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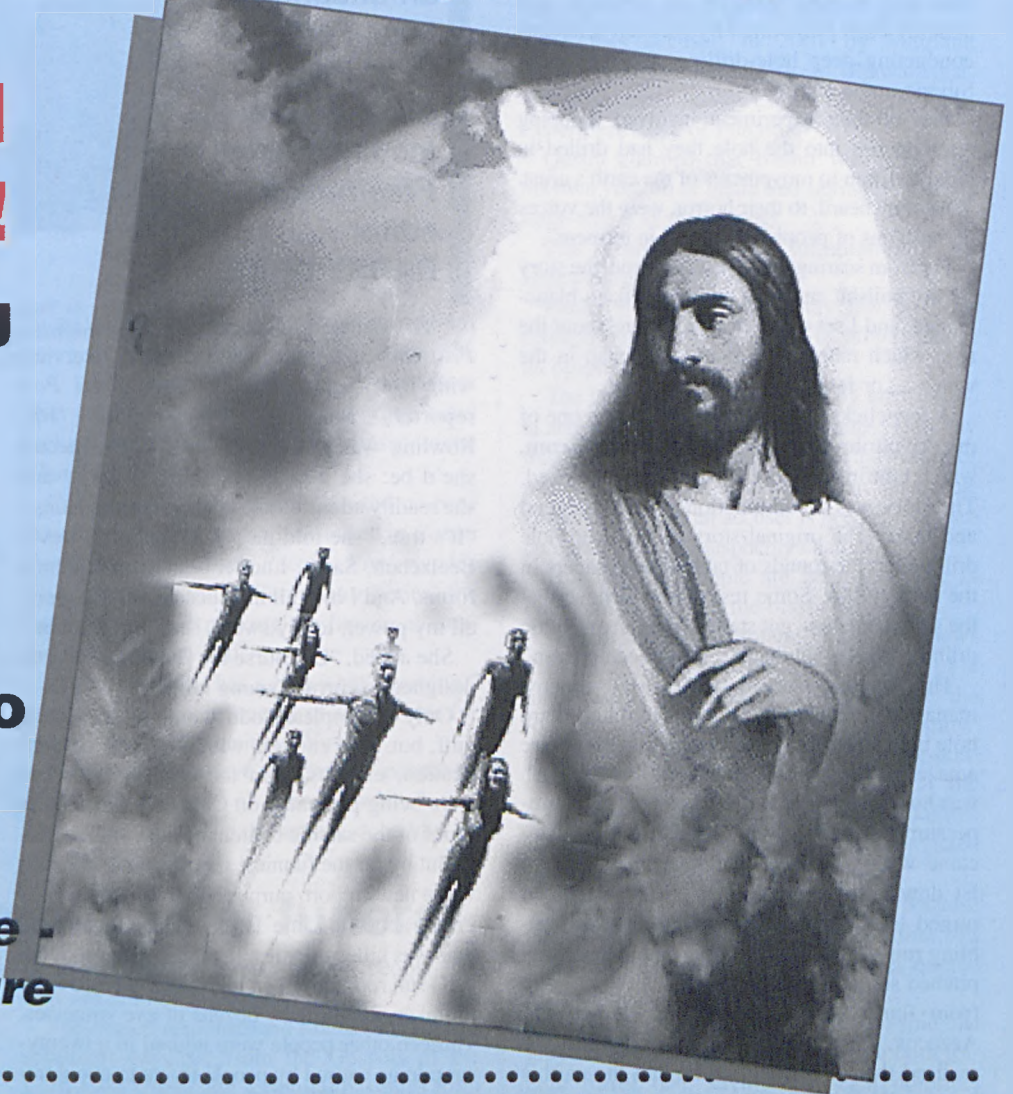
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Free thinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

**Abducted
by Jesus!**
– everything
you always
wanted to
know about
the Rapture
but were too
indifferent
to ask

– see centre-
page feature



Derren Brown, the extraordinary psychological magician who has been astonishing Channel 4 viewers and theatre audiences around the country, gets the National Secular Society seal of approval – *Find out why on page 4*

Also in this issue:

America's Religious Right Wants to Terminate the Terminator – *p3*

God Ain't Nothing but a Bad Dream – *p10*



A DILIGENT Christian in the United States, who really ought to get out more, decided last month to trawl the internet for atheist souls to save. My name popped upon his screen, and I received a message, in ominous block capitals, warning me that unless I mended my ways and took Jesus to heart, I was destined for hell.

To back up his (or her) assertion, the writer claimed that there was no doubt whatsoever that hell existed because its location had *actually been pinpointed* by Russian scientists conducting deep hole-drilling experiments in Siberia in the 1990s.

Part of their experiment involved dropping microphones into the hole they had drilled in order to listen to movements of the earth's crust. What they heard, to their horror, were the voices of "millions of people crying out in torment".

Far from scaring the knickers off me, the story set my bullshit antennae quivering like a blanc-mange, and I set out to discover more about the tale, which rang about as true as Jonah in the whale ... or Jesus rising from the dead.

A few clicks of the mouse took me to one of my favourite websites: **Truthorfiction.com**, which confirmed what I had already guessed. The story was a combination of urban legend and hoax. The original story of the deep hole drilling did the rounds of tabloid newspapers in the early 1990s. Some researchers believe that the story somehow got started from an authentic drilling project, but that has never been proven.

That original story quoted a Mr Azzacov, manager of the project to drill a 14.4 kilometre hole in remote Siberia, as saying that they were amazed to find that the deep centre of the earth was hollow, and it had a surprisingly high temperature. But the most shocking discovery came when supersensitive microphones were let down through the hole. "What we heard turned logically-thinking scientists into trembling ruins. It was a sometimes weak, but high pitched sound which we thought to be coming from our own equipment," explained Dr. Azzacov. "But after some adjustments we realised that the sound came from the earth's interior. We could hardly believe our ears. We heard a human voice, screaming in pain. Even though one voice was discernible, we could hear thousands, perhaps millions, in the background, of suffering souls screaming. After this ghastly discovery, about half of the scientists quit because of fear. Hopefully, that which is down there will stay there." Azzacov added.

The story was given extra zest when a Norwegian schoolteacher named Age Rendalen decided to embellish it with the description of a bat-like creature emerging from the hole. He did it purposely to see whether a religious television programme would accept the tale at face value without checking it out – and of course they did.

Why? Because religion has an uncanny knack of deadening the critical faculties of

those who embrace it, and they will consequently swallow any old hogwash.

Take, as another example, a report which started to appear on all sorts of Christian websites regarding J K Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, around about the time that the second Potter film was due to be released in the US.

Religion has an uncanny knack of deadening one's critical faculties says Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE



The Canadian satirical magazine *National Post* carried a heavy-handed spoof interview with Rowling. According to *National Post* reporter Massimo Commanducci, "J.K. Rowling was not at all like I had expected she'd be: she was warm, she was funny and she readily admitted she is an avowed Satanist! "It's true," she told me. "I worship the Devil, Beelzebub, Satan, Lucifer – in all his unholy forms. And I owe all my success, all my glory, all my power, to my sweet, beautiful Lucifer." She added, "Of course the [Potter] books are designed to corrupt young minds."

Only a complete dodo would swallow that guff, but, sure enough, within days of its publication, extracts from the phoney interview were being presented on Christian websites as proof of the satanic content of the Potter series.

But by far the funniest spoof I stumbled upon was a news report, purportedly from Associated Press, about a Little Rock, Arkansas, woman who was killed after leaping through her moving car's sun roof during an incident described as "a mistaken Rapture" by dozens of eye witnesses. Thirteen other people were injured in a twenty-car pile-up caused by people trying to avoid hitting the woman, who was apparently convinced that the Rapture was occurring when she saw twelve people floating up into the air, and then passed a man on the side of the road who she claimed was Jesus.

"She started screaming 'He's back, He's back' and climbed right out of the sun roof and jumped out the car," said Everett Williams, husband of 28-year-old Georgann Williams who was pronounced dead at the scene. "I was slowing down but she wouldn't wait till I stopped."

"She thought the Rapture was happening and was convinced that Jesus was about to lift her up into the sky," he went on to say.

"This is the strangest thing I've seen since I've been on the force," said Paul Madison, first officer on the scene. Madison questioned the man who looked like Jesus and discovered that he was

dressed up as the Messiah and was on his way to a toga costume party when the tarpaulin covering the bed of his pickup truck came loose and released twelve blow-up sex dolls filled with helium which floated up into the air. Ernie Jenkins, 32, of Fort Smith, who apparently looks like Jesus, pulled over and lifted his arms into the air in frustration, and said, "Come back here" to the dolls just as the Williams' car passed him.

This tale actually came to light on a Christian website devoted to the Rapture, and was cited as an example of the way in which we cruel non-believers hold religious convictions up to ridicule. But when one reads the "serious" content of Rapture websites, which describe in great detail how Christians will, one day, all be snatched up to heaven by Jesus (*see centrepiece feature*), one can only conclude, as tears of laughter course down one's cheeks, that satire is utterly wasted on the religious.

ON the very day that Pope John Paul II chose to berate Europe for moving away from morality and its Christian roots, the world's media homed in on a 69-page report which proved the existence of a systematic campaign by the Vatican to stifle sexual abuse claims so that priests may be protected.

The 1962 Latin document, bearing the seal of Pope John XXIII, was apparently sent to every bishop world-wide with orders to keep it under lock and key. It focuses primarily on priests accused of propositioning congregants during confession, and instructs bishops to treat cases of the "worst crime", defined as obscene acts with young people of either sex or animals, "in the most secretive way".

"Everyone ... is to observe the strictest secret which is commonly regarded as a secret of the Holy Office ... under the penalty of excommunication," instructs the document, which was obtained from confidential Vatican archives by Daniel Shea, an American lawyer acting on behalf of abuse victims.

The explosive report made world headlines on Sunday, August 17, and completely overshadowed the Pope's latest attempt to persuade EU leaders to include a reference to Christianity's role in Europe in the EU's new constitution, currently under preparation (*See Keith Porteous Wood's report on page 4.*)

"You cannot deny that, in these times of ours, Europe is going through a crisis in values, and it is important that it recovers its true identity," the doddery dictator told pilgrims and tourists who assembled at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo near Rome.

If he manages to persuade the EU to embrace the "values" of the despicable organisation he heads, Europeans will find their social and political institutions drawn inexorably into the slime of religious chicanery, hypocrisy and deception.

He must be resisted with all the strength we can muster.

The Religious Right Wants to Terminate the Terminator

ACTION man Arnold Schwarzenegger, 56, has faced some pretty tough opponents, human and alien, is his role of movie hero, but his toughest fight yet looks like being against California's religious right, who hurriedly established an organisation to oppose his election to the post of Governor of California.



Well known for his role as *The Terminator*, Schwarzenegger is already being called *The Governor*

Schwarzenegger, in a surprise announcement last month, said he would stand as a Republican candidate to replace Governor Gray Davis – and immediately won the support of enthusiastic friends, donors and Republican politicians, including former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, who has bowed out of the race, as well as millions of fans.

But he is not short of opponents either – most notably Christian fundamentalists. Within hours of announcing his intention to stand for election a scathing attack came from the head of the conservative religious Traditional Values Coalition who blasted him as a morally corrupt candidate and announced the formation of a committee to oppose the moderate Republican's first run for political office.

"As governor, Mr Schwarzenegger would be a darker villain than any he has faced in his movies," the Reverend Lou Sheldon said, while unveiling the group's Californians for Moral Government. "And when it comes to the

moral issues that Californians really care about, he gives us inaction, not action."

Sheldon chastised Schwarzenegger, who is already being dubbed "The Governor" for supporting abortion rights and gay adoption, two issues that have helped define the actor as a moderate with bipartisan appeal.

Other opponents are already gearing up to resurrect tawdry tabloid stories about the actor's alleged womanising and his steroid use as a champion bodybuilder.

"We're probably going to learn more about Arnold from the *National Enquirer* than anywhere else, and it's not going to be flattering," said Jack Pitney, a political science professor at the Claremont McKenna College.

Critics to his left and right wasted no time denouncing the man who has starred in *Conan the Barbarian*, *Total Recall*, *Kindergarten Cop*, and the popular *Terminator* series, the latest of which is packing the fans in at cinemas around the world.

"I don't think he has a clue what's coming," said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.

"He is going to have to convince people he is actually capable of running what is the equivalent of the sixth-largest economy in the world."

Priest sued over remarks at funeral

THE family of former Chama, New Mexico, Councilman Ben Martinez is suing a Roman Catholic priest and the Archdiocese of Santa Fe over the sermon at Martinez's funeral.

The lawsuit says Rev Scott Mansfield used "graphic terms" to tell the congregation that Martinez was going to hell. A spokeswoman said the archdiocese and Mansfield "deny the allegations and are vigorously defending themselves".

Nine Martinez family members allege that Mansfield, a former disc jockey for a rock radio station, said "clearly, loudly and without

hesitation that the Lord vomited people like Ben out of his mouth to hell".

The church response said Mansfield "recited scriptural passages from the Gospels of the Lord Jesus Christ and scriptural passages from the Book of Revelations" at the funeral. In Revelation 3:15-16, God says, "Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth."

The suit suggests Mansfield was irked that Martinez didn't attend church when he was terminally ill.

The song, set to the music of the *Banana Boat Song*, included the line: "Run Mr Taliban, we know where you're hiding... air force come and flatten your home."

Mr Wickens, 32, who broadcasts as Ian Skye, was due at a tribunal last month, but settled the case instead. A spokesman for Century, which is owned by Capital Radio, refused to comment, saying the terms of the incident prevented both parties from talking publicly about the incident.

Taliban song led to DJ's sacking

A RADIO DJ sacked after he played a song which ridiculed the Taliban has settled a compensation case with his employers.

Ian Wickens was fired by Nottingham-based Century 106FM in October 2001, after playing the track, *Hey Mr Taliban*, on his breakfast show.

'Blasphemy' convictions in Pakistan and Poland

A JUDGE in Pakistan has sentenced a 60-year-old man to death after finding him guilty of making derogatory remarks about Islam and its prophet, Muhammad, a police official told Associated Press last month.

Chaudary Bashir was convicted under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws.

He was accused in 2001 by Maulana Mohammed Qasim, a cleric in Bhawalnagar, 190 kilometers southwest of Multan, in the eastern province of Punjab.

Qasim claimed that Bashir was preaching his own version of Islam and saying he had the same status as the prophet.

The conviction will automatically be appealed to the high courts.

Under Pakistan's blasphemy law, it is an offence punishable by death to offend Islam, its prophet or its holy book.

The laws have been criticised by international and Pakistani human rights groups. They say that they are easily abused and that the burden of proof is on the accused to prove their innocence. Only the word of an accuser is needed to prosecute a suspect on blasphemy charges.

Hundreds of people are believed to be in Pakistani jails under the blasphemy law.

Meanwhile, from Poland comes the news that an artist who exhibited an image of a man's penis attached to a cross broke the Roman Catholic country's law on blasphemy.

A report in *Gazeta Wyborcza* said the conviction of artist Danuta Nieznalska in the Baltic port of Gdansk was the first known instance in Poland of anyone being convicted of offending religious sensibilities.

"The cross is a symbol of suffering, because on it Christ died. There is no doubt that this cross has been desecrated," the paper quoted Judge Tomasz Zielinski as saying.

In addition to a 2,000 zloty (\$500) fine, the judge imposed on Nieznalska a six-month foreign travel ban, saying her legal notoriety would likely increase her demand in international art circles.

"I am shocked by such a severe sentence," the paper quoted the artist as saying after the verdict. "The court was totally biased. The judge admitted he was no art expert."

Norwich revealed as the most godless of UK cities

NEARLY one in three in the city of Norwich checked the "no religion" box in the 2001 census form, which makes church-filled Norwich the inexplicable home to the largest population of unbelievers in the United Kingdom – at almost twice the national average, according to a report in the *Times* newspaper.



Government Working Party seeks to maximise religion's influence on policy making

ONE of the most disturbing recent political developments in the United Kingdom has been the establishment of a high-level working party "to consider the most effective means of achieving greater involvement of the faith communities in policy-making and delivery across Whitehall". Its members include ministers from no fewer than seven departments, the No.10 Appointments Secretary, and ten senior religious representatives.

The Working Party was announced without publicity and would have been overlooked by all but the most determined researcher. We often suspect direct No 10 involvement in initiatives conflating church and state, but rarely have we seen the gun smoking so visibly. The Working Party's chair, Fiona Mactaggart, has gone on record to say that "the Prime Minister is aware of our 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 ..."

The *Observer* majored on the story and quoted from the National Secular Society's letter to Fiona Mactaggart: "We feel this is a further example of the Government's desire to favour and privilege religious organisations, and won-

der when the opinions and needs of those who are non-religious will be similarly regarded.

"The non-religious feel alienated and excluded from the political processes that help shape our society. ... " The issue was taken up by other newspapers and resulted in a number of television and radio interviews featuring the Society.

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reports on the Government's determination to involve religion in policy-making



This has clearly had some effect, for the Minister has invited the Society to discuss the matter, although it is clear that she has no intention of adding any non-religious representative to the Working Group.

Ms Mactaggart's letter containing the invitation included the astonishing assertion that "Most people in Britain are members of a faith organisation which to a greater or lesser extent guides their values and beliefs - providing a mechanism to bring faith perspectives into the development of social policy is therefore a good way of engaging with many citizens and improving the sensitivity of our policies." Even the Established Church's membership

only amounts to 1.2 million.

The Government is also seeking to justify the Working Party as satisfying a manifesto commitment to "look at the way in which Government interfaces with faith communities". NSS Honorary Associate Alice Mahon MP does not think it does, and wrote to the Prime Minister to say so: "One of the huge strengths of our democracy has been the separation of religion and politics and, along with many other democrats, I believe this is a very dangerous path to take. Can I ask when this decision [the greater involvement of the faith communities] was taken, and by whom? ... Is there a proposal going to Annual Conference to ask the Party to endorse this major change?"

We will keep you informed of progress.

Will you join our fight for Church State separation in Europe?

THE battle between the secularists and religionists over the preamble to the European Union's constitution has centred on the inclusion of a reference to God or Christianity. Another offensive is expected with the Italians taking over the rotating presidency.

Vera Pegna, a leading light in rationalist circles in Italy and vice president of the European Humanist Federation, is convinced that the demands to include God and Christianity are an attempt to divert attention

(Continued on page 5)

IF Derren Brown were to insist that he was psychic, even the most ardent of sceptics would find it impossible to prove him a fraud, so remarkable is his talent for "reading" minds.

But Brown, whose extraordinary ability has earned him recognition for being one of the greatest psychological magicians in the world, has no supernatural talent whatsoever. Indeed, he boasts of the fact.

And it is precisely for this reason that the National Secular Society is urging people to watch the latest of his *Mind Control* series on Channel 4 television.

Last month the NSS, responding to a consultation by the Independent Television Commission on whether restrictions on the portrayal of the paranormal on TV entertainment programmes should be lifted, insisted that vulnerable and impressionable viewers should be protected from charlatans.

The Society suggested that broadcasters should show a warning before and after demonstrations of supposed paranormal abilities. This might be along the lines of: "What you are about to see is not proved by science, and all claims of paranormal abilities should be treated with caution ..."

Terry Sanderson, a spokesman for the NSS said: "Living TV has just announced a whole raft of new programmes featuring people purporting to have paranormal abilities. They

'Psychic' Derren Brown gets the NSS seal of approval

assure us that these programmes are for entertainment only, but television has a special responsibility for what it introduces into the living rooms of the vulnerable and impressionable in our society." It added: "We think it is important that if Living TV, or any other channel, is to continue to promote clairvoyance and claims of speaking to the dead, it should be made to broadcast a much stronger warning to viewers that it cannot guarantee that trickery has not been employed to achieve the results seen on screen".

The NSS says: "Our fear is that repeated television appearances by self-proclaimed 'psychics' will give them an authenticity and respect that they do not deserve.

"We commend the illusionist Derren Brown for making clear that his own mind-boggling tricks are just showbiz flim-flam."

Brown, who has built up a very large following in the UK with his apparent telepathic powers, was quoted in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* (March 13, 2003) as insisting that he is not a psychic. "Nor does he believe in thought-to-thought transference, ESP, or any

other New Age guff. Mainly, he says, he works with ingrained patterns of behaviour."

"What I am doing in its very basic form," he told *Telegraph* reporter John Preston, "is tricking you into giving away clues. Watching for unconscious signals that allow me to make certain deductions."

"Although we may like to think of ourselves as terrifically complex creatures, on certain levels, it seems, we're suckers: hopelessly credulous and greedily gullible," observed Preston, after spending a day in Brown's company.

He added: "Magic began to take over Brown's life in unexpected ways. Around this time he stopped being a Christian; seeing how illusions were created effectively destroyed his faith. Brown said 'I decided to take my beliefs apart to look at them more closely, then I found they wouldn't go back together again.'"

After writing a couple of books on magic for aspiring magicians, Brown's breakthrough came in 1999 when he was recommended to Channel 4 by the comedian Gerry Sadowitz. Channel 4, looking for a British equivalent to the fashionable American magician David Blaine, commissioned him to do a one-off show. That proved so successful that he was given a series entitled *Mind Control*, the latest of which is promised for early next year. He has a *Russian Roulette Special* on C4 this October.

from Article 51 of the Constitution (reproduced below) binding the EU to respect religious organisations. She told the *Freethinker* that the Article "will give the church – especially the Roman Catholic Church – a special rôle *vis à vis* the EU and prevent any future moves toward separation of Church and State." She continued: "I understand the Vatican strategy to be that by making demands in two areas rather than one, it becomes much more likely that at least one will be granted."

So, while any inclusion of God or Christianity in the preamble might at some stage be used by the religious as a pretext to call for some further privilege, the Article respecting religious organisations is a more pressing concern for secularists.

Article 51 started out as Declaration No 11 of the Treaty of Amsterdam. The latest version reads:

Status of churches and non-confessional organisations

1 *The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.*

2 *The Union equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.*

3 *Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.*

The National Secular Society is only one of many organisations disturbed by Article 51, and the European Humanist Federation has actively opposed it. EHF has been able to do so from within the EU orbit because of the special representative status it has with the EU (in common with around 50 religious organisations). As an affiliate of EHF, the Society, of course, applauds its efforts. It is essential, however, that opposition is maximised, and spread as widely as possible beyond humanists and internal EU channels.

The French Republic is held up as the secular ideal, or at least the nearest to it that has been achieved. French freethinkers have been worried for many years about the impact of the EU on hard-won French secularism, and were the first to draw wider attention to these dangers. The more that nation states cede autonomy to Brussels, the greater the threat.

The NSS has joined with Libre Pensée (LP) to open up an extra front of resistance, in particular to Article 51, and the growing encroachment of Vatican influence within the EU in general – a concern that liberal Catholic groups share. LP is convinced that the EU is Vatican dominated, a position that is becoming more widely held with every month that passes.

The Society has agreed a joint declaration with Libre Pensée (see panel) that will form the

basis of an indoor rally in Paris on Saturday 6 December. Groups from all over Europe are being invited to join the rally to show their solidarity with the declaration.

We chose a Saturday afternoon as being the most convenient time of the week in terms of travel. A delegation will go from London, and all supporters are welcome. You may wish to enter the date in your diary.

While it may just be possible to travel to the rally and back home on the same day, it is expected that most people would prefer to stay overnight in Paris. Suggestions about travel and accommodation will be made nearer the time.

Anyone representing an organisation wishing formally to append their support to the Declaration should contact me at kpw@secularism.org.uk.

Declaration for the total freedom of conscience by the separation of the Churches and the States and for secularity in Europe: Abrogation of the Amsterdam Declaration No 11/ Article 51

1 Libre Pensée and the National Secular Society of Britain have decided to address jointly all citizens and all associations, whether rationalist, sceptic, freethinking, humanist or secularist who are fighting in Europe for secularity. Currently the future constitution of the European Union is being formulated. Under greatest threat is the principle of respect for absolute freedom of conscience, which includes the freedom to either believe or not to believe

2 The European Charter of basic rights guarantees the freedom of religion and to change one's religion, but there is emphatically no protection for those with no religious allegiance who wish to be free from religious influence despite nearly 40 per cent of Europeans being neither religious adherents nor practising their faith.

3 Article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights is supposed to guarantee "the freedom of conscience, of thought and religion" but in reality the judgments of the European Court of Justice have not acknowledged a duty to protect the secularity of the national institutions and the separation of the Churches and the States. According to the European Court, neither established religions, nor the medieval offence of blasphemy nor Church taxes are contrary to Article 9.

4 It is in this legal and institutional context that the discussion of the future constitution of the European Union continues. Certain interests require a clear reference to the concept of a "revealed god" in the preamble to this constitution and the mention of "Christianity as the common cultural heritage of the people of Europe".

5 Clerical lobbies of every kind, supported by various governments, require that Declaration 11 of Amsterdam be adopted as Article 51 of the future European constitution. Let us not forget that the sole aim of this Article is to guarantee and to reactivate the anti-democratic privileges of the Churches and the religions in the various countries of the European Union, most of which already grant immense privileges to religious institutions either with a concordat or by having a state religion.

6 If such a provision were adopted, no people, no nation, no State in Europe could ever call into question the State religions, the legal settlements, the offences of blasphemy and the Church taxes such as they exist in a great number of countries on the European continent.

7 Indeed, Article 51 (Status of churches and non-confessional organisations) lays down entirely clerical provisions such as: "The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States ... "Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations."

8 It is a matter of not only the maintenance of anti-secular and anti-democratic privileges of the Churches, but also of the conferring of official status to the religions in the institutions. It is the negation of absolute freedom of conscience of the citizens of the various countries as well as a further violation of the principle of equality of rights of citizens.

9 The National Secular Society and Libre Pensée are calling for a massive campaign on the part of supporters of secularity in Europe to defeat this clerical offensive.

10 Libre Pensée and the National Secular Society call upon all rationalist, sceptical, freethinking, humanist and secular organisations and the citizens of the various countries in Europe to take part in the European secular gathering in Paris on Saturday December 6, 2003:

- *Against a clerical and religious Europe dominated by the Vatican!*
- *Against the safeguarding of religious privilege!*
- *Against the granting of official status to religious institutions!*
- *For the absolute freedom of conscience!*
- *For secularity in Europe!*
- *For the separation of Church and State!*

IT WAS reported recently that an ossuary has been found in Israel which is said to contain the bones of Jesus' brother James. The only evidence at the moment for this belief appears to be the inscription on the ossuary – James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus. Dr Herschel Shanks, who by a happy coincidence is the co-author of a book entitled *Brother Of Jesus*, said of the discovery: "It is likely that the inscription refers to Jesus of Nazareth. I think there is little doubt we are dealing with an authentic 1st century AD (*sic*) inscription."

The cynic may ask, however, if we are also dealing with authentic 1st century CE bones and with an authentic 1st century CE James. But why shouldn't we be? There are plenty of other authenticated relics in existence. Mark Twain, while visiting Milan, was shown two of St Paul's fingers – though he did not report, assuming that they were removed after his execution, whether they had been uplifted in a blessing or a final defiant gesture to Nero. No matter. He was also shown one of St Peter's bones and one of Judas Iscariot's which, one will not be surprised to learn, was black.

The bones of Matthias, on whom the lot fell, were discovered by St Helena who was directed to their resting-place by the Holy Ghost, and I doubt whether one can get more authentic than that. St Stephen's bones must have been authentic too, since it was reported that when his coffin was opened "...an odour such as that of Paradise" was smelt which cured no fewer than 73 sick people who were in attendance. The power of the bones was confirmed by the authentic St Augustine who enumerated some 70 miracles wrought by them in only two years – and three of those were of resurrections from the dead. Stephen's blood also had a miraculous property. While normally pretty solid it would liquefy annually at Naples. And that, quite clearly, was Stephen's blood because the miracle occurred only on his feast-day.

The skull of St John the Baptist was exhibited throughout Europe. It was definitely authentic since, as its custodian at Amiens pointed out, one could see the hole in the skull over the right eye which was the very hole Herodias made with a knife when the head was brought to her on a charger.

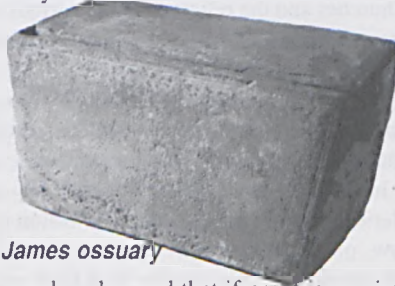
Mark Twain was shown Adam's tomb in Jerusalem, though he was not able to examine the body. It would have been incomplete anyway because the medieval English traveller, Sir John Maundeville, found Adam's skull at Golgotha. This was the same Sir John who wrote so graphically of the authentic bones of the innocents slain by Herod being found at Bethlehem, not to mention the tombs of Eve, Seth and Noah.

There are many other examples of the discovery of saintly relics, but I think I have adduced sufficient to make the point that one should not be surprised that James's bones

have come to light. The wonder is – given that Adam's skull and Eve's grave were discovered so long ago – that James's remains were not located sooner.

NEIL BLEWITT reflects on the importance of the James ossuary, which has caused great excitement among Christians

The authentication of the recently-discovered bones, however, should come later – and in a dramatic way. It is well known that saints' relics will produce miracles. For example, the skeletons of Gervase and Protase when unearthed restored the sight of a blind man. Jesus' swaddling clothes cured a midwife with a withered hand, the bones of Elisha restored to life a dead man who was cast into his sepulchre, and no self-respecting saint would allow a sick visitor to go away from his tomb without an alleviation of his symptoms. If a similar miracle occurs when James's bones are exhibited, their provenance will be proved. The curious may enquire why two sets of saints' bones have not been exhibited to each other so that both of them may be resurrected to the benefit of historians and, no doubt, themselves. But it has been well said that this has not been undertaken because the shock of the joint resurrection would be sufficient to kill them both. It is possible, of course, that the truth may lie elsewhere.



The James ossuary

It may be advanced that if proof is required that the bones in the ossuary do belong to James, the brother of Jesus, it would not be too difficult to extract DNA from them and from some of Jesus' relics and compare the two samples. After all, there are many authentic items connected with Jesus' person extant which would be most useful for this purpose: the crown of thorns, the nails from the cross, his baby linen, his sweat, his blood and his foreskin which was removed at the circumcision. Nor would any of these be too troublesome to trace; there are several of most of them in circulation.

But it is not as simple as that. The difficulty lies in the relationship between James and Jesus. They are called brothers in the Bible

and elsewhere, but whatever the correct designation of the relationship it cannot be that of brother. In the Book of Joseph it is stated that James, three other boys and two girls were the children of Joseph and an un-named woman who died before Joseph even met Mary – and certainly before he was minded to put her away privily. This was confirmed by James himself who also wrote a book on the subject. So, if James was the son of Joseph and Ms X, and Jesus, as we I learn from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, was the child of Mary and the Holy Ghost, it would be futile to compare DNA samples for there can be no relationship between the two. But, on reflection, perhaps not so. If a match was thrown up it would be a matter of considerable interest to historians who could be forced to the conclusion that an impatient and enterprising Joseph had beaten the Holy Ghost to it.

But how will we ever know for certain that the new-found bones really do belong to James, the son of Jesus' stepfather? When Mark Twain was shown the spot in Jerusalem where God gathered the dust from which Adam was made, and a doubt was expressed as to the authenticity of the claim, he said: "That Adam was formed of dirt procured in this very spot is simply proved by the fact that in 6,000 years no man has ever been able to prove that the dirt was *not* procured here whereof he was made." A similar reasoning must apply to any question raised about the authenticity of the ossuary's bones. Nobody has yet proved that they belong to somebody else and until they do they must be regarded as those of James.

An afterthought: If God had used a little more of the dust Mark Twain was shown, how different would we all be today?

THE author adds: Since this article was written I have learned that (a) the inscription on the ossuary was of recent origin and (b) there were no bones in it anyway

But let no-one hasten to the conclusion that this means the relic is not genuine. The original inscription would have eroded after 1900 years and a well-meaning artist may simply have re-written it to ensure the bones were correctly identified. And the fact that James's bones were not actually in the ossuary means nothing. One can't have an ossuary without bones, so they must have been there at some time. So I am still of the Mark Twain school of thought: That James's bones were placed in the ossuary is simply proved by the fact that in 1900 years nobody has proved that they were not placed there.

It pays to adopt a healthy scepticism in these matters.

Neil Blewitt's article first appeared in the July 2003 issue of The Rationalist, the East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group magazine, and is reproduced with their permission.

MOST freethinkers are not, I suspect, subscribers to the *Church Times*. The recent excitement, however, over the appointment of Canon Gene Robinson to the Bishopric of New Hampshire (exciting only because he happens to be gay, of course) gives those of us with a less-than-lively interest in church politics a jolly good reason at least to take a look at it. A version is available online at <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/> Especially interesting in the whole affair have been the reactions of many senior clerics. A good number of those reactions are given on the site in the form of written statements, and a quick glance shows that most of them are unambiguously hostile to the appointment.

It's all a sad and seedy business, and however it turns out it's clear that there will be no winners. Should secularists care? Well, not about the ultimate fate of the Church, certainly. But given the extent to which attempts are being made to turn rampant homophobia (and that's what the affair is about, despite all the theological flannel) into a respectable and acceptable intellectual position, then it is deeply concerning. The Church claims to provide "moral guidance and leadership". If NASA had used a similar guidance system at the time of the first manned moon flight, poor old Apollo 9 would still be inscribing ever increasing circles in the scorched earth around its launch pad.

After reading such depressing material there was only one thing to do – leave the *Church Times* website immediately and seek solace and sanity in the arms of Hubert the Dancing Beaver God. Hubert is, of course, the presiding deity of the site of The English Atheist, at http://www.geocities.com/missus_gumby/ I know I've mentioned the site before, but there's something so addictive about it that I couldn't resist another visit. Maybe it's to do with the relentlessly mad and cheerful music. There is another reason too, though – its excellent links page. Webmaster Martin Burn offers a highly eclectic selection, quite a few of which have never appeared here. One, a link to a "topsite" listing, at <http://www.topsitelists.com/bestsites/nogod/topsites.html>, is especially worthy of a rummage. Sensitive surfers should be alert to the fact that some of the sites listed are not of the kind you would wish to meet on a dark night. Be warned, too, that some of the linked sites have a few "pop-ups", and that some seem as dead as God Himself. Despite all this, it's still worth a look.

Martin also kindly sent me a couple of site suggestions that do not appear on his links page. The first, "Fundies Say The Darndest Things" is at <http://users.rcn.com/rostmtd/winace/fstdt.htm>. The second, The Immaculate Nutwatch Anthology, is at <http://www.ludd.luth.se/~asmodean/>

[nutwatch/](http://www.nutwatch/). Both are very wonderful indeed.

Now a couple more old favourites. A while ago Richard Dawkins entered a plea on behalf of the word "Bright" as a useful self-description for those who held a non-supernaturalistic view of the world. There's now a website for "Brights". It's at <http://www.the-brights.net/> Anyone wondering about the utility of the term will find plenty there that is at least stimulating.

NORMAN PRIDMORE scours the worldwide web for sites of interest to freethinkers



It will be interesting to see if it catches on. As a die-hard adherent of "rationalist", I dislike it – but as with beer and *The Simpsons*, I suppose I could learn to love it ...

The second old favourite is James Randi. Again, his weekly commentary at the James Randi Educational Foundation site (at <http://www.randi.org/>) is something I've mentioned before. But a while ago he broke with his normal policy of not mentioning

religion and wrote a piece about his personal, and thoroughly atheistic, convictions. Go to the site, click on "View Commentary Archive", and then select the one for July 25. It's powerful and cogent stuff.

"Punkerslut" is the name of a young atheist in the USA. Angry and intelligent, he writes about all sorts of things. Unusually, perhaps, for someone so young (he's under 20, apparently) he's a fan of some of the real "old time" radicals and freethinkers – among them Joseph McCabe, Ingersoll, Darrow, Paine, Salt, Margaret Sanger and Mark Twain. The site is at <http://www.punkerslut.com/main.html>. Be prepared for much that is confessional, and much passionate intensity.

I'm presently reading with much pleasure and profit Bill Cooke's just-published (by the RPA) history of the Rationalist Press Association. Dr Cooke is also the author of *A Rebel To His Last Breath*, a biography of Joseph McCabe – and it's with this in mind that I offer this final link to some of McCabe's own writings. Go to the invaluable InfidelsOrg library at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/joseph_mccabe/index.shtml and read your fill of McCabe online. Satisfaction is guaranteed.

Thanks for all the links. More please, as ever, to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

Christian homophobes and their opponents clash in Copenhagen

AN elderly Christian fundamentalist was dunked in a fountain in Copenhagen's Israel Square last month when a scuffle broke out between a group of Christian homophobes and a noisy band of pro-gay opponents.

The Christians were protesting over the appointment of an openly gay man, Carsten Damsgaard, as Denmark's new ambassador to Israel when a group of young militants attempted to drown out what they regarded as the offensive anti-homosexual stance of the mainly elderly religious right-wingers. "These Christians stand for racism and homophobia. They are fascists," one protestor managed to say as he lay face-down in the road following his arrest.

As the police rounded up the most persistent trouble-makers, the fundamentalists' leader, Jony Noer prayed for Denmark to reverse its decision to send a gay couple to head one of its most sensitive diplomatic missions.

"We ask you God to give grace for our country in this midnight hour where the manifestations of homosexuality are around us," he said.

According to a BBC report "the ambassador's appointment appears to be causing more trou-

ble in Denmark than it is in Israel. The Israeli embassy in Copenhagen says that the homosexuality of the ambassador is not an issue for them, and that he will be made most welcome in Israel."

The Ambassador designate has become a gay role model – he is a career diplomat specialising in security and terrorism.

"I have no reason to believe that my partner and I will not be welcomed in Israel," said Mr Damsgaard. "Quite the contrary. Back in May the Israeli Government formally gave their agreement to my appointment as the next Danish ambassador. That was at a time when it was very clear to the Israeli Government about my situation," said Mr Damsgaard, who has lived with his partner for nine years.

But, according to the BBC report, Noer, the leader of the so-called Pilgrims Convoy who lives in Israel's Negev Desert, believes the diplomatic niceties belie the true welcome awaiting the ambassador in the Middle East.

"I'm thinking of the normal Israeli citizen and the farmers living out there in the desert and in the kibbutz," he says. "This is like spitting in our faces."



Denmark's envoy Carsten Damsgaard

Abducted

Sometimes a writer, with a few choice words, can plant in your mind a vision so grotesque or funny that it will remain for you for days – if not longer. Right now, a picture that's both grotesque *and* funny has been haunting me for a whole week. It's the image of a very sweaty evangelist wearing his trousers way too tight, and rabbiting on about the Rapture.

This is how American journalist Greg Bottom described the performance, three years ago, of Rev Tony "the Tiger" Mavrakos, a Seventh-Day Adventist delivering a sermon at the X-treme Spiritual Awakening Tour 2000 Prophecy Seminar in Virginia:

"The 'Tiger' wiped his brow and hiked up his belt buckle in an x-treme way that actually separated his testicles on either side of the pant seam (a habit that at first was comical and later wince-inducing)".

The title of Tiger's sermon was "Can Gays and Lesbians Go to Heaven?"

The answer, naturally, was a resounding no!

Mavrakos "bespectacled and bearded, plump and bulky and sweating", said that, come the End Days, horrible tortures, pestilence and plagues would be visited upon "perverts, reprobates, pagans" ... and anyone who had not accepted the Christian Lord as their personal saviour.

Greg Bottom explains: "The Rapture, to be totally clear at the outset, is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a time at the end of history when true believers' spirits will be 'exalted to a knowledge of divine things'".

Well, not exactly. The writer has the mistaken idea that the Rapture *is* the Second Coming – when, in fact, they are two very different, but connected, phenomena.

I know this because, a few weeks back, the little Christian bookshop close to where I live in Brighton suddenly became "enraptured". Such enchanting titles as *The Bible Cure for Irritable Bowel Syndrome* (no, I did *not* make that up!) were shunted to one side of the window so room could be made for a rash of books and illustrated booklets devoted to the "End Times". Dominant among these were the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins. Together, they have written nine titles in the series, all notching up very impressive sales.

Left Behind, the first in the series, was made into a movie that was never released in UK cinemas. This is not surprising, as *Left Behind* was a critical as well as a box-office flop in the US. Among those who comprehensively rubbished this turkey was James Bernardinelli, film reviewer for movie-reviews.colossus.net film, who called it "Cheesy. Silly. Moronic. Dull. Plodding. Torturous," and concluded that the title described "exactly what's going to happen to this movie at the box office."

Wanting to know more about the Rapture, I did some research. And this, in a nutshell (nut being the operative word), is what I learned: Rapture enthusiasts believe that the return of Jesus Christ will occur in two distinct phases. First, Jesus will return "like a thief in the night", keeping his presence *schtum* and not revealing himself to anyone.

Come the Rapture, all true Christians will be swept naked up to Heaven. *Freethinker* editor, BARRY DUKE, who will among those left behind, takes a peek into the minds of those keenly anticipating the event

Then, suddenly, without warning, Christians will be "caught up", or Raptured (although captured or abducted seem more appropriate terms for a kidnapping exercise of this scale).

One internet site promoting the *Left Behind* novels has it thus: "In one chaotic moment, millions of people around the world suddenly disappear leaving their clothes, wedding rings, eye-glasses and shoes (and, presumably, prosthetic limbs, breast implants, false teeth and glass eyes) in crumpled piles. Mass confusion hits while vehicles suddenly unmanned veer out of control, fires erupt and hysteria breaks out as the living stare in disbelief and fear at the empty places where their loved ones were just seconds before. This is the Rapture that God has planned as the first sign to begin the unravelling of the End of Time (*sic*)." (Surely there's a strong argument here for making sure that born-again Christians are never to be allowed to operate heavy equipment, drive vehicles, fly planes ...or be elected President of the United States.)

The rest of humankind, having been left behind, is then ushered into a "seven-year period called the Tribulation". During the Tribulation, the Antichrist rises to do his or her dastardly work. (In *Left Behind*, the Antichrist takes the form of a slick, sinister Romanian called Nicolae Carpathia who plans to use the UN to establish one world government and religion. Resembling a young Robert Redford and silver-tongued in nine languages, Carpathia is named *People* magazine's "Sexiest Man Alive.").

At the end of the seven years, Jesus returns visibly in his full glory. This is the event

referred to as Christ's Second Coming or "Glorious Appearing".

The whole cockamamie theory rests on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in which Paul wrote that believers in Jesus Christ will someday be "caught up...in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air". According to the *Left Behind* series, those who miss the Rapture will have a second chance to be saved during the seven years of Tribulation.

With minor variations, this sequence is now accepted by millions of Bible-believing Christians as an accurate picture of End Time events. Millions – but not all. Steve Wohlberg, for example, is one Christian who won't have any of it, and has written a book, *The Left Behind Deception*, dismissing the LaHaye/Jenkins doctrine.

He implores Christians to study both verses 16 and 17 of Thessalonians together. "The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

"Honestly," harumphs an indignant Wohlberg, "do you see anything in these words about vanishing Christians prior to the Tribulation? Does 'caught up' necessarily mean 'disappear without a trace'?"

"Far from being a secret event, the return of Jesus Christ will be like the brilliant flashing of millions of lightning bolts blazing across the sky. Can you guess what awesome Greek word Matthew used for 'coming' in verse 27? It is '*parousia*', and this mega-important word is the exact same word Paul used in 1



Photo: Barry Duke

If God's Heaven actually existed, would this angelic duo make it through the pearly gates? No, says US evangelist Tony "the Tiger" Mavrakos. Ah well, they'll have to make do with heaven on earth.

by Jesus!

Thessalonians 4:15-17 in his description of that coming of Jesus at which believers will be raptured or 'caught up'! In many Hollywood action films, certain files are labeled 'Top Secret', yet when it comes to Bible truth about the 'coming', or 'parousia' of Jesus Christ, this return will be anything but secret."

He goes on: "The amazed masses of mankind will literally 'see the Son of man

coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.' Certainly no one will miss it, and no one will wake up the next day wondering where all the Christians went. On that great day, all the unsaved will 'mourn'. Why? Not because their loved ones have vanished into thin air, but because Jesus Christ has suddenly come, and now their life of sinning and partying is over.

"And once again, this will be a very noisy and loud event that will include the echoing of 'a great sound of a trumpet' throughout the sky. When that booming blast is heard, billions of shining angels will descend and circle the globe to 'gather together his elect from the four winds.' Thus, true believers will be 'caught up' into the air."

Whichever way you slice it, the Rapture and the Second Coming – like the contents of Rev Tony "the Tiger" Mavrakos' tight khaki trousers – is all balls. But, of course, you knew that right from the start.

A SHAFT of daylight the length and breadth of a football pitch filled the stadium, stretching up to the heavens like a celestial laser beam, and drawing sleepy Mancunians out of their beds and on to the streets to gaze in awe at such an unworldly wonder. Not since 1989, when Man City beat United 5-1 in the derby, had Maine Road been host to such an incredible event.

With this miracle, Steven Baxter, aka Jesus Christ, demonstrates his messianic credentials to the world, and *The Second Coming*, Russell T Davies' remarkable drama screened earlier this year on ITV, got off to a very bright start. Having seized the whole planet's attention, Baxter proceeds to berate everyone for being "cheeky bastards" (hilariously prompting the BBC to cut the broadcast), and demands they produce a Third Testament to replace the first two which had clearly served them so poorly. He gives them a deadline, and retreats to a secure room at the top of a Manchester police station to drink beer, watch telly, and take up smoking.

Everyone is impressed. Everyone except his atheist girlfriend Judith, who in the end manages to persuade him that the world would be a better place without God and religion, and persuades him to eat a last supper of spaghetti and rat-poison which she had prepared for Him earlier. So, with a gasp and a twitch, Jesus is gone; not back up in heaven to an eternity of joy after a three-day kip, like the first time, but really, truly, *properly* dead.

Inevitably, back in the real world, there have been protests from various Christian organisations. *The Second Coming* is "deeply flawed and confused" according to one group; "at its conclusion, it presents a simplistic, utopian atheist vision ...". Well, much as it irks me to agree with the pious fools of the Evangelical Alliance, I have to admit that they are absolutely right on this point.

God's demise is broadcast around the world via cameras concealed in Judith's kitchen. According to the vox pop interviews which concluded *The Second Coming*, once everyone has absorbed the shock, people just shrug,

ITV's version of the Second Coming angers Christians

By David McKeegan

heave a sigh, and get on with the business of living as responsible human beings in a world without God and religion. A lovely thought, I'm sure you will agree. But is that the way things would actually turn out?

There have been several real-life messiah figures in the past whose stories suggest otherwise.

Sabbatai Sevi was one such messiah for the Jews in the 17th century. He amassed a huge and devoted following, and was rumoured to have been a great teacher and performer of miracles. Then, in 1666 he was captured by a Turkish Sultan who threatened to kill him if he didn't convert to Islam. So, naturally, Sevi converted without further ado, sending shockwaves of despair and confusion among his many followers. But rather than throwing their hands up and saying "My, he certainly played us for a bunch of fools. Oh well, you live and learn," a large number of his disciples continued to believe. They developed an elaborate apologetic which allowed them to regard



Steven Baxter, played by Christopher Eccleston, is a video shop worker and Manchester City football fan who wakes up one day to find he is Jesus Incarnate

Sevi's humiliating about-turn as a wonderful victory. As Gersholm Scholem states in his book *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, "the analogy with early Christianity almost obtrudes itself." Indeed.

The True Believer does not give up his belief in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. In *The Second Coming*, Steven Baxter had many True Believers following him. So how would they react to his death? Let us try to imagine a more realistic ending to the drama.

Shortly after Steve breathes his last, rumours spring up that He has been seen alive again; He appears to some of His followers in dreams, reassures them that He lives, and that He will save them; various Baxterite theologies spring up, explaining His demise in ways that are beneficial to believers; they split into various sects, bitterly and often violently disagreeing with each other over points of theology; of these original sects, most will die off, and only two or three will survive, but the violence and disagreements will continue for centuries.

Baxter's mode of death is fetishised. On His first visit to earth He was crucified, and the cross became the dominant symbol of Christianity. This time He suffered death by spaghetti. Baxterite Christians now wear silver spaghetti necklaces, hang spaghetti from their walls, and kneel before large representations of forksfull of spaghetti in church. Baxterite parents send their kids to Holy Spaghetti Primary School, and superstitious footballers scribble the sign of the spaghetti over themselves as they run on to the pitch. (Yes, I know... it's pasta joke).

There were a lot of good things about *The Second Coming*. The script was compelling and funny; the acting was excellent (Lesley Sharp, as Judith the atheist, was divine); and its heart was in the right place. But its conclusion it was disappointingly naïve in that it failed to acknowledge an obvious truth, a truth of which I am sure Mr Davies is well aware: God does not have to exist for religion to thrive.

Tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep!

— Edward Young (1683–1765)

As atheists, we are 14 per cent of a very large and increasingly intolerant society – intolerant of atheists especially. In addition, we have some distinct disadvantages. Atheists have not had a convincing explanation as to why belief in mysticism has been and still is so prevalent. In the process of doing research for a book about the origins of art, I realized that some of my findings apply to religion as well. This article connects the origin and persistence of religion to biology and linguistics. It is an explanation of religion, but as you will see, it is not an endorsement.

All stories of gods start with a creation myth, and each culture has its own. Most of us probably assume that mysticism arose because primitive people did not have a scientific explanation for natural phenomena. This may have been true, but a creation myth is always a story of the distant past, not something that touches people personally. A creation myth does not explain the prevalence, persistence and virulence of religious fervour. Although a creation myth is mysticism, it cannot account for so many primitive people believing that some mystical being directly controlled their lives with unlimited powers and unknowable motives.

Logically, we have to conclude that there was some widely-experienced personal phenomenon that was both inexplicable and frightening. Many people still believe that spirituality and morality are solely the province of mysticism. Spirituality merely means concern for one's soul. For atheists, the soul is the self, and the concerns are self-esteem and self-worth. Morality is the concern with standards of right and wrong. For atheists, moral judgments and actions are required to enjoy the benefits and protections of civilization. No mysticism there, but spirituality and morality are merely side issues. Religion arose and persists because of a general lack of knowledge of the biological purpose of dreams.

Survival of the human race or of any individual has never been instinctive, guaranteed, or even assured. Since we are not born knowing what to do, we have to learn. We depend on our faculty of awareness, our ability to focus, understand the world, and act on our understanding. Action is necessary for survival. Sometimes the action required is immediate. Survival often depends on simply doing the right thing at the right time. But what? What is the right thing? How are we to know?

And most importantly, how are we to know quickly enough to survive when the action

required is immediate? It is not fool-proof and there are no guarantees, but our biology provides us with a mechanism to help us prepare for survival. While we are asleep, our unconscious integrates the events of our lives as they have affected our psyche. If our days are placid and our thoughts equally so, sleep, the act of integration, will be easy and undisturbed. If we were living in the Garden of Eden, we would have little need for sleep.

American artist ILENE SKEEN says that for atheists, the soul is the self, and the concerns are self-esteem and self-worth



Since our days are full of pleasure, pain and irony, our thoughts jumbled, upset and disturbed, our sleep may be troubled. Unanswered questions, threatening events, contradictions in thought, the simple clash of good and bad must be organized by our subconscious in a hierarchy. That organization becomes the basis of our "gut" reactions, our so-called "instinctive" responses to danger, our emotional toolbox and trigger system. Thanks to the work of our subconscious in sleep, when we face danger, immediate action is possible because we are emotionally "ready" for it.

When we rank the requirements for human life, we usually don't think about sleep as a survival issue. However, a human can survive a few minutes without oxygen, 3-5 days without water, and about 2-4 weeks without food. As it happens, sleep is right up there behind oxygen. After only two days without sleep, the body begins to crave sleep constantly, the senses become unreliable, and alertness, strength and judgment are all diminished. A good night's sleep is not a leisure activity, it is required by the body to allow us to prepare to face the challenges, dangers and opportunities of each new day.

To get a good night's sleep, we usually have to try to evaluate the significant events of our lives before our subconscious takes over and does it for us. This is the purpose of spiritual introspection. If our

days are troubled because we have failed to integrate the important events of our lives in terms of good and bad, we will not rest easy. We will remember our dreams. If we are very troubled, we will remember them as nightmares. While we are troubled and sleeping, we may groan, moan or cry out.

Scientists studying vocalization and language have found a rather strange fact. Monkeys, apes and other mammals have a vocal repertoire of noises for warnings, fright, soothing, surprise, etc. These are directed by a region of the brain lying near the mid-line. Humans also have a repertoire of noises. Screams, gasps of surprise, grunts, groans, laughter and giggling are part of the human noise repertoire. These noises are controlled from the same area of the brain as the apes', near the mid-line¹. The surprise is that human language does not originate in this area at all, but rather in the area of the brain devoted to memory. For both animals and humans, the same area of the brain is devoted to memory, we just do more with it. It is as if, in order to learn to speak, we learn to listen and mimic first. Then, with our superior brain power, we learn to attach a meaning to sounds as we remember them, and finally, we mimic the sounds in our memory as we repeat them.

Stroke victims have been known to lose the ability to make language if the stroke affects the memory part of the brain. Similarly, deaf people have been known to lose the ability to manually sign, if the stroke affects the memory part of the brain, even if their motor control is not otherwise affected. Involuntary noises can be made by all human beings who have a



Sleep, 1908, executed in marble by Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957)

larynx, even deaf mutes and people who can't otherwise talk. Anyone – hearing or deaf, speaking or mute, young or old – can cry out involuntarily in sleep. That sleeping cry can be anything from a scream, a groan, a coo or a whimper. In primitive times, these pre-language sounds were presumed to come directly from the gods. These stories were conveyed in folklore and scriptures.

Awakening from a troubled sleep, we may re-evaluate whatever is troubling us. We try to understand the contradictions of the thoughts that our subconscious cannot resolve. We give ourselves conscious help (also known as thinking). However, if for some people the process of resolution is too painful or they are too lazy or otherwise occupied, they can fail to face an important problem. Instead they can repress the memory, resort to avoidance, drugs or alcohol to erase it, or decide that they cannot really be held responsible for their dreams. They can claim that some unknown and unknowable supernatural power took over their consciousness and delivered these unwelcome messages. If they are particularly cunning, they can twist these messages to their own advantage, telling others that the unknown supernatural being chooses to speak through them. If they are convincing and charismatic, they may use this advantage to their own purposes – good or evil.

Inherent in all religions is an element of egocentricity, the idea that the universe is aligned to reward your good deeds and punish your sins. Someone "up there" is waiting to heed the prayers of the worthy, and to dash those of the undeserving. Somehow, a god with infinite wisdom and powers, and unfathomable motives, speaks to believers. That same deity bends events as if the universe revolved around their wishes and fears. These delusions in the secular realm would be recognized as a bi-polar form of psychosis – megalomania and paranoia.

Linguistics drives home this point. Although in English, the words "god" and "good" appear to be closely related, they did not originate from the same root. About 7,000 years ago, humans had developed a "proto-language" which linguists call Indo-European. This is the root of many languages including Latin, German and subsequently, English.

The study of Indo-European gives us much insight into the beginnings of civilization. The word "good" had its root in the Indo-European root *ghedh*, meaning to unite, join or fit. Later meanings from this root include fitting, suitable, gather. Our English word "together" is a direct descendent of *ghedh*. The world was a dangerous place 7,000 years ago (not that it isn't still), so there need be no mystery or mysticism regarding the obvious importance of getting together. There was strength and com-

fort in being together and that was good.

The word "god" however, had a very different Indo-European root. It is *gheu*² which (9) meant to call, invoke, and later, possessed, insane. Giddy, meaning having a reeling, lightheaded and uncontrolled sensation, is from the same root word, *gheu* (9).

Although now giddy has been secularized, at one time it meant crazy or "mad, possessed by an evil spirit."³ Thus rests the source of the linguistic proof that ties the biology of the bad dream to the mysticism of religion.

The bad dream, a natural phenomenon misunderstood by primitive people, was the catalyst which gave rise to mysticism as a personal world view. Born out of humanity's need in the search for meaning, religion substitutes mysticism for rationality. But religion doesn't explain, it explains away. Today, biology continues to discover and provide answers to the questions of the centuries – mysteries of brain function, of genetics, evolution and of life itself. Religion continues on the path of dogma, while the irrationality and impracticality of "God" have become increasingly apparent. We unheralded 14 per cent represent the most rational course in the future of human thought.

Atheists can no longer afford to hide in the closet while the world is engulfed in a frenzy of religious destruction. We must speak out against religion, against the very idea of religion, against all religion. As atheists, we must teach our children reality, spirituality and morality. We must be zealous in guarding our self-esteem, self-respect and peace of mind. Religion is a remnant of the dark age of igno-

rance. Our lives are measured by accomplishments, not by prayers. Our strength should encourage other atheists to "come out" and agnostics to see the folly of their indecision.

Courage and sweet dreams to all.

References

¹ Ridley, Matt. *Nature Via Nurture*. 2003. New York. HarperCollins Publishers. p 216. Although the author coyly calls the principle of the genes the Genome Organizing Device (GOD), the book is well-written and by no means does it make a case for mysticism.

² This final symbol is called a *schwa* and the pronunciation is like the "e" in item.

³ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Fourth Edition.

• Ilene Skeen studied art education at Queens College in New York City, and earned a masters degree in business administration from Adelphi University. She has worked as a college professor and for various corporations in computer systems analysis, design and management.

Art remains her first love. Her principle *oeuvre* has been the "bare brush" series of watercolour sketches. She is an artist member of the Salmagundi Club, one of the oldest art clubs in the US.

Ms. Skeen currently lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is at work on a book – *Art and Value: An Introduction to the Visual Arts*. Ms Skeen contributed this article as a result of her research for her book, and her reaction, as a long-time atheist, to finding herself in the super-religious environs of the Carolina piedmont.

Dates for the diary Freethought History

DO you know which leading secularist was tipped to be first President of a British Republic; what led to G W Foote being imprisoned for blasphemy; who was the leading Deptford secularist tried for his role in the Plumstead Common riots; what Aveling said when he went to Downe to meet Darwin; and which leading Chartist acted as agent for the *Oracle of Reason* when its editor was imprisoned for blasphemy?

Find out the answers to these and other burning questions of our epoch at the **Freethought History Research Group Inaugural Meeting** on Saturday, October 4, 2pm. in the Library at Conway Hall, 25, Red Lion Square, London, WC1. Nearest tube: Holborn.

Freethought has a rich and interesting history spanning two centuries. The aims of the Freethought History Research Group are to preserve and record this history and make it

readily available, to publish a journal on all aspects of Freethought history, to publish pamphlets, to hold meetings and seminars and to provide speakers for other groups.

For further details and a list of publications contact Terry Liddle, 83, Sowerby Close, Eltham, London, SE9 6EZ. Tel 0208850 4187. Email: tliddle@freeuk.com

Sheffield Humanist Society Day Conference

The Fundamentalist Threat to the World – religious extremism in the 21st Century

Speakers include Terry Sanderson, Vice-President of the National Secular Society.

The conference takes place at **The Winding Wheel, Holywell Street, Chesterfield** on Saturday, October 18, 10am-4pm. For an information pack telephone 0114 2309754 and 01246 270268 (www.sheffieldhumanists.org.uk).

WHAT is a humanist? What does a person who describes himself or herself in this way actually believe? And why "humanist", rather than secularist or rationalist or freethinker?

To outsiders, these question means very little. They are not ones that excite a lot of interest, frankly – and why should they? After all, humanists don't engage in organised terror, or shoot dead the staff of abortion clinics. They don't threaten hellfire or castigate unconventional or minority lifestyles as "evil". They don't see that a person's private beliefs are a sufficient reason to deny them employment or housing. In fact, the worst a humanist is likely to do in response to any outrage is to write a letter to the *Guardian* about it. Even then, when it's not published (as it invariably won't be) they won't get cross. Oh no – they'll just gaze sadly at their breakfast of muesli and croissants and turn to the obituary page. Just to cheer themselves up, you understand.

Humanists are wishy-washy, terminally anger-managed liberals whose voices seldom rise above an apologetic mumble. They are small in number, quite without influence, and entirely safe to ignore. They are, as the phrase goes, born to be mild.

Or, of course (and from another point of view entirely) they are the wicked, baby-eating spawn of Satan, responsible for all the world's evils, and for the decline of all that is good, precious and true. They are the single greatest threat to the family, to morality, and even to God Himself that there has ever been or ever shall be. Period.

Strange, isn't it?

Caricatures? Certainly. Travesties of the truth? Undoubtedly. But who shall save the humanist from such calumnies? Who can set the story straight? Step forward, please, Jim Herrick.

For ten years a schoolteacher, and for a time editor of the *Freethinker*, Jim Herrick was until recently the editor of the *New Humanist* magazine. Now its literary editor, he is surely the ideal person to write a popular introduction to the subject. His earlier books (*Vision and Realism – A Hundred Years of The Freethinker*, and *Against The Faith – Some Deists, Skeptics and Atheists*), are both valuable contributions to the history of rationalism, and are rare and notable exceptions to the rule that secular history is a subject area badly neglected by historians. They are both excellent books – and so is his new one.

Mr Herrick manages to convey in clear and direct language a great deal of information, and he outlines in nice detail the story of humanism and its influence. Nor does he ignore the really important matter of why humanism is more relevant than ever (and the case he makes is a fine one). But he does rather more than this. By adopting a tone that is itself moderate and measured, the polar opposite of a rant, he manages

to communicate much of that spirit of reasonableness and tolerance that lies at the heart of the humanist message.

He also patiently and intelligently contrives to uncover and point out the glint of steel that runs through humanism. He manages to show that there is within it something that is tough – tougher, and ultimately more difficult and demanding than any religious alternative ever could be. Humanists of course know this – that the roots of humanism lie deep, and that it is humanist influences that have ameliorated the

NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews
Humanism – an Introduction by
Jim Herrick. Published by the
Rationalist Press Association,
2003. Price £8.00. ISBN
0301003017

worst excesses of religion. They know too that it is thanks to humanistic ideals that most of what is valued in society by the great majority of its members has been enabled to develop and flourish. But it does no harm to have all this made clear and to be reminded of these facts.

"Humanism" said Paul Kurtz, "includes at least four main characteristics: (1) it is a method of inquiry; (2) it presents a cosmic world view; (3) it contains a concrete set of ethical recommendations for the individual's life stance; and (4) it expresses a number of social and political ideals."

Jim Herrick's book deals with each of these characteristics in the course of its hundred or so pages. It begins with this statement: "Humanism is a most human philosophy of life. Its emphasis is on the human, the here-and-now, the humane. It is not a religion and it has no formal creed, though humanists have beliefs. It is essential to humanism that it brings values and meaning into life."

From this beginning it goes on to summarise what humanism both is and is not. For example, it is not atheism, nor scientism. It is not intolerant or totalitarian. It does not unreasonably elevate the importance of individuals, but neither does it deny or seek to demean the value of individuals. Its morality, unlike that of the revealed religions, "stems from our situation as social animals".

Humanists, it contends, value an open and democratic society, and are concerned about justice, free speech, access to information, and with economic well-being and security. Humanists are concerned too about education and fairness – and especially that no "special interest" groups attain undue influence. Mr Herrick writes of the international nature of humanism, and the extent to which its message has been and continues to be adopted throughout the world – often in the face of real and significant opposition

Each short chapter explores succinctly a different aspect of humanism. After a look at the

"Humanist Tradition", the book moves on to explore "Philosophy, God and the Afterlife", morality, religion, politics, science, the arts, and the environment. Having covered these areas there follow sections on "Organised Humanism", "International Humanism", and "Humanist Action and Humanist Living". The book ends with a section on "The Future of Humanism" and a useful appendix containing the Amsterdam Declaration of 2002 (this being the statement of humanist beliefs agreed at the 50th anniversary conference of the International Humanist and Ethical Union).

For far too long the humanist message has been misrepresented as being a philosophy for the shallow or the inane. For those who try to insist that this is so, I can do no better than to suggest they read Herrick. They will find that the truth is rather different and rather more interesting. Jim Herrick insists that humanist optimism is neither blithely sanguine nor naively unrealistic – but, rather, a sane and practical attitude based upon a clear-eyed assessment and understanding of ourselves and the world.

Who is the book aimed at? Anyone and everyone, really. It's a shame that its publishers, the RPA, are not a rich organisation. Why? Because ideally a copy should be sent *gratis* to every RE teacher in every school and to every priest, imam and professional religionist in the land. It wouldn't hurt to send it to a few politicians and journalists too (and they know who they are ...). A ridiculous idea? Maybe. But I can think of no better way of communicating the message of humanism. Leave it to the Beeb? I don't think so.

Gripes? Just two, and both minor at that. Jim Herrick uses throughout the conventional historical shorthand "BC". It would surely be a good habit to encourage by example the use of the less value-ridden "BCE" (Before Common Era). And it was something of a shame to have missed the opportunity to include somewhere a bibliography – or at least a "suggested reading" list. Given that the book may well be for some a starting place on a serious intellectual journey, a few more pointers on the way might have been useful.

This is a short book and an easy read. It is not, however, superficial or cursory. It's true that more "radical" secularists will not find their objections to humanism dealt with within its pages, but that is not its purpose and to criticise it on such grounds would be quite unfair. It does its job well, and far better, given its length, than any of its predecessors.

As to its production, the RPA have done a very good job indeed. The cleanly retro, lino-cut style cover illustration is very striking – and there are some nice pictures in it too (are you listening, George Dubya?). Definitely a book to own and certainly one to lend.

AS reported by Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, in the August *Freethinker*, the Board of Governors of the BBC, which was supposed to decide whether the refusal of their Religion and Ethics Department to lift its ban on non-believers appearing on the daily peak-time Radio 4 item *Thought for the Day* was justified, merely ruled that it was "reasonable". They did not seem to consider whether this unbalanced discrimination might contravene the charter of the public broadcasting authority, not to mention the European law on human rights.

Referral of the dispute to the BBC Board of Governors was in the context of a lawsuit, in which I was the litigant – some three decades after taking part in a deputation on the same issue to the then Head of Religious Broadcasting. That was soon after I became President of the NSS, and also soon after Radio 4 had changed the name of the morning slot *Lift Up Your Hearts* to *Thought for the Day*.

It was generally assumed at the time that the name change from a religious phrase to a secular one was intended to facilitate opening up the item to every viewpoint. However, the Department now claims that the intention was to open it up to every *religious* viewpoint, since the original title sounded too specifically Christian. Accordingly, representatives of every major religion, and some very minor ones, have ever since had their regular say on *TftD*, but no non-religious voice has ever been heard on it.

Not only do the timing and context of *TftD* ensure a large captive audience; it is the only slot where broadcast contributions are not interrupted by either an opponent or interviewer. There is therefore no equivalent opportunity for any non-believer ever to be heard on the BBC (apart from the World Service).

The BBC's legal argument is that it is a religious programme, and under its charter the BBC is allowed to broadcast religious programmes. However, the fact is that *TftD* is neither theological nor devotional, but usually consists of an ethical homily regarding some current event – on which, of course, secular humanists and other non-believers have no less relevant a perspective than any religionists.

For instance, during the war against Iraq the main theme on *TftD*, morning after morning, was the crucial question – from one theological standpoint or another – as to whether the "coalition" attack could be justified as a "just war". But no personal answer from a purely consequentialist perspective was ever allowed in this unique slot.

BARBARA SMOKER exhorts freethinkers to redouble their efforts to persuade the BBC to open up *Thought for the Day* to non-religious voices

The BBC policy of permanently disallowing any such single-handed, non-theological, ethical comment can only be intended to support the bigoted implication that social morality needs a religious basis. And this on the part of a public body, publicly funded, that is supposed to reflect society as a whole with a balanced, proportionate output – not to butter up one section of society in opposition to another.

What, then, of my lawsuit? Taking on the big battalions, I obviously needed public funding to allow me a court hearing. Otherwise I (and sponsors) would be liable, should I lose, to meet not only my own legal expenses but those of the BBC – which could be astronomical. On their side, of course, they had access to the TV licence money.

Unfortunately, having initially issued me

with a public funding certificate, the Legal Services Commission then decided to cancel it. I therefore had no choice but to agree to my solicitor's withdrawing the lawsuit – which means no litigation on this issue in the foreseeable future. However, that does not necessarily mean the end of the campaign.

Indeed, while the NSS and its supporters have put up an admirable fight with regard to this matter, they should now redouble their pressure on the BBC through the media – though the press is almost entirely against us.

The *Daily Telegraph* published a letter (July 23) from the Head of BBC Religion and Ethics, Alan Bookbinder, which was so amazingly cavalier with regard to the BBC's role in society that it actually boasted of their "recent success [in] fighting off the atheist lobby". What other minority public group would the BBC consider it appropriate to "fight off"?

Moreover, in terms of resources, this triumphalist boast was on a par with Saddam Hussein's that he had succeeded in fighting off the Kurds!

The following week the *Guardian* (July 30) belatedly published an article on the withdrawal of my law case, written by its religious affairs correspondent, Stephen Bates. In it he quoted unnamed contributors to *TftD* as having said that "secularists would have difficulty speaking for three minutes without attacking religion, since that is their main *raison d'être*".

He did not seem to recognise that, unlike religions, which almost invariably focus on proselytisation, secularism is actually based on universal freedom of expression and equal opportunity, and its ultimate concern is human wellbeing – which must make it particularly pertinent for the provision of radio commentators on social morality.

St Paul

I AM no fan of St. Paul, and heartily agreed with Norman Pridmore's remarks about him in the July issue, when reviewing a book by Karen Armstrong.

But that is no reason to distort Paul's words, as does a letter from Jim Cass of Durham, in the same issue.

The latter cites the Letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verses 7-8. The only words he quotes are the questions that Paul asks in order that he may dismiss them. They are: "If through my falsehoods, God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?"

Mr. Cass then claims that Paul is actually *advocating* the telling of lies etc. But the rest of the words, which are left out, show that Paul refutes those who suggest such practices, and says that his God will condemn the "slanderers" who have accused him of them.

On reading the Cass letter, I thought I had

Points of View

come across the same thing before. Sure enough, in the book *The Case Against God*, by George H Smith, (Prometheus Books, New York, 1989), there it is on page 165. The same excerpt, the same misconstruction. Is this wilful? It seems to be doing the same as Paul is accused of. Error or spin, besides being wrong, can only play into the hands of the enemy.

JOHN LAWRENSON

Leicester

Islamic Charity

I DID eventually manage to read all of August's "feature" ("Where was Islamic charity when the Palestinians needed it most?"), but it was a close run thing. Your magazine went hurtling across the room after almost every paragraph.

The NSS and the *Freethinker* are supposed

to stand for reason and truth and against this kind of deceitful religionist propaganda.

The first few drafts of this letter were an attempt to put the record straight, but I've found it to be too daunting (and depressing) a task. It would take a whole book to analyse and expose every one of the article's cynical misconstructions and outright racist lies.

Please print no more of this repulsive Judeo-fascist bilge.

GRAHAM NOBLE

Fareham

IN "Where was Islamic Charity ..." (*Freethinker*, August), David Carr-Allinson draws a misleading comparison between the Jewish and Arab treatment of the refugees – displaced by the creation of the State of Israel – in 1948.

It had always been Zionist policy to encourage as many Jews as possible from the diaspora to settle in Palestine and learn modern Hebrew in order to create an "Israeli" population there.

By contrast, the view of the Arab leadership was that Palestinian refugees from Israeli terror in 1948 should *not* renounce their right to return to their homes, in the hope that, eventually, such a return might be honourably possible.

This difference in the long-term political objectives of the Jewish and Arab leaders, rather than any inherent superiority of Jewish over Muslim charity, explains the contrasting fortunes of the two groups of displaced persons.

Carr-Allinson goes on to state that "the Arabs have succeeded in manoeuvring Israel into the role of oppressor". One would have thought that "anyone who has lived through the last 50 years" would realise that it is Israel herself who has assumed that role as a consequence of her military occupation and colonisation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Old Jerusalem since 1967.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

THE statements in Derek Wilkes's letter (*Points of View*, July) about Palestinians and Jews are completely at odds with reality.

To say the Israeli army "protect their citizens with remarkable restraint and constantly seek peace" is absurd; their brutal occupation sees them commit atrocities against unarmed civilians and children almost every day. When they assassinate Palestinian political leaders with rockets fired from helicopters they pay no regard to others people who stand nearby in the street or live in the apartment blocks that they demolish.

So the "Palestinians lack a state it is entirely of their own choosing" is it? Then please explain to me who the hell is it who occupied their land, driving half of their population into refugee camps? Israel launches attacks against Palestinian towns and villages with impunity killing civilians and destroying their infrastructure.

If "Palestine is merely a geographical area" that "always included Jews" then the fact that a religious group set up a Jewish State and evicted half the population of non-Jews (and treated the remaining ones as second-class citizens) must be racist and apartheid. Even today, a Jew who has never been to Israel has more rights in that country than a Palestinian who has lived there for generations.

ROGER LEWIS
Exeter

PALESTINIANS are entitled to resist military occupation and ethnic cleansing, without their resistance being called terrorism. Nobody, however, is entitled to deliberately kill innocent civilians. Recent Palestinian "military" operations have been mostly targeted at civilians: the civilians aren't being killed because a bomb went off early, or as "collateral damage" in an attack on a military or economic target: they are being deliberately killed, in shops,

cafés, discos, in buses on their way to school, and even in the open air. Often the "freedom fighter" could leave the bomb and get off the bus, but they choose instead a ritual sacrifice. Europeans – who could never guarantee the basic rights of Jewish people (and were content to solve the "Jewish problem" by means of a homeland just as long as it wasn't in Europe) – are frequently impressed by this, and call it "suicide" bombing.

Lyn Hurst (*Points of View*, August) suggests that it is Zionist to call this terrorism, and that anywhere else in the world, such people would be known as freedom fighters. Nowhere in the world has any freedom fighter actually targeted innocent civilians and children (unless one considers vicious fascists like Renamo, the Contras, the GIA, the UVF, or Afghanistan's acid-throwing zealots to be freedom fighters). In the words of the brother of an Israeli Arab blown to bits by a student who set out, not to destroy a shop but to kill as many shoppers as possible, others have suffered more but "did not lose their humanity". The martyr's morals have been corrupted not just by the appalling conditions of occupation, but by religious insanity.

The death-cult has produced unspeakable public celebrations of child-murder – including a Hamas-constructed "exhibition" recreating the 2001 Sbarro pizzeria bombing, complete with fake explosion and fake civilian and child body parts and pizza slices hanging from the ceiling, a sign indicating that the meat is Kosher. This is religion, not freedom; sadism, not fighting.

A wide range of Palestinian opinion and parties (including the Palestinian Authority) has condemned the attacks on civilians, identifying it also as a strategic disaster for the *Intifada* which materially assists the Occupation.

National liberation struggle, however, is not the cause of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) or Islamic Jihad: they have hijacked and sabotaged it to promote the glory of Allah and his Law (*shari'ah*). Hamas's Charter of Allah begins with a quote from the Qu'ran to the effect that Muslims are the best, and most Jews and Christians are evil-doers, then continues with *hadiths* concerning the murder of Jesus by the Jews, and the ubiquitous prophecy that rocks and trees will call out "Oh Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!" The presence of Jews and other unbelievers in "an Islamic *Waqf* consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgement Day" is Hamas's main grievance.

Their leaflets do not speak of winning a state, but of killing "the brothers of the apes, the killers of the Prophets, blood suckers ... thieves, monopolists, usurers". (It comes as no surprise that Hamas refers to the Holocaust as "an alleged crime that never occurred". Palestine is special, not as a nation, but because it was "conquered by the Companion of the Prophet", and was "the point of depar-

ture for Mohamed's midnight journey to the seven heavens". Peace is not possible except under the wing of Islam: no secular, democratic, or ecumenical Palestinian statehood will stop Hamas "fighting", with the Qu'ran as their training manual.

Religious apartheid is not a Zionist preserve: the principle and history of the *dhimmi* under Islamic law cannot be ignored in the light of Hamas's appeal to the previous obliteration by Islam of other religions and cultures. The sustained cultural genocide of indigenous peoples which Islam's *dhimmi* laws brought to conquered lands planted the seeds of actual genocide in Armenia. The anger of defeated religious superiority is layered on top of the understandable anger of the occupied, and is aimed not just at immigrants and secularists, but at all Jews.

Mahmoud Kawasme was a typical Hamas "freedom fighter". A computing student – a tiny percentage of the Middle East population is in Higher Education, yet such relatively privileged science (under)graduates are hugely over-represented among Islamists – he packed his explosives with shrapnel specifically to tear children to bits on Haifa's 37 bus. Mahmoud's parting message didn't mention Palestine, but had plenty to say about an imagined Master of the Universe. His mother, serving sweets in celebration, put it very plainly when she said: "We must fight for our faith and not for our nation (the Palestinian nation)."

Hamas leaders are mostly sons of privilege and fathers of hypocrisy. Dr Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi sends young Palestinians to kill both themselves and Jewish toddlers, but his own son abroad to medical school. He explains that "some men must grow up to become doctors. But for that to happen, others have to sacrifice themselves and become martyrs".

The British have cared so little for Palestinian children murdered by the IDF, and for the young Arab victims of their own genocidal sanctions against Iraqi civilians. Yet surely a British secularist more than anyone should be able to see that fundamentalist hate crimes and racism cannot be absolved simply to assuage one's own sense of imperial guilt?

PETER MCKENNA
Liverpool

WHAT Lyn Hurst (letters August) and others who criticise Israel should do is spend a little time studying the history of the Jewish people. Centuries of pogroms and persecution all over the world, culminating in Hitler's holocaust, have ensured that the overwhelming resolve, beating in every Jewish heart, is: never, ever again. Little wonder that with this imperative in mind the priority for the newly founded Jewish state in 1948 was to arm itself to the teeth. And sure enough within days no fewer than 7 Arab armies combined in an attempt to



wipe Israel off the face of the earth. They tried again in 1956, 1967 and treacherously during Yom Kippur in 1973. Having failed on the battlefield, Israel's enemies are now deploying the grotesque weapon of the suicide bomber against innocent civilians. Almost 100 such attacks to date. Understandably Israel is doing all it can to search out and destroy the organisers of such outrages and is driven to building walls in a desperate attempt to keep them out.

I am not Jewish, but if I were, I too would not hesitate to defend my precious refuge from a hostile world with all the means at my disposal. I have no doubt that if the Islamic nations could overcome their pathological hatred of all things Jewish there would be peace in the Middle East in no time. Israel has no imperialist intentions; all it wants is to be left alone.

That Christians and Islamists should want to persecute the Jews is what we have come to expect; it is what religion is good at. Freethinkers ought to show more understanding.

TONY AKKERMANS
Shropshire

Hypnotism

IT WAS a pity to see Norman Pridmore deal so dismissively with hypnotism (book review, *Freethinker*, August 2003). Of his subject, he says: "Oh, and don't get him into hypnotism. He was an advertising manager for hypnotic stage shows and will tell you very definitely that there's no such thing – not as understood by most folk, anyway. He's right, by the way."

Is he, now? I've read several books on various aspects of therapy of one sort and another, and hypnosis is taken as a given. None of the writers I have read (except those dealing specifically with hypnosis) even bother to mention whether it works or not, but have without exception merely spoken, almost in passing, of putting the client into trance before doing this or that therapy. No one needs to make claims for the mere existence of hypnosis any more because it's taken as read that it exists. And the concept – that of quietening the "noise" of the conscious mind so that imagery can be planted at a subconscious level – is hardly the stuff of religion.

Although I have never knowingly been hypnotised, I cannot see what the fuss is about, and lose patience with card-carrying fundamentalist humanists/secularists or whatever who boast of being "freethinkers", but who can dismiss something as easily as that without explaining why. If there was no room for Norman to expand on that view, perhaps it would have been better expressed elsewhere in a dedicated article on the subject. I have seen so-called freethinkers dismiss all kinds of stuff because science hasn't bothered much with it yet, or there haven't been enough double-blind tests. If enquirers of old had dismissed

everything they came across that had demonstrable, though thus far unexplained, properties, we wouldn't have the richness of medicines and therapies we have now (many of which *have* subsequently come under the scientist's microscope and *have* stood up to rigorous tests). Those who knock, for instance, herbal remedies (not that Norman did) must remind themselves that many of our modern medicines are taken from plants. Nowadays, they're in a different form: more concentrated, more controllable and predictable, perhaps, in most cases, and able to make more megabucks for the pharmaceutical industry.

I shudder to think what the fundamentalists would say if I admitted to having a "spirituality". They wouldn't bother to ascertain from me that I can explain that in terms of neurons and synapses before landing on me like a ton of bricks.

Or perhaps I do Norman a disservice, and it was merely stage hypnotism he speaks of. I can't speak from first-hand experience, but there has been enough concern expressed about it and guidelines put in place that one wonders whether authorities would go to such trouble if the practice did not involve the possibility of an altered state of consciousness. The practice must have been scrutinised before policy is enacted.

When I click my fingers, Norman, you will awake from your closed-mind ...

ANDY ARMITAGE
West Wales

Religious fanatics kill

IN my letter in the August issue of the *Freethinker*, I implied that religious fanatics do not kill other people. Of course they do. I should have made the distinction, although it is sometimes hard to maintain, that in general they are considered to be responsible for their actions, while the certifiably insane are not.

JOHN RADFORD
London

The Blues

PETER Richards is right. "... the blues must surely be the music for humanists" (*Freethinker*, August). But there is much more to it than that. The antithesis of sanitised church going, hymn-singing and sermonising, for the respectable and god-fearing the blues was the Devil's music. It was said that Robert Johnson, who died at the age of 24 allegedly poisoned by a jealous woman, had sold his soul to the Devil in return for his exceptional musical talent.

Coming out of the Delta and going via Memphis and Texas to Chicago, where it became amplified and electrified, it was the music of those at the very bottom of the social pile. It was about rotgut booze, drugs, poverty, prison, migration, faithless women, even more faithless men, and the struggle to survive.

Many blues singers – unable to stand the racism in American society, made careers in Europe.

Played in brothels, speak-easies, and at house rent parties, above all it was about sex – dirty, raunchy, raw upfront sex. And it wasn't always straight sex. Ma Rainey was fairly explicit about lesbianism.

Anti-religious themes could be found in songs like Big Joe Williams (1937) *Brother James* and John Lee Hooker's *Burning Hell* recorded with the white band Canned Heat, themselves named after an old blues song.

Brought to Britain in the 1950s by Chris Barber, the blues was adopted by bands like the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds and recrossed the Atlantic. There it was sung by white singers like Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison. Like their blues heroes, many died tragically young from drink and drugs.

The blues reflects life in all its glory and its horror in the here and now. Away with the dour hymns with their false promise of salvation after death. Let's hear it for the blues.

TERRY LIDDLE
London

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Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, 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 Cleevelands 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.

Freethought History Research Group: Information 0208 850 4187. Inaugural meeting, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Saturday, October 4, 2pm.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Friday, October 10, 7.30pm. Pedro Almodovar, lecturer in film studies, University of Warwick.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: June Kamel 01925 824844. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

Harrow Humanist Society: Information: 020 8863 2977. Monthly meetings, December – June (except January).

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, September 4, 8pm. Norman Dannatt: *Show business personalities I have known.*

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/Iss>. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Thursday, September 25, 8pm. Public meeting.

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, October 1, 8pm. Geoff Heath: *Dogma and Dialogue – an Exploration of Beliefs and Values.*

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: brianmclinton@aol.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

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

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