remained bits. Islam cannot, therefore, take science on board. Science isn't a few bits and pieces to be picked up and discarded. Nothing has changed; nor can it. It's worth keeping in mind that there's probably a big majority in the USA and a small but sturdy minority in Gateshead who still can't live with Darwin and for whom there is no story to the universe, just the bits and pieces that keep turning up – religiously inspired or aggravated happenings which, before Blunkett, one might as well have called jokes.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Wrong transmitter

I AM afraid that Mr Pridmore's antennae, July 2003, are pointing at the wrong transmitter. My letter simply does not bear the meaning that he tries to load on to it. His irrational suspicions are speculative and lacking in "fairness".

JOHN C BEYER
Director
Mediawatch-uk
Kent

A cover too far

I HAVE always thought satire to be an appropriate and powerful way to criticise those with whom we disagree. Its use should, however, comply with certain standards of decency. I felt that the cover of the last issue (June 2003), which depicted the Pope with a condom on his head next to the slogan "Don't be a dickhead, rubber up" went too far. Even though some secularists may find this amusing, we should ask ourselves what impression it would create on someone who is not a regular reader. At worst, they may be profoundly shocked. At best, they may conclude that secularists are petty, unreasonable and gratuitously offensive. We should convert people to our cause by illustrating the excesses of religion in a provocative but tasteful manner. The *Freethinker* should adopt a tone that engenders respect for secularism and atheism among the wider public.

RALPH LOVESY
London

AS a very recent subscriber to the *Freethinker* I hesitate to begin our relationship with a criticism, but I should like to state my objections to the crude and vulgar nature of some of your

cartoon covers, and notably to that of the June issue, which showed the Pope with a condom on his head.

I cede to no-one my place in the front ranks of those who detest and despise organised religion, but please don't let's fight our corner from the gutter. The advocacy of reason deserves better. Like other readers (I presume) I try to use the magazine to interest friends, intelligent people (their blind spot called faith apart), and this sort of thing doesn't help, in fact it turns them right off. Adopting a sneering attitude only brings us down to the level of many of our antagonists. They of course have little or no other recourse. We do.

DAVID CARR-ALLISON
Oxford

The Jeffrey John affair

THE fracas concerning Canon Jeffrey John's homosexuality arises out of a predicament which the Christian Church cannot resolve and tries to ignore. They are plagued by the problem of not being able to agree on the meaning of biblical texts. As a consequence, and this applies in Canon John's case, different groups of Christians arrive at opposing conclusions based on the same Bible. The frequent appeals to "scriptural authority" and "bible truth", as if these were objectively known, are bogus. These appeals require that the "authority" and "truth" are assumed and not examined. Even the most rabid fundamentalists have no other recourse than to ignore the more bizarre and outrageous biblical exhortations because, in modern life, they are utterly impractical.

Any honest reading of the Bible will reveal what Robert G Ingersoll, who died in 1899, described as its "ignorance and savagery, its hatred of liberty, its religious persecution." Yet this is the fount of moral certainty for those attempting to resolve the dispute about homosexuality in the church. As the Irishman who was asked for directions said, "If I were you I would not start from here."

DENNIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Why I left CIVIS

"ONE does not choose one's allies," say the French. And indeed, in many a demo, I have marched alongside people I'd rather have seen on the opposite side, or signed petitions under the names of individuals distasteful to me as my adversaries in other fields. So, as it takes all kinds to make a world, every political party, every association, every movement fighting for this or this or that cause, has any number of members that differ in their views on other issues.

But surely there are limits. I left the antivivisection society, CIVIS, (see *Points of View*, May and June) when I was grossly and stupidly insulted for having asked a legitimate ques-

tion. When the representative of a society's president (and he never objected or apologised after) tells me to shut up ("As an atheist you have no right to criticise religion") and then lashes out against atheists as (*ipso facto!*) animal torturers and mass murderers (in fact or potentially), then I can no longer trust the people responsible for such a society – intellectually, I mean, apart from the insolence. (Actually I had had misgivings about them for a while, and that episode was the last straw.)

Of course, I do not object to an antivivisection society reporting news on the religious at long last discovering the plight of the animals. Of course, I think it's a good thing when a Catholic priest publicly protests against the callous attitude of his church to animals. That's interesting news. But I refuse to have religious nonsense imposed on me as I read a bulletin of an animal-defence society. I happen to feel absolutely revolted by the intellectual cowardice of those who pity the animals as victims of *human* cruelty, but simultaneously express pious adoration of the (alleged) creator of *all* the horrid suffering on this planet, human and animal! Pointing out the lack of logic in such an attitude I was told to shut up... (etc). There are things one cannot stomach. I left a rationalist association years ago, because they defended vivisection. There are enough anti-clerical and anti-religious associations one can join without supporting that kind of thing. I would leave the *Freethinker* if it showed itself in favour of blood sports and took it for granted that its readers were as well. I have also left a couple of unhearably bigoted animal protection societies (on the Continent), one of them proving to be pretty reactionary in respect of women's rights.

There are plenty of authors one can read apart from CIVIS' Mr Ruesch to obtain all the necessary information on animal experimentation (to name but two: Peter Singer and Richard Ryder) and associations one can join to help the animals without simultaneously supporting the bigots. I am a member of 19 such associations (national and international), and over several decades have given a considerable amount of my time, energy and money to the cause of the animals. (A collection of my articles, *For the Animals*, was a bestseller in this small country in the 1990s.) I may be permitted to bow out of CIVIS and even to slam the door on them without being regarded as a traitor or deserter of a good cause.

NELLY MOIA
Luxembourg

Justice for Israelis

DEREK Wilkes (*Points of View*, July) asks whether there are any Arab groups campaigning for justice for Israelis. It's not the Israelis who need justice.. They are the perpetrators of injustice, whereas Palestinians *do* need justice – jus-

tice that will halt demolition of their homes, destruction of their crops, the shooting of their children, and action that prevents them from reaching hospitals, places of education or work.

But since he considers people who campaign for justice as cranks, it is clear he has no empathy with people who suffer the indignities of the Israeli apartheid state. He exposes his pro-Zionist views of the situation, by complaining Israelis suffer "terror attacks", when it is the Israelis who are the invaders in these areas. It is Israeli propaganda that has allowed Palestinians to be called terrorists when any where else in the world they would be called freedom fighters. He states "Israelis are suffering injustices as great as any in the entire history of the world". Surely he has not forgotten the Holocaust?

He proclaims the *Freethinker* should offer a voice to those who are pro-Israel. *Why!* The Zionists have control over, or the biased support of the majority of the world's media already. Surely the tiny secularist platforms available must support secularist ideals and principles, not an apartheid state like Israel which promotes the status of one religion over the rights of all others.

LYN HURST
President

Leicester Secular Society

The madness of religionists

NORMAN Pridmore, (*Points of View*, June) says that "belief in religion is nothing short of madness", and William Harwood in the same issue suggests that those who reject science for religion are "certifiably insane". I have often felt the same, and indeed said it, when faced with minds apparently impenetrably locked against reason or evidence. But it is not so simple. Those who are "mad" to the point of being certified are generally so disturbed that they cannot function in normal life – hold down a job, respond coherently to others, even know who they are. They may attempt suicide or (rarely) attack others, sometimes complete strangers, or have delusions about voices or possession by strange forces, and so on. Of course not all have all these symptoms, and some are milder. But none of this is true of religious persons in general, even the most fanatical. On the contrary they are often well organised and efficient – and sometimes very successful, no less than the non-religious.

Although I know of no research directly on this, it seems there is a kind of no-man's land between rationality and madness, in which the most bizarre ideas can be believed as absolute truth, and indeed argued for often with great skill. This in no way interferes with the normal processes of living, except in so far as it causes the individual to make specific choices, such as avoiding alcohol, or travel on the sabbath. Human beings are well able to compart-

mentalise their minds and behaviour. A priest can sincerely believe that he changes bread and wine into flesh and blood when in front of the altar, but make no such mistake when doing the shopping. Sometimes such divisions are an advantage, as when a professional person carries on with his or her work for others despite a personal tragedy. But, in general, I think, it is better to try to integrate thoughts and feelings, and not to put anything into a category that is unquestionable and untestable. As academics always say, research is needed ...

JOHN RADFORD
London

Anyone for Brittany?

DAVID Austin, a *Freethinker* subscriber now living in Brittany, would like to make contact with fellow freethinkers in this region. A 60-something single dad, he is also seeking like-minded active folk, one, or a couple (or a single mum?) to share the big house, complete with "lake-like" pond, he acquired when he left the UK. David's address is La Daviais, Vay 44170, France.

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

*Views expressed in the magazine are
not necessarily those of the
publishers.*

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund
donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote & Co Ltd
P O Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD
Tel: 01273 680531

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5.00 sterling or USA \$8.00 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.00

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Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

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, September 7, 4.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

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

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

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, 21 Southdowns Road, Dawlish, EX7 0LB. Tel: 01626 864046.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Secretary Alex Hill 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: Niall Power. Tel 0161 2865349. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI 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.

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

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

Perth Group: Information: Terry Martin, Tel: 01250 874742.

Email: terrymartin@dalcruce.fsnet.co.uk.

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: 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.

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, August 6, 8pm. AGM. Wednesday, September 3, 8pm. John Hughes: *The Lunar Men – Freethought and Science in an Age of Revolution*.

South Hampshire Humanists: Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120.

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

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

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Information: Maggie Fraser. Tel: 01892 523858. E-mail: melgin@waitrose.com.

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

E-mail: brianmcclinton@aol.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

Please send your listings and events notices to:
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Notices must be received by the 15th of the month
preceding publication