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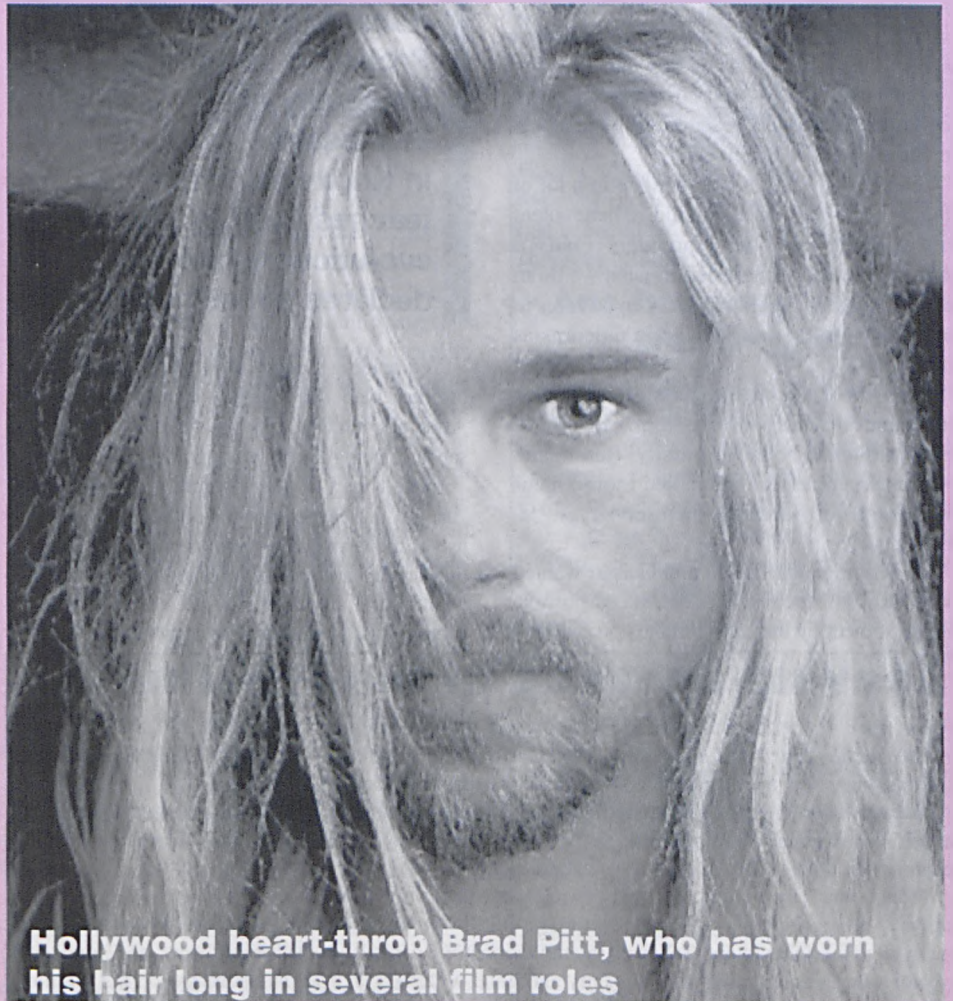
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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

Throughout the ages, Christians have vilified men with long hair, and even today, many fundamentalists associate long-haired men with decadence, effeminism, and homosexuality

– see centrepage feature



Hollywood heart-throb Brad Pitt, who has worn his hair long in several film roles



Churches are notorious for putting silly slogans on their billboards – or marquees, as the Americans call them. This set us wondering what words an atheist might mischievously place on a church sign

– see details of our church billboard competition on page 6

IT IS time for me to come out of the closet ... I am a bright. No, I didn't say "I am bright," that would be too blatant even for my notoriously inflated ego. Rather, I am following the suggestion of Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert to use "bright" as a noun, not an adjective. Let me explain.

Futrell and Geisert are long-time activists for what most of us call secular humanism, freethought, or atheism. They put a lot of effort in defense of the rights of what often are referred to as the "godless," or the "unbelievers." The problem is, look at that list of words I just laid out for you. Most of them have a negative connotation, or sound so threatening that they inspire a knee-jerk reaction from most people, including your neighbors.

"Unbeliever"? But we do believe in a lot of things, except they do not include a benevolent deity looking over our shoulders (and, it seems, particularly interested in what we do in our bedrooms). "Godless"? Would you refer to somebody who doesn't believe in unicorns as "unicornless"?

"Atheist"? That, in the classical and most benevolent meaning of the term, means atheist, without a belief in a deity. But, again, how many people feel compelled (not to mention proud) of labeling themselves as "a-unicornists"?

You get the point. Futrell and Geisert wanted a word to label their beliefs that has a positive feeling, something that could make you proud to

say "I am ..." in other people's company, and – even better – that would make your company ask: "what's that?" I have to admit that when I came across the bright movement (www.the-brights.net) I was a bit skeptical, and just a tiny bit annoyed at the possibility that the word bright would be used to imply that we are smarter than other people.

DR MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI, an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he teaches ecology and evolutionary biology, declares himself a 'bright'



Yet, reading some of the essays posted on the brights' web site quickly changed my mind. After all, not all "gay" people are gay in the sense of being happy, easy-going fellows, right?

Indeed, part of the inspiration for the name "bright" did come from the consciously positive use of the term gay by homosexuals. The idea is that brights are in fact a bashed minority in this country and around the world, and the last such minority – at least in Western democracies –

that is ok to bash! President Bush the First is on record as saying that he didn't think brights (he didn't use that term, obviously) are real American citizens, and perhaps should not be afforded the rights that go with that privilege. Bush the Second hasn't been more friendly on that respect. Yet, not even the Bushes dare attack gays or African-Americans, or women (the latter, of course, are not exactly a minority ...) – at least not in public.

As Richard Dawkins put it in an article on the brights movement published in the *Guardian* earlier this year (and I don't often agree with Dawkins, so read this!), it is a matter of raising awareness of the problem. Gays did it effectively during the past decades, so did feminists. Most people are careful these days when using words that imply male chauvinism: we now tend to talk of chairperson, not chairman; we use "she" almost as frequently as "he" when referring to a hypothetical individual. This may be awkward, or even aesthetically unpleasant, but it means that the problem of sex discrimination has risen to the level of general consciousness, as it should be.

Similarly with brights. A bright is defined simply as a person with a naturalistic worldview. That means a worldview that is free of supernatural and mystical elements, and this worldview extends to ethics and morality. Simple enough, no? Many more people than you think are in fact brights, even though several may not realize it, or may not wish to "come out" (as for gays and feminists). Brights don't have a common political agenda except when it comes to the defense of themselves as a bashed minority. The same goes for gays and feminists, whose range of opinions on any other subject is as wide as the population at large. What brights want is to be as respected by the community, politicians, and authorities as much as anyone who freely labels herself as a Jew, a gay, a feminist, a Baptist, or a Catholic. Nothing more, but – crucially – nothing less.

According to a 2002 survey of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, about 27 million Americans are brights. That's a staggering number, and they vote! In other Western countries our numbers are significantly higher, and I suspect there are many of us even in officially "Muslim" countries around the world. What on earth makes it right to deride our beliefs and ethical convictions? Why would anybody feel threatened by meeting or talking to a bright? There is no reason, and it's time to tell the world about it. If you are a bright, go ahead, use the name and talk to people about it. Not in order to "convert" them, but to stimulate their awareness. If you are not a bright, be decent to us, in the same way in which — one hopes — you are decent to gays and African-Americans even if you are not black and you have a heterosexual orientation. It simply is the decent thing to do.

Leaving a legacy to the *Freethinker*

EVER since it was launched in 1881 to support the non-religious and to reflect their views, the *Freethinker* has depended on the support and generosity of supporters who, through their donations and bequests, have kept the magazine going without a break for more than 120 years.

Since the beginning of 2003, we have received £3,496.00 in donations from generous readers, and we are also extremely grateful to have received a bequest earlier this year of £4,000 as a result of the generosity of the late Lord Sefton, a long-time supporter of the magazine.

Through your forethought in leaving us a legacy, you can help us carry on the fight for the secularisation of our education system, the ousting of the Bishop's Bench from the House of Lords, and the giving of equal rights to non-believers in employment in hospitals, in the armed forces, and in prisons. By promoting reason, tolerance, humanity and good will, we can offer an alternative to the religious authoritarianism that has blighted the world for millennia.

Making a will need not be difficult or complicated, nor need it be expensive. But we do recommend that you get a solicitor to do the job for you. The fees for a simple will are quite modest, and they will relieve you of the worry that your wishes will not be carried out as you want them to be. Your local Citizen's Advice Bureau or law centre may also be able to guide you.

To make the whole process simpler make sure that you go to your solicitor armed with the following information:

- A note of all your main assets. Include your home, your investments, pensions, savings and valuable possessions.
- A list of your liabilities, such as mortgages and other loans.
- Decide who you wish to appoint as executors (these are the people you are entrusting to carry out your will). It is wise to ensure that at least one of them is younger than you. You can ask your solicitor to act as one of your executors. He can also keep your will safe for you.
- If you have dependent children, it is wise to appoint a guardian for them until they are 18.
- Decide what you want to do with your assets. If you want to give particular items to specific individuals, take to your solicitor appropriate details of who they are and what it is you want them to have. Once you have made the will you can change it at any time. Minor revisions can be made without having to make a whole new will. This is done by a formal short document called a codicil, which is placed with your will and forms part of the instructions

If you want to leave a legacy, of whatever size, to the *Freethinker* it will be greatly appreciated.

Christian Institute slammed over homophobic adoption card

A CARD issued last year by the Christian Institute which said: "In the event of my death I do not want my children to be adopted by homosexuals" has been slammed by the Charity Commission as "inappropriate". The Commission ordered the Institute to withdraw the card, which they have now reluctantly done.

In response to a complaint by the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA), the Charity Commission launched an enquiry into the card, that was issued during a parliamentary debate about giving adoption rights to gay couples. GALHA had claimed that the card exceeded the charitable remit of the Institute. The Charity Commission's Tony Dunn, said in a letter to GALHA:

"After careful consideration, the Commission took the view that the adoption card should be withdrawn as being inappropriate. The Institute disagreed. We have indicated the need for commentary to be clearly linked to the promotion of a charitable object, particularly as the card did not refer to the Institute directly, nor the basis of its position on the issue of adoption.

We do however accept that the nature of the card medium may have made detailed reference

to the Institute's position more difficult than with their other publications. As the card was only available on request to individual parents, or journalists in accompaniment to a press release, the card would however be clearly linked with the Christian Institute, and as such, its beliefs. We are assured by the Institute that they have no plans to revive the card or to produce anything similar in the future."

The Charity Commission, however, did not think the CI had "overstepped the mark" as far as charitable restrictions on political campaigning are concerned.

Terry Sanderson, a spokesman for GALHA, said: "We are pleased that the Christian Institute has been forced to withdraw this card. It was crude, insulting and as far from charitable as it is possible to be. It is annoying that such organisations can receive the tax benefits of charitable status to launch such offensive attacks against innocent people. When it was first reported, there was a general revulsion at such blatant homophobia. We can cope with criticism and disapproval, but this was one step beyond fair comment. This document will have deeply hurt many gay people who are doing their best in difficult circumstances."

Crucifix 'inappropriate' says Catholic priest

A NEW South Wales Catholic priest has been accused of undermining church teachings by saying the crucifix should never have become the symbol of Christianity, and that Jesus would have been crucified naked.

Father John Dobson, Sunshine Coast dean and Caloundra priest, made the comments in his column in the *Sunshine Coast Sunday* earlier this year.

His views have since been attacked by Max Lynch, head of the Sunshine Coast Catholic Advocacy League and editor of the fundamentalist Catholic newsletter *Lepanto*. He described the remarks as "unbelievable". "The crucifix has been the symbol of Christianity since it began," he declared.

Father Dobson's remarks were made in the context of the current debate about sexuality of the clergy, in which he advocated a greater understanding of the power of the Christian message.

He wrote that the fascination of sexuality in a negative form has long been a feature of Christianity and that the crucifix had been rendered unauthentic by this negative sexual mindset.

"Most certainly Jesus would have been crucified naked, as was the Roman practice," Father Dobson wrote. "At some stage it was decided that Jesus' genitals must be covered up, and so he was draped in a loincloth, which somehow would make him more presentable in polite Christian company! It is also as if sex had to be removed from this powerful image." Father Dobson said the crucifix should never have become the symbol of Christianity because it was a means of execution. "But maybe the crucifix is the appropriate symbol for such negative, confining thinkers who are terrified to think in a more lateral, open way.

"These people love to debate what other people should or shouldn't be thinking or doing and whether they belong in the Christian tradition or not. Christianity was surely never meant to be a stick to belt someone on the head with, but rather a constant call to a meaningful life with God."

Describing Father Dobson's statements as "weird", Mr Lynch said copies of *Lepanto* detailing the controversy had been sent to three senior Vatican cardinals, including Pope John Paul II's right-hand man, German-born Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

An unrepentant Father Dobson said that he had received positive feedback about his column, which he had been writing for 12 years, with many people commenting it had helped them understand their faith.

Porn movie wrecks weddings

A PORNOGRAPHIC movie shot in an Italian church has rendered dozens of weddings and baptisms invalid. Officials at the medieval St Vincenzo Church at Gioia del Marsi, east of Rome, said they had no idea that the camera crew they allowed into the church were making a porn movie, in which a man dressed as a priest was filmed having sex with a "nun". As a result the church had been turned into unholy ground.

After the scene was recognised as having taken place in the church, people were informed that all ceremonies since conducted in St Vincenzo would have to be repeated. A diocese official said: "They are not valid in the eyes of the church because the building had been tainted. The film crew is now facing charges of desecration."

Another pope declares war on gays

THE head of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenuda III, vowed in Cairo last month to launch a global campaign to root out the "plague" of homosexuality. Shenuda, who claims to have received death threats from gay rights groups during a recent tour of Australia because of his outspoken criticism of gays, promised that he would "initiate contacts with a number of international organisations to fight this plague. We support the courageous who oppose homosexual marriage and the appointment of gays to the clergy," he added.

Language of hate

A CHURCH in Indiana, USA, has stirred up a row with a big sign that declares "Islam: America's Number One Enemy." Mare Monte, pastor at the Faith Baptist Church in the town of Avon said in defence of the sign: "I wanted to stir interest, not alarm, but Islam is a false religion, dangerous and hate-promoting. If I were a pastor who read Ku Klux Klan literature or Hitler's *Mein Kampf* I would hope the members of my church would head to other churches. It is awful stuff. I repudiate it, and I put Islam in the same camp."

But not everyone agreed with him. "To call Islam an 'enemy' seems to be a message of hate," said Susan Jones, who works in Avon. "It is just arrogant and ignorant. It is disheartening that a pastor, a pillar of the community, should be preaching this."

Sayyid M Syeed, director of the Plainfield's Islamic Centre of North America, said such views were inflammatory and dangerous to society. "Whether it is a pastor in Avon or Osama Bin Laden, it is religion spoken with the same language - to incite others and provoke violence. Extremists think a lot alike."



In 1799 the French astronomer Pierre Laplace published a book in which he accounted for the movements of the planets around the sun exclusively in terms of Newton's laws of motion. Apparently he showed his book and explained his theory to the future Emperor Napoleon who asked "What about God?" To which Laplace famously answered, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

I go along with Laplace. In computerspeak I believe in WYSIWYG – what you see is what you get. So I don't believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, an immortal human soul or a spiritual dimension in any shape or form, and I am not aware of any empirical evidence that the human personality survives physical death in any significant way.

I consider it, not a virtue, but a positive dereliction of duty to believe in things for which there is no evidence.

I call myself an atheist rather than an agnostic because I am quite certain that no god who would be recognisable as such to any mainstream Christian, Muslim or Hindu can possibly exist, and I hesitate to call myself a humanist because I think it most unlikely that *homo sapiens* will turn out to be nature's last and best effort before the universe closes down, or that all other terrestrial species exist only to be exploited by man.

Now I'm not here to argue my case in any way, but simply to try to explain what it's like to be me, and I would like to do so in several distinct contexts.

My first context is worship

For an unbeliever I find myself in surprisingly good company.

First of all I am in the company of the Christian Atheists; men like Richard Holloway, the recently retired Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. I'm also in the company of several Anglican bishops, perhaps most famously John Robinson, who, in the 1960s published a book called *Honest to God* in which he explained why he didn't believe in God; and a few Church of Scotland ministers, like Elizabeth McLaren, who in the '70s published a book entitled *The Nature of Belief*, in which she explains why she doesn't really believe.

They don't believe in God either, but they remain in their churches and continue to practise the rituals. This I can't understand. If ritual is the re-enactment of ancient myth, as the Catholic mass and the Jewish Passover clearly are, or the Hindu festival of the Durga Puja, which celebrates the victory of the ten-armed goddess Durga over a buffalo-headed demon, or if ritual involves an address to a mythical being as Friday Prayers in the Mosque or the Lord's Prayer do, then what on earth is the point of the ritual if the myth is no longer believed?

Then I am in the company of the Nature

Mystics. They don't believe in a conventional god either, but they find themselves so overwhelmed by the wonder and beauty and terror they encounter in nature that they find themselves obliged to bow down and worship it.

JACK HASTIE, a regular contributor to the *Freethinker*, was invited earlier this year to deliver the sermon as a guest preacher in a Unitarian church in Scotland. These are the words he addressed to the gathering.



I think it was Rousseau who said, "The heart has its reasons." Notice that he said "the heart", not "the brain."

Well, I have seen the Black Cuillin of Skye painted blood-red by the light of the setting sun. Once I stood for over an hour, mesmerised, in Edinburgh zoo watching a black panther pacing across and across the confines of his enclosure, "following the drills of its eyes." And I have had several close encounters with the spectre Death. I watched both my father and my mother dying; and there was one occasion when, for a time, I was quite certain that I was about to die myself. These were moving and frightening experiences. Sometimes I have tried to conjure poetry out of them, but never have I felt the urge to bow the head, bend the knee and adore anything because of them.

However I did attend the baptismal services of my two children. My wife was a member and is now an elder in the Church of Scotland, and she wanted the kids christened. I was willing to go along with that, and even felt that maybe I should be there. The minister who officiated knew my views and suggested that I attend the services and use them to re-dedicate myself to the highest ideals I knew. So I did this, and that is the only sense in which I can ever be said to have worshipped.

My second context is morals

It's often asserted that morality requires religion firstly to define it and secondly to enforce it. Definition surely shouldn't be a problem; good is what leads to happiness; bad is what causes pain and suffering. Of course there will be grey areas and tricky individual cases, often associated today with medical ethics, such as embryo manipulation, cloning, euthanasia. Only recently there was a dispute over whether a couple should be allowed to have a "designer" baby whose tissue would be used to save the life of another child. So there may well be individual moral conundrums, not so much about what is good and what is bad, but about what is better and what is worse. But

the general principles ought to be clear enough: thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal.

In the eighteenth century the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, worked on a philosophy known as Utilitarianism, according to which moral philosophy was reduced to the greatest good of the greatest number. So all the ancient shibboleths and mystifications – good and evil, right and wrong, sin and holiness, righteousness and wickedness – dissolve like fog in the dawn.

But, of course, morality is about much more than moral philosophy; it is about behaviour, about altruism. So the question has to be asked: "Are we good only because we fear the wrath of the Lord and the agonies of eternal damnation?"

In the 1950s Margaret Knight, who was then a lecturer in psychology at Aberdeen University, delivered a series of radio talks on the subject of morals without religion. Here's what she said in one of them:

"We are naturally social animals and have evolved appropriate instincts because morality has survival value. Our instinct is that it is axiomatic that we should consider others and we have rationalised this into firstly taboo and secondly law."

Notice "survival value". In other words, most of us are good most of the time because those who aren't are less likely to leave descendants who inherit our bad behaviour patterns. And I would suggest that the more we act out of fear of the wrath of God, the less we contribute to the common good.

I am reminded of the last two lines of a poem that was written for a school magazine I was involved with long ago. The poem was about some imaginary pre-historic animal that had become extinct. It concluded:

*"Two eyes it had; two ears and a snout
But it ate its own young and the species
died out."*

My third context is responsibility

The highest religious teachers have always transcended conventional morality.

Jesus gave us the parable of the Good Samaritan, the very model of the man who went out of his way to help someone from an alien cultural background. And that model has been an inspiration for Christian action for millennia; I am thinking of men like William Booth of the Salvation Army and women like Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

So the question is, "Can atheism generate that kind of commitment?" Can I introduce you to William Morris, the nineteenth century English social revolutionary? Morris came from a middle-class background and at one stage intended to take Anglican orders. However, in 1883 he apostatised and joined the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. Here's what he wrote:

"What I mean by Socialism is a condition of

society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor overworked; neither brain-sick brain workers, nor heart-sick hand workers; in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all – the realisation at last of the meaning of the word 'commonwealth'."

Now this turned out to be a dream too far, a Utopia impossible of realisation. Worse than that, this particular dream was perverted into the malignant tumour of Stalinism. But the point I want to make is that out of atheism can come prophecy. And a superior form of prophecy, because Morris sought to transform society, whereas Mother Teresa ministered to the destitute without ever doing anything to diminish the causes of destitution.

Prophecy and even martyrdom. If I can choose one example from a slightly later period, Rosa Luxemburg, one of the founders of the German Communist Party, bitterly opposed the First World War and spent most of it in prison. And shortly after the war she was murdered by German army officers.

Martyrdom and prophecy. So even among the atheists, old men may see visions and young men may dream dreams.

Jesus went even further than this, and in doing so put morality into paradox. According to Luke's Gospel he taught his followers to love their enemies and, when assaulted, to "offer the other cheek."

When I first began to think about what I would say today, the murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman were not long off the front pages; today in the wake of the Iraqi war I might be more likely to think about Osama bin Laden. Can I say here in passing that I have no difficulty in accounting for evil in terms of the perversion of instincts? But that's not my reason for mentioning these names. The French have a saying: "To understand everything is to pardon everything." I believe that if we could understand enough about the person who killed Holly and Jessica we could find it in our hearts certainly to pity and even to forgive him – however he may have killed them.

And I have the utmost respect for a terrorist who, in calculation and cold blood, can blow himself to pieces for a cause in which he believes. But I would submit that to use the term "love" in either of these contexts is a spurious use of rhetoric. And as far as offering the other cheek is concerned, when we encounter either a murderous paedophile or a suicide-bent terrorist we have to try to stop them.

My final context is ultimate meanings

When I look out on a starry night and see the Universe of galaxies stretching away in every direction for millions of light years, and backwards in time for millions of centuries without

any vestige of a purpose, I am a nihilist.

But then I don't have to cope with the recession of the galaxies or the extinction of the dinosaurs. I have lived my life in a goldfish bowl, the little bubble of my own ego. Within that bubble there have always been meanings and purposes; I remember as a wee boy carefully choosing a Christmas, or maybe it was a birthday, present for my mummy.

Later and older, sitting exams, falling in love, getting married, bringing up a family, chasing promotion.

Even now I still set myself targets; this summer my grandson and I planned to climb Ben Lomond together. As he is only eight and I am nearly 68 this may be an ambition too far, but we're in training.

In fact I have never had any difficulty reconciling scepticism, even pessimism, on a cosmic scale with an enthusiasm for living. The pop song writer Warren Zevon was recently

diagnosed with terminal cancer. When a colleague in the music industry asked him if his condition had taught him anything about life and death, Zevon thought for a moment and said, "How much you're supposed to enjoy every sandwich."

The United States' Constitution proclaims that man has the right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

The Hebridean folksong, *Westerling Home*, assures us that on our arrival, on the island of Islay, laughter and love will be waiting to welcome us.

I concede that my atheism could not have delivered me from despair in Buchenwald, or in the famine camps of Africa. But as far as mainstream human experience goes – life, love, laughter and the possibility of happiness – in these, I am a believer.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Hebrew toast, *le chaim* – to life.

Homosexuals blamed for demanding democracy

KING Mswati III of Swaziland, who earlier this year blamed all the world's ill on women wearing trousers, has followed up his controversial remarks with an attack on people pressing for democracy in his country. The king told 500 religious leaders that democracy was a fashion unsuitable for Swaziland.

As an absolute monarch, the 34-year old king rules by decree and has control over the government. His autocratic style of rule has attracted criticism at home and abroad.

A prominent supporter of the King, Pastor Mkhubuzza Zwane, joined in the debate, describing the multiparty system as "evil". Pastor Zwane said there was a culture of homosexuality among demonstrators for political change in Swaziland.

Swaziland is one of Africa's smallest and poorest countries with four in every ten people suffering from HIV/Aids. Campaigners say a decade ago life expectancy was 61. Now it is just 37. Soon it will be 30.

Christians dedicate Kenya to God

AROUND 20,000 Christians from various denominations gathered in Nairobi in August to dedicate Kenya to God.

The occasion was marked by prayers of repentance for ills such as tribal clashes (1991-1992), corruption, torture, and terrorism, and seeking God's guidance in the war against afflictions such as HIV/Aids, poverty and insecurity.

Highlight of the occasion was the dedication of Kenya's draft constitution to God. A Member of Parliament, Onesmus Kihara Mwangi, noted that there were some clauses in the constitution that were ungodly, and asked the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission to dedicate the preamble of the document to God.

Kihara, who was speaking on behalf of parliamentarians, said that sections of the draft document that seemed to sanction abortion and homosexuality should be deleted because they were ungodly.

No Bible verses, no refugee status

A SUDANESE man who could not recite Bible verses on demand has been refused refugee status in New Zealand. The NZ Immigration Service said it did not believe Mechel Sami Salih Sakran, 41, was the Christian he purported to be. He could not recite Bible verses when asked during his interview. It was concluded the "evidence suggested that Mr Sakran was dishonest and evasive, traits that one would not expect of a person holding strong Christian beliefs".

Baptist missionary jailed for abusing young boys

A FORMER Baptist church missionary has been jailed in Australia for eight years for sexually abusing young boys during visits to the Philippines.

David John Gillard, 57, was voluntarily deported to Australia in 2001 after local authorities caught him interfering with young boys at camps for disadvantaged children.

He pleaded guilty to 12 counts of indecency relating to four boys during four visits to the Philippines from May 1999 to July 2001. The NSW District Court heard that Gillard would visit the camps and offer the boys food, clothing and money.

THESE days, when you talk about religious fundamentalism, the image conjured in people's minds is of a robe-wearing, beard-sporting Arab – quietly sitting at the back of Flight 730 from Heathrow, waiting to strike.

But fanatical Islamists are the least of our worries. They are only the visible tip of the iceberg when it comes to extremism – the part that our police, army and security services are dedicated to weeding out and imprisoning. They're the usual suspects – the people we expect to endanger our human rights.

What we don't expect – and what many of us don't even know – is that the real front line of fundamentalism is much harder to identify, and can do far more damage. It's in our schools, in our youth clubs, in our social ser-

vices, and in our universities. It wears ordinary clothes, looks like everyone else; is polite, well educated and plausible. To make matters

Cultic methods are shamelessly being used by Alpha to lure youngsters into fundamentalist Christian courses, warns NIKOLAI SEGURA

worse, it's targeting our biggest asset, our only store for the future – our children.

When I arrived at my first "Alpha Course" session, I was 19, and in my last year of university at Imperial College. The Alpha Course, run by the semi-Pentecostal Holy Trinity Brompton Church in South Kensington, markets itself as "...a practical introduction to the Christian Faith..", and a chance to explore the big questions of life. As it turned out, it was really a chance to target young, vulnerable people – newly separated from their parents and likely to be lonely and low on confidence – in an attempt to fill the empty pews of the Church of England. As they themselves point out, "If we continue at the present rate, by 2020 in some areas the church will no longer exist."

They use every cult tactic in the book: peer pressure; emotional blackmail; instant "friends"; isolation; abstraction; fatigue – everything you'd expect from a well-oiled fundamentalist sect. And here's the scary part – they're coming to a school near you.

The Alpha for Youth Leader's Guide makes an interesting read. It details, point by point, how best to infiltrate a school or youth group, target the vulnerable children within, and convert them to Alpha's biblical literalist, homophobic version of Christianity.

First off, you need to gain a position of trust: "Many churches are involved in running or helping with different kinds of youth clubs and organisations in their locality. These might include: sports clubs, Scouts or Guides, open/drop-in youth centres, social work or training projects, choirs or drama societies. These gatherings of young people present an interesting and challenging mission field ..."

If you are a sports person then see if you can support the Physical Education department ...; if you are a musician think about offering your time to the music department ... – do whatever you can to be of use and to build up relationships and trust. Any proposal you make will be far more generously received if it is made from this position of trust."

And you thought churches helped schools

purely out of civic-mindedness. But that's only the beginning of the infiltration – after all, indoctrination can't be successful if you don't know who you're indoctrinating:

"Take some time to think about this group of young people and to write down everything you know about them. No piece of information is too trivial.

- *What are their ages?*
- *What is their current level of involvement with the church?*
- *What are their main leisure interests?*
- *Which causes or issues animate them?*
- *What is their level of education?*
- *What is it that makes them a definable group?*
- *What clothing labels do they wear?*
- *What films do they watch?*
- *What responsibilities/time commitments do they have?"*

And finally, if all else fails, pick kids who can't defend themselves:

"The Alpha for Youth material is split into streams. One of these streams attempts to present these concepts [sin, salvation, grace] in a way that is more appropriate for young people not yet thinking abstractly, either because they are too young, or because they do not have the academic or intellectual resources to interact with the material in this way."

Then outnumber them in small groups (two "discussion leaders" and two "helpers" per group) – and blast them with repetitive Christian worship songs, and propaganda for an hour. Repeat for 11 weeks. If all that doesn't work, take them on a weekend away, tire them out with several two-hour "sessions" and physical exercise in between, and then have people talk in tongues all around them, lay hands on them and pray for them.

To top it all, even the theology preached at Alpha is tailored to take advantage of vulnerable people – those who are lonely, low on self confidence, confused or abandoned.

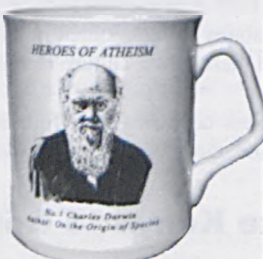
People with low self-esteem are more likely to believe it when they're told that they're all sinners, and deserve to die. People who are lonely and vulnerable are likelier to respond to the promises of eternal love despite their intrinsic flaws, and the immediate hope of instant friends and community. People who have a poor standard of education are more likely to accept the crude evidences that Alpha presents for its brand of paint-by-numbers Christianity, and are ill-equipped to defend their own beliefs.

Children and adolescents are the embodiment of all those characteristics. They're still being educated – they often feel isolated and lonely – and they have very low self esteem. They're easy pickings for Alpha's professional indoctrinators – and, thanks to Tony Blair's commitment to faith schools, they'll also be more accessible than ever.

Win a set of Heroes of Atheism quality mugs

IF YOU had the opportunity of placing a notice on a church billboard, what would it say? The doctored photograph on our cover this month is an example of a mischievous message, but we are sure you can devise something funnier.

The first prize in our competition is a set of quality mugs specially commissioned by the National Secular Society. They are worth £29.95.



The Heroes of Atheism mug collection features six individuals chosen by NSS members in a poll. They are Charles Darwin, Richard Dawkins, Carl Sagan, Bertrand Russell, David

Hume and Charles Bradlaugh. The full set of mugs, and other Heroes of Atheism products, can be viewed at

on the web at www.secularism.org/merchant.htm, where the mugs can be bought on-line as a set, or individually.

Entries to the competition, which should be addressed to **Billboard Contest, Freethinker, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD**, should reach us by December 10, 2003.

Apart from the top prize of the mug collection, three runners-up will receive prizes of a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*, plus a copy of Barbara Smoker's collection of *Freethinker* articles, entitled *Freethoughts*.

Autistic boy suffocated during exorcism

A CHURCH minister has been charged with physical abuse after an eight-year-old autistic boy died during an exorcism carried out in August in Milwaukee, USA. Ray Hemphill, 45, was charged with physical abuse of a child causing great bodily harm, a crime punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a \$25,000 fine.

Torrance died of suffocation after he was wrapped in sheets and tied down at a church service. According to the county coroner's office, his chest had been strapped and he had been unable to breathe. Help was only called after an hour of prayer when a worshipper noticed the boy was not moving.

Torrance's mother had been taking him to the Faith temple Church of Apostolic Faith church three times a week in the hope of curing his autism.

The boy's grandmother claimed force was used but this was disputed by church members. "We were asking God to take this spirit that was tormenting this little boy to death," said Bishop David Hemphill Sr, brother of the man who was charged in connection with the death. "He just passed away. God is a mysterious person, and if he wants to call a life back, he does."

Denise Allison, 25, said she had become close friends with the boy and his mother, Patricia Cooper, during two years living in the duplex above the family. Allison said Torrance, called "Junior" by family and

friends, was brilliant with his hands, and could craft complex kites from newspaper. Though hardly able to speak, Torrance would knock on her door and shout with a smile, "Tickle," asking Allison to play with and tickle him. "He was really fun to be around, but you had to relax, get to know him and understand his ways," Allison said. "He just wanted love and attention like any other kid."

Allison and other neighbours said they'd seen radical changes in Cooper's behavior after she joined the church this spring. Once gregarious and energetic, the single mother getting by mostly on Social Security began to live in near-seclusion, appearing dazed, exhausted, and increasingly worried.

"They completely brainwashed Patricia," Allison said. She claimed that a church member approached Cooper one day when she was struggling to control Torrance outside their home. The person told Cooper that if she brought her son to the church, he could be "spiritually healed."

Church members began to take Cooper and Torrance to the church in a van three and four times a day for prayer, Allison said. Cooper told her that during prayer sessions – both at home

and at church – church members would forcibly hold down Torrance and strike him in attempts to heal him of his autism.

On one occasion Cooper told her that during an exorcism the devil started to speak through Junior, saying, "Kill me. Take me."

Allison began to notice that each time the group gathered in the apartment, Torrance would screech, wail and cry. She and other neighbours noticed Torrance had a swollen lip and black eye the days after at-home prayer sessions, she said.

Once, Allison said, she looked through her friend's window and saw church members taking turns striking the boy with a belt as Cooper watched.

"I told Patricia that it was wrong, but she said the Bible told her you're supposed to chastise your children," Allison said.

"I told her to stop, asked her what could a little kid ever do that was so wrong to beat him like that? Cooper said the church told her it was the only way to heal him."

David Hemphill and his church were investigated in 1998 after a mother struck her 12-year-old daughter with a stick during a church service. The girl suffered bruises and cuts.

No charges were filed after authorities talked to the mother and Hemphill, who both defended the physical discipline as necessary for the unruly girl.



Torrance Cantrell, another victim of Christian superstition

Progressive Dutch Catholic group throws in the towel

AN umbrella group representing Dutch groups who want to modernise the Catholic Church has decided to disband. Chairman Henk Baars of the progressive 8 May Movement (AMB) said the lack of volunteers and money were the main reasons behind the decision to dissolve at the end of the year.

The AMB was formed by 100 Catholic groups in 1985 on the eve of the Pope's visit to the Netherlands. Tens of thousands of believers took to the streets on 8 May to protest that the question of renewal of the Church's structures was left off the agenda.

The AMB campaigned for women priests, the abolition of compulsory celibacy and the full acceptance into the Church of homosexuals. Baars said the AMB had managed to achieve little in terms of church politics over the last 18 years as Roman Catholicism remained a conservative bulwark.

'Atheist' priest gets his job back

A DANISH priest who admitted to not believing in God has been given his job back after he apologised for his comments. Earlier this summer Thorkild Grosbøll confessed to thinking that God was no more real than Robin Hood.

He also stated that he did not believe in resurrection or eternal life. The statements from Grosbøll drew criticism from figures inside the Danish church, media, and the political community, and he was dismissed from his position.

However, in July, Bishop Lise-Lotte Rebel confirmed that the priest's suspension had been annulled after Grosbøll apologised. The Danish media are now questioning the priest's credibility and the bishop's right to decide whether his faith is strong enough.

It's official: Barbie is a slut

TWO dolls created by an Iranian government agency to counter the "threat" of Barbie and Ken are said to be selling well in this hard-line Islamic country. Dara and Sara, with their modest clothing and pro-family backgrounds, were developed by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, a government agency affiliated to the Ministry of Education, which exists to promote traditional values.

Toy seller Masoumeh Rahimi welcomed the dolls, which are made in China. She insisted that Barbie was "foreign to Iran's culture" because the buxom, blonde doll sometimes wore "revealing clothing".

She said young girls who play with Barbie, a doll she sees as "wanton", could grow into women who reject Iranian values.

"I think every Barbie doll is more harmful than an American missile," Ms Rahimi said.

Many die at Indian religious festival

AT least 39 people were killed and more than 100 injured in a stampede at the Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela in western India in August. An estimated six million people gathered at Nasik and the neighbouring town of Trimbakeshwar for one of the holiest days of the massive Kumbh Mela, or Great Pitcher festival.

Witnesses said thousands of pilgrims pushing to take a dip in the holy Godavari river broke through police barricades.

The festival was held near Mumbai, where two bombings killed 52 people a few days earlier, but is held in a different part of India every three years. It began on July 30 and ended in the first week of September.

Gimme head with hair, long beautiful hair;
 shining, gleaming, streaming, flaxen,
 waxen ...
 Give me down to there hair, shoulder
 length or longer;
 here baby, there mama, everywhere daddy
 daddy ...
 hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair ...
 Flow it, show it, long as God can grow it,
 my hair.

- from the 60s musical, *Hair*

In a rare bout of insomnia recently, I got to thinking about hair. Or, to be more precise, the rich auburn locks that cascaded over my ears and collar when I was in my late teens and early twenties. (It has long since gone, of course, having migrated from my scalp, only to emerge as wiry white growths sprouting like Japanese knotweed from nostrils and ears. Ain't nature a bitch!)

What set off this train of thought was a 4 am trawl through a bag of old photographs. Among them was one of me chatting to actress Susannah York at a cocktail party in 1974, held to celebrate the launch of the movie *Gold*, in which she starred. My hair was almost as long as hers – and boy, did it ever land me in hot water when I was wearing it that length in my native South Africa.

Long hair on men, in those days, was universally reviled by members of the dominant white Dutch Reformed Church, and anyone spotted wearing it that length was, at best, subjected to abuse; at worst, physically attacked.

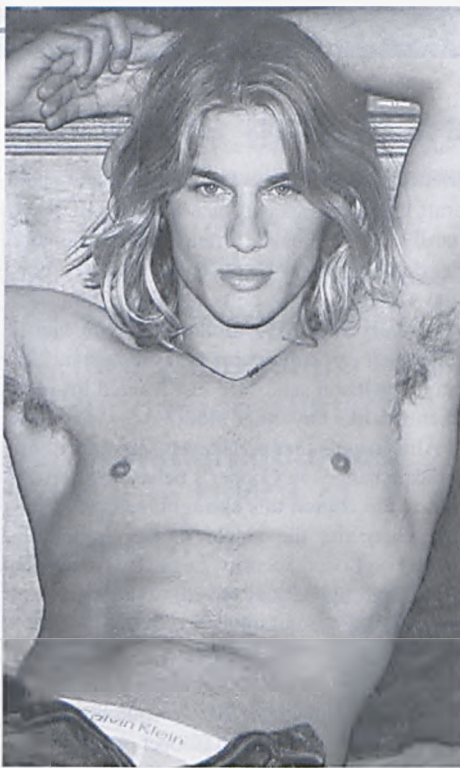
I was the victim of both, frequently being called a “communist”, a “liberalist”, a “moffie” (queer), a “hippie” – or a combination of all four. I was assaulted on three occasions – one attack saw me dragged by my hair alongside a moving car for a few hundred yards – but fortunately I escaped the punishment handed down to some others: having their hair hacked off with blunt bowie knife.

What fuelled this hatred? Chiefly, the blistering condemnation of long hair by balding, bullet-headed fundamentalist DRC *dominees* (pastors) up and down that mad and sunny land who, in the late sixties and early seventies, could think of nothing more threatening to the South African way of life.

And they had, as justification for their extreme views, the Bible – the same tome that made racial prejudice the cornerstone of the apartheid state.

Naturally, this hatred of long hair was no means confined to South Africa. Along the entire length and breadth of America's bible belt similar sentiments were being expressed, and even in Britain there were no-go areas for long-haired individuals.

Christian revulsion of men with long hair



Long-haired Travis Fimmel, who models Calvin Klein products in ads and on billboards around the world

stretches a long way back in time, as this quotation indicates: “It is clear that long haire is one of the sinfull customes and fashions of the wicked men of the worlde!” This observation was made by Thomas Hall, an English pastor in King's Norton, who felt so strongly about the issue that he burst into print in the mid-17th century with a publication entitled *The Loathsomenesse of Long Hair*.

Why are many Christians as phobic about long-haired man as they about those who are gay? BARRY DUKE goes in search of the answer

In it he stated that long hair was “the guise and fashion of the most barbarous, idolatrous, heathenish nations that know not God, but worship the devil – such as the Virginians of America.”

But even he was no newcomer to the debate. In 5,000 years, of all the fashions the world has seen, none has been as closely and controversially interwoven with moral, political and religious attitudes as men's hairstyles. And right throughout history the church and lawmakers have desperately tried to influence styles through threats, pleas, pronouncements and legislation – all with scant success.

In the mid-17th century, according to a formidable tome entitled *Fashions in Hair: the First 5,000 Years*, by Richard Corson, many people were inclined to blame the devil for

Pushin hair li its li

anything of which they disapproved. “These people wasted no time in pointing out that long hair was a flagrant example of the devil's handiwork,” Corson observed.

Hall's idea of hair being too long was “when it lyes on the back and shoulders”, adding that “the haire of a man's head is given to man for cover to his head, and not to his back and body, which apparel must cover”.

Earlier in the century another Christian with strong views on the subject, William Prynne, published *The Unloveliness of Lovelocks*. (The lovelock, according to Corson, was “one of the most inexplicable fashions of the period”. It comprised one particularly long lock which men wore draped over one shoulder. Occasionally a bow or rosette was attached to the end.)

Prynne, addressing his book to “the Christian reader”, declared, in a text containing more invective than logic, that the style was “coarse, vile, effeminate and lascivious”. He accused its wearers of being “wholly degenerated and metamorphosed into women by indulging in the womanish, sinful and unmanly act of crissing, curling, frouncing, powdering and nourishing their locks”.

As if this weren't enough, Prynne went on to accuse lovelock-wearers of “violating the decent tonsure of their ancestors, and breaking the very ordinance and law of God and nature”.

Richard Corson's objective and scholarly book clearly reveals that throughout history, close-cropped individuals have been militant types of a rigidly conservative order – far more concerned with the development of the physique than they were of the mind. The early Greeks, however, were a notable exception. While the males were short-haired and athletic, they remained at the same time sensual, cultured and open-minded.

A common *modus operandi* of all militant races was to force haircuts on groups and nations subjugated by means of political power and war. Julius Caesar did this to the Gauls, who regarded long hair as an honour. To this day, the army does this to recruits, and prisoners in most parts of the world are shorn of their locks.

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Long hair, on the other hand, was the "trademark" of the open-minded, freethinking individualist, who, through the ages, has been associated with liberal attitudes, the arts and demands for freedom of speech and thought. He has been, and still is, an innovator clamouring for a change to old-world ideals and behaviour patterns, Corson observed.

But the Rev "Dr" Jack Hyles, an American Baptist preacher who shuffled off to glory about three years ago, did not quite see it that way.

In a booklet entitled *Jesus Had Short Hair!*, written, I would guess around 30 years ago, he thundered that long-haired men were decadent, and possibly homosexual. Worse still, their long hair would frequently be accompanied by the "Sign of the Antichrist" – that's the international peace symbol to you and me.

His booklet begins with a short history lesson. "Several years ago musical groups such as the Beatles presented to society a hair style that was new to our generation. Soon long-haired young men began to appear on our streets. The hippie movement adopted this hair style, as did the Jesus freaks and other religious cults.

"Soon many men and boys who are not hippies, Jesus freaks, religious cultists or revolutionaries, adopted these hair styles.

"When protests began to come from parts of the Christian world, the advocates of these newer hair styles replied that they saw nothing wrong with men wearing long hair since Jesus Himself had long hair. They referred to paintings of Christ which picture Him with long flowing hair. This sent the older generation and some Christian leaders hurrying to the Bible and history books to find if, for a fact, Jesus did have long hair."

Hyles own research showed that Jesus had short hair.

"The paintings of Christ are simply artists' conceptions and have no Scriptural authorization. At least one historian of His day described Him as being a tall man with chestnut-colored hair, parted in the middle, with short hair which turned up at the end.

"In *The Modern Students' Book of Christ* by Irving Vollmer the author says, 'Archeologists

object to the conventional pictures of Christ because they are not true to history.' A German painter, L Fahrenkrog, says, 'Christ certainly never wore a beard, and His hair was beyond a doubt closely cut. For this we have historical proof.' The oldest representations going back to the first Christian centuries and found chiefly in the catacombs of Rome all pictured Him without a beard.

"All the pictures of Christ down to the beginning of the first century and even later are of this kind. Students of the first century and of Roman history are aware of the fact that the time of Christ was characterized by short hair for men. This author has seen many coins and statues which bear the likenesses of emperors who reigned during and after the time of Christ. Such likenesses reveal that the Caesars and other rulers and emperors had short hair, and, of course, the subjects followed the example set by the emperor.

"The plain, simple truth is that during the life of Christ, short hair was the acceptable style. That Jesus wore the conventional style of His day is proved by the fact that Judas had to kiss Him to point Him out to the soldiers. Had Jesus been somewhat different, as a long-haired freak, Judas could have simply told the soldiers that Jesus was the One with the long hair. This, of course, is not true, as Judas had to place a kiss on Him in order to identify Him."

Hyles also points out that "the Bible plainly teaches that it is a 'shame' for a man to wear long hair, and points to I Corinthians 11:14: 'Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?'

"The Greek word for 'shame' in this verse is translated elsewhere in the New Testament as 'dishonor', 'vile', 'disgrace'. In Romans 1:26 the same word is translated as 'vile': 'For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.' You will notice that these 'vile affections' have to do with homosexuality.

"It is very interesting that as the trend toward long hair increases, the acceptance of homosexuality increases. This is not to say that long hair and homosexuality always go together, but it is to note the fact that both are on the rise in our generation."

Hyles ends his tirade with the following call: "Men, let us wear our short hair with pride as a symbol of our belief in the Bible and its Christ. Parents, start your son with haircuts and short hair when he is a baby. With discipline *and, if needs be, punishment* [my italics], see to it that as he grows up he uses his hair as a symbol of patriotism and Christianity, thereby following the admonition of the Scripture that says in Romans 12:2, *And be not conformed (fashioned) to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind,*

that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect, is the will of God."

Nowadays, it is impossible to draw any conclusions from the length of a man's hair – unless it is viewed in a particular context – say, for example, a rally of British National Party (BNP) neo-fascist thugs. Thirty years ago, one would automatically associate the skinhead look with the racist National Front, but this look was well and truly subverted – first by young gay men, who deliberately adopted the style to rob it of its menace, and later by older men, gay and straight, who used it to turn the tables on the balding process (I confess to being one them). Today, if you were to walk into any one of a myriad gay bars in London, you'd be forgiven for thinking that it was hosting a convention of death-row inmates!

Which is probably why David Copeland, with his dark, closely-cropped hair, blended in so well when he entered a gay bar, the Admiral Duncan in Soho, London on April 30, 1999, carrying a nail bomb in a bag.

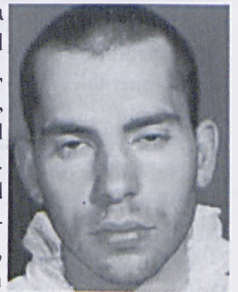
Copeland, who revered the Nazis, had, in separate earlier attacks, planted nail bombs in Brixton and Brick Lane, London, aimed at the black and Asian communities. But the most devastating explosion took place when he targeted the gay community. Ironically, two of the three people – a pregnant woman and her husband – who died as a result of this third terrible hate crime were not gay. Copeland, arrested shortly after the pub bombing, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Another neo-Nazi who has most recently hit the headlines is

American Joseph L Druce, the man who, in August this year, strangled the jailed Roman Catholic paedophile priest John J Geoghan. Druce, 38, an avowed homophobe who also loathed black people,

was serving life imprisonment, without parole, in a maximum-security prison in Boston for strangling a bus driver he thought was gay. That crime took place in 1989. According to reports in the American media, Druce told his lawyer that he had killed Geoghan, who was serving his term in the same prison, to avenge the disgraced priest's victims.

Druce, unlike Copeland, did not wear his hair short. In fact, he grew it very long.



David Copeland



Joseph L Druce

It is now the year 2003 CE, the history of the world is still young and we are already starting to gasp in utter disbelief as our universe gradually reveals its size, being seemingly infinite and ever-expanding. A little over 200 years ago most of humankind thought that the Milky Way, the galaxy in which our planet Earth has its place, was everything there was, and our galaxy was looked upon as being absolutely and unbelievably massive. Having looked into very deep space, we now know we will never stop learning.

Through the centuries, beginning in the smallest way, humans have continually devised new methods of researching nature, seeking to quench their thirst for knowledge, moving in known and new fields in attempts to gain insights into the secrets of life. There is so much which remains unknown, so much which has yet to be discovered. For every piece of puzzle put into position another thousand loose pieces come into existence, eagerly awaiting their turn to find their place in the total picture. The capabilities offered by our universe today are innumerable; radio and TV, mobile phones, X-rays, music, sound, sight, smell, consciousness, art, flying, motor cars, balancing on a bicycle, and so on – it just cannot be true – it's a never-ending and a continually expanding list. Fantastic.

As far as astronomy is concerned, even the Druids watched the skies. They possibly even built Stonehenge as an aid to their stargazing. And now, after thousands of years untiringly observing space through constantly improving optics, from today's space satellites and from radio telescopes and platforms in space, we are able to observe millions, no, billions of galaxies of all sizes and kinds, and we now know that the universe is of such a size that we cannot conceive, in any way, the sheer vastness of space. A recent scientific TV programme suggested that there are more suns in so many billions of galaxies than the number of sand corns on all the beaches on our planet.

Such facts are staggering. There is hardly any room left to think of just a few of the amazing statistics involving our cosmos: that our planet would fit into our sun one million times; that the farthest galaxies we can see are moving away from us almost at the speed of light – and this happens as space itself expands; that light travels 5,880,000,000,000 miles in one solar year – this means that any event occurring, for example, on the sun, is visible on Earth about ten minutes later, but 50 minutes later on Jupiter. The micro-cosmos is even more amazing, an example being that the relative distances between measurable micro-entities are greater on scale than in the macro-cosmos.

So, if we think about the universe and its incredible mass, about the speed of light; about the distances between suns; about all the billions of planets; about the countless black

holes – all whirlpools of churning energy; about old suns exploding and growing rapidly into balls of energy millions of miles across; about the millions and millions of planets there must be which are carrying life forms we cannot even imagine; about our planet, stuck right on the outskirts of the Milky Way, but still teeming with life in spite of our misusing and destroying what we have; then the trifling biblical description of creation in Genesis cannot possibly have anything to do with what we see in the "heavens" today.

Swiss resident IAN KELLY takes a fresh look at Adam and Eve's 'long and happy marriage' – and finds some glaring inconsistencies and a great deal of confusion

As is usually the case in the Bible, the description of God creating the earth begins in a state of confusion: Genesis 1.2, "*And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters*", so you see, the waters were already there! And we are talking about *God's Word!* In 1.4, we can read the following: "*And God saw the light that it was good*", so, being pedantic, we can assume that until he saw it he didn't know if it was going to be good or not. He then went on to divide the light from the darkness and called the light Day and the darkness Night. It's obvious that this, the creation, the most important part of the Bible, has not been written by an able representative, but by someone who knew nothing about planetary movements – the sun's "light", giving us day and night, has only to do with the rotation of the earth, not with "divided light" as we all now know. But somebody should have known it then. Genesis 6 is clearer – it tells us that "the sky appeared". At least it looks as if it is clear (a pun to be excused). Unfortunately Genesis 7 and 8 lead to confusion again. Now he makes the firmament and divides the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament? So he seemingly put waters under the firmament and below the firmament and then changed them again? Anyway, he now calls the firmament "Heaven".

Genesis 1. 9,10,11,12, and 13 are simple-to-understand descriptions, 14 proves again that a layman of sorts was busy writing the story of the creation and probably, knowingly or not, introduced a then current belief in astrology into biblical history. The rest, the continuation of the creation of our overwhelmingly fantastic universe, as I have described it above, is a marvel of biblical understatement, the billions of stars being palmed off as lights,

the sun and the moon as lights for the day and night (that's odd, these "lights" had already been created in Genesis 4, on the first day). Confusion again.

Then biblical creation continues, taking its course quite without problems really, the animal kingdom being created, and then, on what appears to be on the fifth or sixth day (I can't quite work it out), God created man.

Quite fascinating really if you think about it. Being Adam I mean. Created on the fifth or sixth day when the world was sparkling new, being completely alone in paradise. No worries, no enemies, no need for boring old small-talk. Made by God in our image. Pardon? In our image? Well, that's what it says in the Bible, see Genesis 1.26. Unfortunately, and as much as we would like to, we don't know to whom God was talking or who was helping him in his creative phase, but this fact is clearly stated. In 1.27 he suddenly changes to "*in his own image*", getting back to basics, so to speak, so that's alright then. Clears things up a bit. Makes it more logical. It's just that ... well ... why does he say *in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them*. Confusing really. (Adam and Eve were surely the first people in Eden, that's the whole aim of the tale.) God goes on to bless them, (these males and females), gives them dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. He also told them to be fruitful and multiply: 1.28.

However, moving on to Genesis 2.5, we are surprised to hear not only that God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, but that there was not a man to till the ground. So, obviously needing someone to till the ground, he now



Michelangelo, in depicting Original Sin in his painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, represented the serpent as being female.

formed man of the dust of the ground, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

So who are the males and females he created in 1.27?

Anyway, let's forget all that, and stick to Adam's story – the man who had the breath of life breathed into him. Adam was put into the Garden of Eden in order to look after it (and to presumably till the ground). He was, however, told that *of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a help for him.* Saying this, he caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep and he took one of Adam's ribs out, made a woman from it and took her to Adam. Adam then called her Woman because she was taken out of Man. This was logical, really, and is apparently the reason why (see Genesis 2.24) Adam said, *therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.* Clear? It just makes you wonder how Adam, at that point in time, still wet behind the ears really, knew anything about fathers and mothers. If eating the apple was supposed to be the (at that moment, future) cause of sin brought about by knowledge of nakedness, how are fathers and mothers in the picture at this stage?

Chapter three starts off somewhat more confusingly because a serpent is able to talk to the woman (later to be known as Eve). The serpent goes on to tell her that *in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.* So there we have it again. There is more than one god. Anyway she was tempted, who wouldn't be if one could become a god (or perhaps a goddess, although being female and thus not so important, goddesses are not mentioned). She took of the fruit and gave some to her husband (they'd got married at some time) and he did eat. Now the funny thing is he didn't die, even though God had told him he surely would if he ate of the fruit of the tree!

Now, having eaten, they immediately realised that they were naked. They hadn't seen that before – so in a state of nudity they sewed fig leaves together (with what is not specified) and made aprons for themselves. God, who was walking in the Garden, called to Adam and they hid themselves because they were naked. God then asked a very good question – *Who told thee that thou wast naked?* Any quick thinker knows, of course, that it could only have been Eve. It would be interesting to know if she giggled when she told Adam that he was naked, maybe giving him a symbolic dig in the ribs and perhaps even cheekily dropping her eyes to give him a clue and to underline her meaning. Adam, ignoring

the fact that he was supposed to be responsible for his own actions, something which Christianity snapped up later, immediately blames the woman as well as God, saying *"The woman thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat."* God, suddenly no longer all-knowing and obviously also of the opinion that the woman must be to blame, asks her, *"What is this that thou hast done?"* Whereupon the woman blames the serpent. From this moment, after being cursed by God, the serpent is fated to go around on his belly and eat dust for the rest of his days.

Maybe up until that fateful moment the serpent species had legs.

Now comes the part where God, instead of blessing the couple and saying how lovely it was that they could also share in the knowledge of life instead of hanging around forever in the Garden of Eden like two morons, chooses to put enmity between the two, and tells Eve that he (being as we know, a hard-liner in such matters) intends to increase her sorrow, that she shall bring forth children in sorrow and that her husband shall rule over her. Adam is then more or less disowned and is sent out of the Garden of Eden after God had made coats out of skins for Adam and Eve. The question of where the skins came from (there had hardly been a chance for grown animals to die, they had only been on the earth for five minutes), we'll leave until another day.

Chapter 4.1, tells us that Adam knew Eve his wife; and that she conceived and bare Cain, and said (another strange thing), *I have gotten a man from the Lord Confused?* And then she bare Cain's brother Abel.

Later on, as a result of more confusion, Cain slew Abel. God was mad at him and banned him to the land of Nod, east of Eden. Now comes another odd moment. *Cain knew his wife and she bare Enoch.* Where on earth did Cain's wife come from? We have always assumed that the human race was started by Adam and Eve. Confused again? Never mind, for after a few generations had followed the birth of Enoch, Adam knew his wife again and she bare a son and she called him Seth; the reason for this apparently was because, *God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.* Common sense really.

By the way, in spite of having eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge and having been assured by God that he would surely die, Adam lived to be 930 years old.

The crux of this story is that you, of course, thought that eating the apple from the tree of knowledge had to do with sex. But as the Word of God shows quite clearly, sex has nothing to do with it. There are a number of good reasons for saying this. The first is of course that when God made Adam originally

he – intending Adam to be led into temptation – obviously gave him male genitals. Eve, made from Adam's rib, was the recipient of female genitals, and rightly so. This we know because as soon as they had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge they knew they were naked, that is, they suddenly saw their genitals for what they were. Of different gender. Of course you may tend to be of the opinion that had God not wanted them to understand that they were different from each other (not wanted them to possibly succumb to temptation placed by him in their way), that he would have made them without genitals – this would more or less have been a guarantee that everything would stay as carefully planned. After all, the physical shapes and forms of human male and female genitals haven't been designed specifically only for urinating (otherwise I wouldn't be able to write this), for this purpose they could easily be of a different construction, even be more efficient than they are. No, forget sex having anything to do with the developments in the Garden of Eden. God said, right at the beginning, that man should multiply (Chapter 1. 28). The reason for God's anger was evidently the fact that man had *gained knowledge* by eating the fruit of the tree, instead of spending aeons lazing around in hammocks slung between the trees after tilling the ground and not even knowing if one was wearing clothes or not.

So Adam's sin, no sorry, I mean Eve's sin, no, sorry – right at the end it was the Serpent's sin, and to him/her (it?) we should be thankful, as this prevented us from remaining mentally retarded until the end of time.

The biblical story of Creation doesn't seem to have any other point.

- Ian Kelly "grew up in the lap of Jehovah's Witnesses". Today, retired, he is "concerned with the world-wide move back to blind faith". He is also a member of the Swiss free-thinkers who fight against the luxury lifestyle led by the state-supported Swiss clergy.

Ex-nun jailed for five years

A LONDON headmistress and former nun who stole £500,000 of school funds to pay for a lavish lifestyle of foreign holidays, expensive restaurant meals, designer jewellery and clothes, was jailed for five years in August.

Sentencing Colleen McCabe following a nine-week trial at Southwark Crown Court, Judge Christopher Elwen told McCabe that she was a mendacious, manipulative and self-satisfied individual who had shown no remorse for her actions. The court had been told earlier that McCabe, 50, had stolen the money from the St John Rigby College in West Wickham, south east London.

IT MAY seem odd to be re-viewing in 2003 a book published in 1993, but this scholarly American history has just gone on retail sale in the UK, and there have been no important developments in its subject since 1993.

Many Americans believe, without studying the subject, that the Genesis stories of Adam and Eve and Noah's flood are literally true. They may be described as naive creationists, or in some cases anti-science creationists, following the American tradition of rebellion against intellectual elites.

This book is about another group, the self-styled "scientific creationists", who have written books and given lectures claiming to provide scientific proof that evolution is false. They are often dismissed as pseudo-scientists and cranks, but Robert L. Numbers does not dismiss them.

He seeks to understand them. He writes: "I think it is profitable to get acquainted with the neighbours, especially so if we find them threatening".

The neighbours he acquaints us with are nearly all American Protestants. Catholics, Jews, and Mormons. Inhabitants of Britain get a look in, but their contribution to scientific creationism was never large. American Protestants have directed and dominated the movement, from Darwin's day to the rich and influential Creation Research Society of our time.

Readers learn a lot in passing about American Protestant sects, colleges, periodicals, doctrinal differences and personal antagonisms. I learn, for instance, that the Missouri Lutherans are a separate sect, not confined to Missouri and doctrinally distinct from other American Lutherans. And that Seventh Day Adventists hold not only the Bible, but also the works of Ellen G. White (1827-1915) to be divinely inspired and incapable of error.

In Darwin's time there were eminent geologists and paleontologists who also held the Bible to be inerrant, and had to reconcile the infallible truth of Genesis with the evidence of geology. They devised the day-age theory and the gap theory. With the later pictorial-day theory, they were common among scientific creationists at least until the mid-twentieth century.

The day-age theory asserts the infallible truth of Psalm 90, which informs us that God perceives a thousand ages but as yesterday. What God experienced as the Days of Creation, therefore, were each a thousand ages long in human terms. Adherents of the day-age theory included the famous anti-evolutionist William Jennings Bryan.

Jehovah's Witnesses, whose translation of Psalm 90 reads "years" where others read "ages", reckon the six days of creation lasted 6,000 years.

The gap theory holds the interval between the Beginning, when God created heaven and earth, and the six days of Edenic creation

beginning at Genesis verse 3, sufficient for the accumulation of rocks and fossils. The pictorial-day theory sees the six days of Genesis as days not of creation but of revelation, when the process of creation was revealed to Moses.

Such theories were of course rejected by hardshell bible literalists, especially the Seventh Day Adventists, whose founder Ellen White had witnessed the Creation in a vision, and personally testified that it took six literal, ordinary, twenty-four-hour days.

DONALD ROOOM reviews *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*, by Ronald L. Numbers. Published by the University of California Press, £13.95. ISBN 0-520-08393-8

George McReady Price, an Adventist who sometimes made a living by selling the books of Ellen White door-to-door, had little scientific learning but was able to study books on evolution by evolutionists, and discovered what seemed to him a fatal flaw in their theory. The age of fossils was calculated from that of the rock strata in which they were found, and the age of the strata was calculated from the fossils found in them, making the argument circular and invalid. In his *Fundamentals of Geology* he announced a new geological principle, the Law of Conformable Stratigraphical Sequence, "Any kind of fossiliferous rock may occur conformably on any other kind of fossiliferous rock, old or young". This law, he wrote without false modesty, "is by all odds the most important law [of geology] that has yet been discovered".

Fossils had been deposited, not in a regular sequence but more or less randomly, consistent with a flood covering the whole earth, and fierce currents generated as the water receded.

He wrote articles for the religious press of many persuasions and unpublished articles for the scientific press, issued many books at his own expense, and expounded his ideas with such vigour that he became famous, though always poor.

Price's fellow Adventists did not dispute his findings but saw them as superfluous, since the truth of Genesis had already been conclusively proved by infallible scripture. Other creationists were wary of being seen as followers of a Seventh Day Adventist, but liked his arguments. Eventually *The Genesis Flood* by John C. Whitcomb Jr. and Henry M. Morris, a Grace Brethren minister and a Southern Baptist, "gave [Price's] theory a proper fundamentalist baptism and then skilfully promoted it as biblical orthodoxy".

"Old earth creationists" still exist, but "scientific creationism", these days, has become more or less synonymous with flood geology. In 1964, six of the ten members listed on the letterhead of the Creation Research Advisory

Committee had genuine science doctorates, including doctorates in biology and biochemistry, from secular universities. Since then the number of creationist scientists has increased, as convinced creationists have undertaken university studies of geology and other relevant sciences, and while some of these have turned to theistic evolution, others have remained to swell the numbers of creationists with science qualifications.

In 1963, the United States Supreme Court ruled that compulsory bible reading in public schools breached the constitutional rule separating government from religion.

But the ruling explicitly endorsed a policy of religious neutrality, prohibiting militant secularism as well as religious propaganda, and so gave rise to campaigns for the teaching of evolution and creation as equally valid scientific alternatives. The Constitution would prohibit bringing the Bible into it, so the demand is that children should be taught the possibility of living things appearing suddenly, for reasons which are not explained. This would be bad science, but the Constitution does not prohibit the teaching of bad science.

- In the 1960s, Donald Rook was the editorial cartoonist in the anarcho-pacifist *Peace News* (and simultaneously, for a short time, in the conservative *Spectator*). He was briefly famous for the "half-brick case", in which he was acquitted of carrying an offensive weapon at a demonstration. Four policemen were charged with planting weapons on demonstrators, 20-odd prisoners were released, and there was a Public Enquiry.

He now writes and draws *Wildcat*, a political comic strip which has been described in a student thesis as "children's comic slapstick", for the anarchist paper *Freedom*.

The chief anarchist characters are "the revolting pussycat", a hot-tempered female cat, and "the free-range egghead", a bespectacled ibis representing the scholarly side of anarchism. Against them are a black spherical bomb with short legs, recognisable politicians such as Bush and Blair, Lord Kitchener, and a smiling pig policeman called "the rebus". (A rebus is a pictorial pun; when *Wildcat* started in 1975 Britain's chief law officer, the Lord Chancellor, was Quentin Hogg. Geddit?)

A critic wrote of an earlier *Wildcat* book (this is the sixth in the series), that when she was sent a book of anarchist strips to review, "I expected it would be obscure and pedantic [but] found myself laughing out loud".

This new book, published by Freedom Press (48 pages, £3.00) is no less delightful.

Copies of the book can be ordered direct from **Freedom Press, Angel Alley, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX. Tel/fax (020) 7247 9249. Email: FreedomCopy@aol.com.**

Religion and mental illness

BEING transgendered, and having already had to suffer the misinformed intellectualism of evangelists as to the difference between gender and sexuality, I could take offence at Barbara Smoker's "A Theological Romance" (*Freethinker*, July), but I am rather more concerned at the concatenation being made in the magazine between mental illness and religious belief.

Now, one could be forgiven for thinking that this is a perfectly reasonable assumption to make. After all, the words delusional and psychosis make merry bedfellows along with god and creation, but this misses the point entirely. Having been the victim of psychological vituperation, and having actually studied the subject, one must surely be of the opinion that it is not the correlation between mental illness and religious belief which needs to be re-evaluated, but the correlation between the discipline of psychology and religion.

The whole idea of diagnosing psychological illness reeks of precisely the same theoretical substance as a belief in god. It is unfounded and subjective to the point of myth. There is research being conducted, I understand, to ascertain the "god gene". This research is also being carried out in other areas, and, with time, I am positive that we shall see mental illness re-processed as a biologic illness, as much as schizophrenia now is. Almost. It is telling indeed that many psychological disorders can only be controlled or treated with the use of drugs, or other such "physical" treatment, such as the disgusting continuance of ECT. We may draw our own conclusions as to how closely this resembles some kind of re-discovery of the methods of the inquisition.

It is telling, also, to be told that you are not mentally ill, and then, in the next sentence to be told that to live a decent quality of life you have to succumb to psychiatric interference in that life. Now, one could be forgiven for thinking that this is somewhat allegorical to religion. "You are a good and decent human being, but you are full of sin and need to suffer guilt." And all this from your friendly parish priest, or, as the case may be, your friendly parish psychiatrist.

I'd like to add at this point that, with tongue firmly out of cheek, I am myself embarked upon a career in psychology, but I am constantly amazed at the assumption by so many that psychology offers a reasoned explanation for those things that we do not understand as yet (sound familiar?). It doesn't, it merely points the way, lights the pathway, to the knowledge that will enable us to understand, in the same way that religion has been used as a guide, oftentimes a brutal guide, towards the reality of enlightened development.

Any comments would be appreciated (and fully incorporated into the Jen Theorem of

Mindful Implausibility.).

MISS JENNIFER HYNES
Plymouth

More names to the list

PETER Richards' article on the arts and atheism etc (*Freethinker*, August 2003) was extremely interesting. However, I think I can add a few more famous names to the list.

Shelley is already mentioned, but not the rest of the family. His father-in-law, the philosopher, William Godwin (1756-1836), wrote at least two novels; his mother-in-law, Mary Wollstonecroft (1759-97) wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; and her daughter, Shelley's wife, Mary Shelley (1797-1851) wrote *Frankenstein*. At the same time, it is probable that both Byron and Keats were atheists – if one "searches" their poems.

Also, later on in poetry, there was A E Housman (1859-1936) in his well-known *A Shropshire Lad*.

In serious music, Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958) was an atheist who actually composed religious choral music amongst his other great works!

Where artists are concerned, Dali was mentioned, but Dali was not regarded as a true Surrealist by Andre Breton who "founded" that particular art movement. Surrealism was supposed to be a manifestation of "Automatism", free of directional thought and reason – in other words, the subconscious. Dali's work was deemed to be too consciously "knowing" and designed, and so he was ejected from the group!

MRS C P GOODWIN
Derby

Sleep and dreams

ARTIST and professor Ilene Skeen's article (*Freethinker*, September), proposing that the origin of mysticism lay in the biology and linguistics of dreaming, awakened interest. Yes, atheism is the only rational way forward, and what better way than to offer explanation for the origins of myth and mysticism by which to expose the insanities of the Scriptures-taught religious thought matrix.

The etymology of the word "god" does provide linguistic proof of a neurological basis for mysticism, but I think its distant origin is more complex than bad dreams. In wakefulness, dreams of warning lose their urgency in people who are not introspective – which I don't think Cro-Magnons circa 7000 BCE were. For us, the visual narrative of a dream is intriguing theatre choreographed by the subconscious, but its metaphorical "reality", even when interrupted by a fearful awakening groan, in consciousness rapidly attenuates and is soon forgotten. An attack by a fanged animal would give anyone a nightmare, but in the morning what would be remembered is where not to go

hunting. This is an example by which the function of dreaming evolved – in us and in the higher animals. That is, during sleep, causative visceral, or "emotional", experiences are processed by the subconscious and memory circuitry suitably modified, providing "gut reactions", or instinctive "feelings" (Prof A Damasio, 2003) that aid survival. More to the point, I don't think primitive hunter-gatherers had the interest or objectivity to critically observe those asleep. Any moans, groans and snoring would just be another ingredient of the ambience of ignorance and fear that mysticism and myth, by providing (magical) explanation, tried to ameliorate – as it still tries to do today.

What was collectively and individually experienced by tribal primitives throughout the world in all ages was the stress that can cause bad dreams. From hunger sometimes, or lack of sleep; from attacks by hunting carnivores and enemies; from floods, drought, earthquake; from afflictions, ailments, accidents. And, as awareness evolved, from the inexplicable death of family members. Unceasing stress can cause phobias, paranoia and panic attacks, the latter a "giddy ... reeling, light-headed and uncontrolled sensation". Dependent on genetic susceptibility, the mind can disintegrate, resulting in a psychosis that could cause victims "to call, invoke ...", and to be "possessed, insane." Schizophrenia sufferers, like today, would hallucinate voices and visions, and, if their voices commanded them to violence, be seen to be "possessed by an evil spirit." An early megalomaniac proclaiming himself to be the sun, if not revered or murdered, might be thought "possessed, insane". Hallucinogenic plants would cause addicts to be "possessed ...".

Much more likely a cause, then, for the biological symptoms Ms Skeen quotes for the historical meaning of the word "god" – Indo-European *gheu* is mental illness and disorders. There are symptoms that lead some sufferers to believe themselves not victims, but "spiritually blessed". A mild epileptic seizure in the right temporal lobe (which seems to have a head start in the race to find the centre of religiosity – which, believers can be assured, is not on the other side of Pluto) can cause victims to see a "shining light" and to have an all-knowing "religious" experience (Prof V S Ramachandran, 1999, pp 175-188). Although only a minority of people suffer schizophrenia, or epilepsy, reports of historical and contemporary self-promoting leaders who probably did – Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, Joan d' Arc, Mother Teresa of Calcutta – being guided by a "shining light" or "the voice of God", is for believers evidence enough for a supernatural power – especially when in formative years their brain circuitry has been irresponsibly

(Continued on p14)

bly configured for it in home, school or church sing-a-long.

It has been proposed – however hard it is for us to imagine – that in the pre-literate era, in the language- and learning-driven transition from an earlier proto-conscious mentality, primitives when stressed readily hallucinated voices. There seems to be a vestigial circuit for it: electrical stimulation of an area in the right temporal lobe can cause rational people to hear voices (Prof J Jaynes, 1976, pp103-111). The hallucinated voices, more real and persistent than any dream and accompanying the sufferers wherever they went, came as if someone was speaking authoritatively from above their heads – in the same direction from where during storms cracked lightning and roared thunder, from where in the night glinted the stars and glowed the moon, and where when darkness cleared arced the shining sun. Little wonder that these mysterious celestial objects – and later also the planets – were by primitive minds feared and worshipped as the cause of *gheu* – of god.

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Berkshire

Gay bishops

OPENLY gay bishops and bishops *manqués* in the Anglican Communion are a bit like air pockets in a plastic bag. You push one down only to see another one pop up. Whether the bag will eventually rupture remains to be seen.

The curiosity is that these clerics claim to be now living “celibate” (by which they seem to mean “chaste”) lives, so that they have in effect made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake and should be highly commended by all fundamentalists. Even the Catholic Church has no objections to homosexual men as long as they don’t put theory into practice. And what’s that text about one sinner that repenteth?

Approaching the gospels as works of fiction – which to a large extent they are – a literary critic might say that, reading between the lines, Jesus and his disciples, or at least Jesus and John, were in a gay relationship, platonic or otherwise. The difficulty for all revisionist Christians, Jews, Muslims and their secularist supporters, however, is that the lines themselves in both Old and New Testaments are quite explicit in condemning homosexual activity. There really is no question of “interpretation”. The issue then becomes: Is the Bible the Word of God, resounding with eternal verities, or the out-of-date word of a bunch of ignorant bigots whose only excuse was that the globe was then underpopulated?

If the latter, then we can throw out not only a raft of social and sexual taboos, but animal and human sacrifice, black and white magic, mysteries and miracles, witches and warlocks, devils and demons, angels and archangels,

holy and unholy spirits, heaven and hell, ghosts and gods – in short, the entire content of “revealed” religion.

Liberal religionists face the theological and psychological dilemma of deciding which bits of orthodoxy to cling to and why. But secular humanists also face a dilemma.

Should we persuade all modernists to follow Enlightenment logic and abandon the bastion of faith, thereby leaving valuable tangible and intangible assets in the clutches of fanatics with their own primitive logic?

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

James the Brother of Jesus

NEIL Blewitt’s account of the history of holy relics (*Freethinker*, September) was very entertaining; however, James the “brother of Jesus” is an interesting case. Following the death of Jesus, this James apparently headed the “Christian” community in Jerusalem until his own execution in 62 CE: we gather this from the few references in the New Testament and in Josephus, though Professor G A Wells (see *Freethinker* correspondence, April to June) is sceptical. Much of what we find irksome about Christianity originated with St Paul. Paul had had serious disputes with the faction led by James, but “Paulinism” triumphed with the disappearance of the “Jewish Christians” in the Roman destruction of Judaea following the revolt of 66 CE.

That was one reason why James’s role has been played down in the Christian version of their own history. The other reason was the rising cult of the Virgin. There is nothing in the canonical Gospels to suggest that the siblings of Jesus mentioned there were not the subsequent children of Joseph by Mary. However, the desire to protect the emergent myth of the perpetually pure Holy Mother generated the “apocryphal” writings, referenced by Neil Blewitt, which promoted the legend of Joseph’s previous marriage. Focusing on the figure of “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” raises challenging questions about the early history of the church, so it is perhaps not such a wonder that his remains were not “found” sooner.

DAVID M PORTER
London

Palestinians and Jews

WRITE an article about any subject from any standpoint and you are bound to get people who disagree, that’s par for the course. But mindless vituperation is a bit of a disappointment. If Mr Noble can refute a single fact which I presented, or at the least show me how I might have interpreted the facts in a more charitable fashion, then I shall be grateful to him. As for the point raised by Mr Hastie, the Arab leaders may have intended to return the

Palestinian immigrants to Palestine at some time in the future, but did they have to keep them in such appalling and inhuman conditions in those ghastly camps for all this time?

DAVID CARR-ALLINSON
Oxford

DAVID Carr-Allinson’s dreadful article in August’s *Freethinker* has already received the required drubbing, but Tony Akkermans’ letter (September) makes more basic historical errors.

Akkermans gives the dates of three wars as evidence of Arab intent to “wipe Israel off the face of the earth”. This is a far too simplistic assessment.

The first, 1956, was in fact a British-French-Israeli attack on Egypt after Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal. The second date, 1967, was another Israeli attack on Egypt, not the other way around. The Yom Kippur war of 1973 was indeed instigated by Egypt, but was an attack on Israeli forces illegally occupying territory conquered by Israel in 1967 – peace feelers from Egypt to Israel having been repeatedly rejected in the intervening years (everyone seems to have forgotten Sadat’s 1971 peace proposals). If the use of military force was wrong in this case, then to avoid hypocrisy we should take the same attitude towards similar Israeli actions.

There is no mention by Akkermans of Israel’s invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982.

What of 1948? A rational approach would be to accept that the intervention of the Arab states in the Zionist war of conquest was a tragedy. Jordan, for example, ended up occupying half the proposed Palestinian state – as had been secretly agreed with Israel. It is untrue that the Arab states were united: Jordan’s imperialist ambitions were regarded with great suspicion.

The aim of the Zionists in pre-empting the UN proposals was to conquer as much territory as possible beyond that allocated to them in the hope of creating irreversible “facts on the ground”. And they succeeded.

There are some broader issues I want to move on to discuss.

First of all, we need to clarify what terrorism is. It helps to define it objectively instead of pejoratively: it’s a form of political violence directed usually against citizens or non-combatants in the hope of securing change through intimidation. All terrorism is political violence, but not all political violence is terrorism. Freedom fighters can use terrorist tactics. Indeed, terrorism has been employed by nearly all political movements at some point in their histories: fascists, anti-fascists, communists, anti-communists, anarchists, monarchists and anti-monarchists, Zionists, anti-Zionists, suffragettes, anti-abortionists, anti-apartheid activists, Irish republicans, Irish



unionists, nationalists, conservatives, liberals and nihilists, animal rights activists, pro-hunting activists, religionists, atheists, States and non-state groups.

If terrorism is not merely violence we disapprove of, whether or not an act of political violence constitutes terrorism or not does not tell you anything about the rightness or wrongness of that violence. Whether terrorism is always a bad thing I leave as an exercise for the reader – I find it hard to imagine many circumstances in which terrorism would be justifiable (as opposed to understandable), but most people do seem to support terrorism (especially state terrorism) in some circumstances. Certainly, few people have principled objections to political violence in general.

Having sorted that out, we should be able to look rationally at the nature of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. The Palestinians certainly do use political violence in support of their cause. Some of them have turned to terrorism. For my part, I have no problem accepting the right of people under occupation to use force against their oppressors (which isn't to say that I'd support any use of indiscriminate violence), but I oppose the use of terrorism by groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Nevertheless, the Palestinian right to self-determination exists regardless of the tactics adopted by particular paramilitary groups. It is not a condition of having rights that you are peaceful in asserting or defending them.

Tony Akkermans tells us to study Jewish history. The Jewish people have certainly suffered, and I can understand where the Zionist desire for a Jewish homeland comes from. What I don't accept is that the indisputably terrible things done to the Jews down the ages give Zionists a moral right to dispossess the Palestinian people.

Peter McKenna is right to note the Islamist-fascist nature of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Like all fascists, they feed on social problems but offer reactionary solutions. In the case of Hamas, they also fill the gap left by an inefficient and corrupt Palestinian Authority in the provision of social welfare services. They certainly made good use of their early support from Israel (who saw them as a useful counter to the PLO).

But while we rightly criticise Islamism, the secular humanist movement will lack credibility in the eyes of potential Muslim recruits if we do not also acknowledge the injustice that breeds popular support for them.

DAN J BYE
Sheffield

Thoughts on the Eruv

I WAS interested to receive with my latest copy of the *Freethinker* a detailed account of the objections raised against the Eruv.

It seems to me that those whose houses have been designated as boundaries of the said imaginary space should rather respond by declaring that there is a space sacred to the Invisible Pink Unicorn which happens to coincide with the boundaries of the Chief Rabbi's house. They could then go there on midsummer morning and make imaginary sacrifices to her ineffable pinkness in accordance with the ancient rite.

EDWARD TUDDENHAM
Grandmaster of the IPU sect
London

SOME people believe that their god forbids them from pushing a pram on specific days. However, this god can be outwitted and the prohibition avoided by a construction of poles and wires.

Surely the cause of promoting rationality will be furthered by the display of this weird theory. Let them build their eruv.

D HARDING
Norfolk

Prayer

KEITH Porteous Wood in his article Religious Fundamentalism Rules the Roost (*Freethinker*, August 2003) has frightening insights into the strength and growth of fundamentalist religions.

I believe that the Christians are right that prayer develops their faith and makes them take it more seriously and that people fall away from the faith when they stop praying. That is why I think it is very important that prayer be exposed for the superstitious uncharitable activity that it really is. If people get ashamed of praying it will lead to a downslide in religious influence.

It is certain that human life is absolutely valuable. The essential for human life is consciousness. Consciousness is more important than than freewill or memory or virtue. This means that nothing ever justifies suffering for consciousness is hurt by suffering. Yes, we have to cause some suffering for a greater good, but still a God would have no justification for making suffering possible, for, unlike us, he has the power to prevent all suffering. For example, he should not have made viruses to cause agonising diseases. Prayer implies that God needs to make us suffer for a good reason, which is therefore a total insult against the dignity of human beings.

Everything we get in life comes about as the result of a worldwide process, for all events affect each other. When you are praying you intend that a lot of things will happen both bad and good in the world to make the forces of chance give you what you ask for. Is it not fanatical and criminal then to ask for the gift of patience when so many terrible events and deaths had to happen in the process for you to get it? Is it not fanatical to ask (indirectly) a

God you only believe in but do not know to kill people to give you what you want? You are trying to get people killed over a belief because that is all that God is. You know that people bleed and suffer but you don't know you can trust God to the same extent – what if he is fairly malicious? God makes life cheap when you can try to kill by prayer just for the sake of a belief when you need proof. If prayer does any good it does it in spite of itself. Access my website: www.carmelcampaign.freesevers.com for a more complete exposure of the egotistic nastiness that lurks behind the sweetness that prayer is plastered in.

PATRICK GORMLEY
Co Donegal
Ireland

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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, October 5, 4.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel 01926 858450. 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, October 16, 8pm. Andrew Blick: *Government Spin Doctors and Special Advisers*.

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@dalcruie.fsnet.co.uk.

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

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

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

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, October 30, 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.

Plymouth Secular Society: Information: Jenny Hynes on 01752 516272 (evenings only). Website: www.plymouth-secularists.org.uk. Monthly meetings and other events.

Sheffield Humanist Society: The Winding Wheel, Holywell St, Chesterfield. Saturday, October 18, 10am - 4pm. Day conference on *The Fundamentalist Threat to the World – Religious Extremism in the 21st Century*. Information pack: Tel 0114 2309754 or 01246 270628 (www.sheffieldhumanists.org.uk).

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, November 5, 8pm. Dan Bye: *Charles Bradlaugh – His Life and Legacy*.

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

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

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

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

BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

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

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

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

E-mail: brianmcclinton@aol.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

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

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