

£1.25

The

Vol 123 No 11
November 2003

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881



Is religion strictly for the bird-brained? You may think so after reading about Solomon, the hellfire-and-brimstone preaching parrot who has flown the coop in Canada
- see page 3

.....
State education, and not religion, is blamed for the terrible death of vivacious London teenager Heshu Yones, the 16-year-old Muslim butchered by her father because she had become "too westernised"

- see *Freethinking Allowed*, page 2



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- American department stores cave in to the Religious Right, and remove French Connection UK products from their shelves - see page 3
- No Resurrection, No Christianity! - centre page feature
- Why Art is the Greedy Twin of Religion - page 10
- Book reviews - pages 14 & 15

THERE are a great many things that rile me about the religious, but what *really* sends my blood pressure into the stratosphere is the wide-eyed-with-innocence, "nothing-to-do-with-me-or-my-faith" response one invariably gets from believers distancing themselves from crimes carried out in the name of their religion.

Take, for example, the "honour killing" of attractive, 16-year-old Heshu Yones, who committed the "sin" of wanting to be nothing more than a normal British teenager, and to date a young Lebanese man who happened to be Christian. This was too much for her devout Muslim father, Abdalla Yones, a Kurd who had come to Britain ten years ago after fleeing persecution in Iraq. He stabbed her 11 times, cut her throat, and left her to bleed to death on the bathroom floor.

When Yones was tried for murder in the Old Bailey early in October, an "honour killing" plea, the first ever to be put before a British court, was entered, but no mitigating circumstances were found, and Yonis was sentenced to life imprisonment for his barbaric act.

Not surprisingly, the case attracted a huge amount of press coverage, and, in a hard-hitting comment, the *Mirror* newspaper said: "Heshu isn't the first young woman to be killed by members of her family in Britain for supposedly bringing dishonour but we must make sure she's the last. Time and again it is rammed down our throats that in Britain we must respect other people's cultures. And we do. But to hell with respecting the cold-blooded murder of a defenceless woman – especially when it's at the hands of her own father.

"And while the rest of the country reels back in horror at this hideous crime, where, pray, where are all the Muslim leaders? Are they all on holiday? Have they all been struck dumb? If it were a white racist who'd slit this young woman's throat they'd have been screaming from the rooftops about victimisation and compensation and demanding changes in the law for ethnic minorities. But because it involves the murder of one of their own by their own – and the murder of a mere woman at that – they're shamefully silent. And in the absence of statements to the contrary we must assume their silence means they believe that what happened to Heshu Yones was justice."

Even worse than this silence was the deeply offensive suggestion that British society was ultimately responsible for Heshu's killing.

This is the view of Iftikar Ahmad, who heads an organisation called the London School of Islamics. In an e-mail sent to me on October 6, Ahmad asserts that Yonis' actions were "un-Islamic" ("a man with strict Muslim beliefs would certainly not kill his daughter") and that "the tragedy could have been avoided if the poor girl had been educated in a Muslim school by Muslim teachers. She was a product of de-education by a state school. According to

British law, children should be educated according to the needs and demands of their parents, but Heshu was educated to be a westernised woman, instead of a Muslim."

Muslim 'honour killings' and the dangerous Catholic myth of 'porous' condoms, send

Freethinker editor

BARRY DUKE'S blood pressure into the stratosphere



Ahmad adds: "This tragedy is an eye-opener for all those Muslim parents who send their children to state schools where they are exposed to teachers who have no respect for the Islamic faith and the Muslim community."

I wonder if it has ever occurred to Ahmad and his ilk that their quest for cultural and social separatism will result only in widening the gulf between Muslims and the indigenous people of Britain, and that many more innocent Muslim youngsters, with a natural desire – *indeed a duty* – to engage with and assume a meaningful role within the non-Muslim, largely secular host population, will end up dying a bloody death at the hands of their "dishonoured" families?

MANY years ago I got into the business of producing anti-religious button badges. It began as a hobby, developed into a cottage industry and soon escalated into a booming enterprise that saw me working through the night to produce badges for the Labour Party and organisations like CND, the fledgling Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and a variety of other secular and left-wing political pressure groups.

In the end I reluctantly had to throw in the towel because the effort was hugely disproportionate to the financial return, and I was in a demanding full-time job at the time.

But the button badge mindset has never left me, and I find myself constantly devising new slogans I think may look good on an atheist's lapel. And right now, if I still had my old equipment, I would be churning out the badge pictured on the right.

No flash of inspiration was needed for that slogan, just jaw-clenching fury ignited by an edition of the *Panorama* programme on BBC TV last month called "Sex and The Holy City".

Broadcast in the same week that marked the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul's election

to Saint Peter's throne, the programme began with the words of reporter Steve Bradshaw: "While his reign is widely celebrated, millions of women around the world may feel they have reason to regret his long rule – and the global battles he has waged against contraception, abortion and condoms."

Panorama then took viewers across four continents to show what pain and suffering has been caused as a result of the Pope's insistence that everyone – not just the world's billion Catholics – should follow the Vatican's teaching.

In "the fiercely Catholic" Latin American country of Nicaragua, for example, the Church strongly backs the law opposing abortion in rape cases involving young girls. Bradshaw interviewed two girls, sisters aged 15 and 16, who were raped by their father, then had no choice but to carry the babies to full-term. Francisca and Lucila both said they would have considered having a termination had they been allowed to do so.

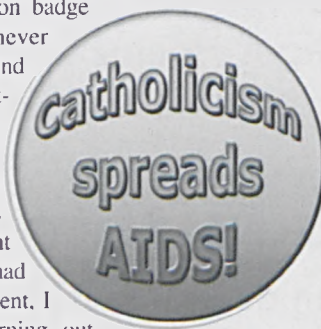
Earlier this year an eight-year-old Nicaraguan, known only as Rosa, was raped and became pregnant. Her parents insisted that the child was too frail to bear a child, and demanded an abortion. They were vigorously opposed by the Church, but while the lawyers argued, they took her to a private clinic for an abortion.

Panorama also interviewed the pro-life Mayor of Manila who has taken control of the City's health clinics, banning the pill and condoms. He boasts of making Manila, with its growing population of unwanted street kids, the world's first "pro-life city".

More horrifying still is the Church's unrelenting campaign in Africa against the use of condoms in the war against AIDS. Flying in the face of mainstream scientific opinion, and ignoring warnings from the World Health Authority, the Church persists with the claim that condoms have microscopic holes in them that allow the HIV virus through. By spreading this unconscionable lie it has been directly responsible for thousands of people being infected with the HIV virus, with many more to follow.

In the light of the *Panorama* programme, it beggars belief that *Thought for the Day*, BBC Radio 4's God-slot, plans to add *more* Catholic voices to this nauseating daily dose of superstitious inanity. This fact came to light in a recent edition of the *BBC Feedback* programme, in which a listener complained that *TfiD* did not feature enough Catholic contributors. Falling over himself to placate the aggrieved listener, an obsequious Alan Bookbinder, the BBC's Head of Religion and Ethics, gave an assurance that two new Catholic contributors had been recruited, and would soon be regularly heard.

If secularists cannot get their views aired on *TfiD*, I think the very least we should be doing now to is campaign for free sick-bags for all BBC radio listeners.



America's Religious Right deals a blow to French Connection UK

BRITISH fashion house French Connection UK hoped to make it big in the States with a new range of toiletries: FCUK Her and FCUK Him. But they hadn't bargained on the power of America's Religious Right who effectively told the company to FCUK off.

As a result of pressure exerted by the American Family Association (AFA), which is said today to have more power than the American unions did in the 1970s, some of the country's leading department stores, including Macy's and Bloomingdales, have removed the fragrances from their shelves.

The AFA vigorously campaigned to get FCUK products banned from shops, saying that the promotion in American teen magazines under the slogan "Scent to Bed" was reprehensible. It has blamed US stores like Target, which stocks FCUK products, for exploiting youngsters.

The promotion for the new fragrance invited readers of magazines to smell the scent under a flap on a page with the slogans "Open here to try FCUK Her" on the front and "Get your scent to bed T-shirt" on the back.

FCUK has described the ban as "unfortunate", and continues to play coy. "Our message is light-hearted and fun, and any misinterpretation is purely in the eye of the beholder," said Karen Gori, a brand manager for FCUK Fragrance.

Anyone who thinks that FCUK has pushed its luck too far on this occasion, and that their ads are a sign of noughties decadence and vulgarity, need to be reminded that saucy ads go



This, in short, was the message sent to FCUK by the American Family Association. The bear is one of the famous range of British Bad Taste Bears guaranteed to raise the wrath of the religious

back a long way.

Responsible for a series of the most suggestive ads ever seen in the US was a company called Springs Cotton Mills. In the 1940s, it ran a legendary advertising campaign executed in the form of a series of salacious magazine ads which would never get past the censors today.

A 1948 ad touting the sturdiness of Springmaid's Fort Sumter sheets pictured a young man sliding down sheets hung from his girl friend's window as her father hacks away at the fabric with a hatchet. Titled "Bungled Bundling," the ad's punchline is "No matter what you say or do, remember that in cold or heat, you can't go wrong on a Springmaid sheet."

But it was the 1949 "buck" ad that raised the most eyebrows. It showed a sleeping Red Indian youth sprawled in a sheet (which cost about a dollar apiece back then) stretched hammock-style between birch trees. An attractive young woman, flashing a wide grin, is getting up from the hammock, one leg still caught in its confines. The copy read: "A buck well spent on Springmaid Sheet." Nowadays it is regarded as racist to describe a young native American as a "buck".

The now-infamous line was coined by Colonel Elliot White Springs, third president of Springs Cotton Mills. His ads gave Springmaid one of the highest US brand awareness ratings of that era, and sales of his company's product rose without interruption until his death in 1959.

Brutal religious police 'need more power'

HARD-LINE Muslim clerics in Saudi Arabia are demanding greater power and protection for the country's religious police. Leading clerics have appealed to Crown Prince Abdullah Bin Aziz to bolster support for members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in wake of street fights in several cities. The religious police have also been heavily criticised in the Saudi media for their brutality – particularly against women. The clerics have asked Saudi leaders to increase enforcement of Islamic law.

In 2002 the religious police were blamed for the deaths of 15 female students who were prevented from leaving a burning building because they were deemed improperly dressed.

Over the last month Saudi journalists and

witnesses have described arrests by the religious police of married couples who were strolling in Saudi cities.

In September, police and civilians clashed as officers tried to arrest young pedestrians. Soon after, the governor of Mecca was called on to replace many of the religious police officers at the Grand Mosque following an accusation by a journalist that the police had beaten elderly women. Hissah Al Oun said Saudi and foreign pilgrims had been trying to find a seat closer to the house of worship when they were attacked.

"The police began kicking the women in their stomachs," Al Oun wrote. "Some fell down with their belongings scattered in all directions. Some even used their hands to push the women, an act that Islam strictly forbids."

The hunt is still on for the Bird of God

AN African grey parrot, with a 2,600-word evangelical Christian vocabulary, including "repent now" and "are you ready to meet the Lord?" vanished shortly before a planned preaching engagement at a Christian jamboree in Alberta, Canada.

Solomon had been scheduled to spread the word of God among about 1,000 people, but flew the coop days before the autumn event.

His owner, born-again Christian hairdresser Dale Doell, who lives in Medicine Hat, has been praying for Solomon's return ever since, but so far his prayers have fallen on deaf ears.

"He preaches a full-scale sermon, just like John the Baptist," Doell told the *Edmonton Journal*. "He preaches fire and brimstone." A doleful Doell added: "Satan terrorised him into leaving."

The last words Doell taught the five-year-old parrot were: "Where's Dr Billy Graham? Where is he?"

Solomon was having his picture taken at Doell's father-in-law's home near Red Deer*. While on the balcony, the \$2,000 feathered God-botherer escaped and flew into a tree where he remained for hours.

Doell, 51, tried to talk the bird down but after six hours he took off eastward, and hasn't been seen or heard since. Doell is continuing his search and is confident that God will send Solomon home safely.

Solomon is not the world's only sermonising parrot. A Texas man has trained another African grey to preach, and plans to liberate him in the hope he will teach other parrots the word of the Lord.

Even more offensive than a sermon-spouting parrot is a fascist dog. When Adolf, a black mongrel sheepdog, hears his master's voice shouting "Sieg Heil", he raises a paw in a Nazi salute.

But when the dog recently performed his trick in the presence of two Berlin policemen, his owner was promptly arrested for contravening Germany's law banning Nazi salutes and greetings.

The dog's oddly-named owner, 54-year-old Roland T, was due to appear in court at the time of the *Freethinker* going to press.

* **Red Deer, Alberta, is the home of prolific atheist author and *Freethinker* contributor, William Harwood. It's a region "politely called Canada's Bible Belt, but is more accurately described as the redneck anus of the universe", Dr Harwood asserts. There is no suggestion whatsoever that Dr Harwood is in any way connected with Solomon's disappearance or Doell's subsequent failure to locate the Bible-bashing bird.**

CONSIDERABLE prominence has been given in the press recently to school transport, especially the religious discrimination and religious privilege aspects of it. The Society's campaign to eliminate these inequalities was the basis of a one-and-a-half page feature in the *Guardian*. Most editions also carried it as a news item. It was also covered by Channel 4, a number of regional papers, and even an specialist electronic information service for lawyers run by Butterworth's, the prestigious legal publishers.

The *Guardian* sent a reporter to accompany a group of children from non-Catholic families in Wheatley Hill, a Durham mining village in Mr Blair's constituency. She described the young children being jostled on their tortuous and expensive journey to a Catholic school several miles away. The buses are crowded, the children often having to stand, and they do not run at particularly convenient times. These parents have to pay the full public fares, which is a real hardship, especially to low-income families.

By contrast, the children of Catholic families (whether their parents had darkened the door of a church in the last 20 years or not) rode to school and were guaranteed a seat in a dedicated bus which drives directly to the school to arrive just before the start of classes.

Readers will not be surprised to learn that the price they pay for this luxury service is nil. It would seem fairer if it were they that should pay the fares rather than the non-Catholics. I wonder whether there is a black market in forged baptismal certificates – they would be worth their weight in gold.

Mosque teacher on trial

AN eight-year-old boy attending a mosque school religious class in Bradford allegedly suffered a nose bleed when he was hit with a stick for making mistakes while trying to read the Koran, Bradford Crown Court was told last month during the trial of teacher Ayub Ibrahim Khalifa, 39, who is charged with assault.

The boy, who cannot be named for legal reasons, said Khalifa had used bamboo sticks to beat his pupils, some as young as four, during after-school religious classes at the Masjid Uzman mosque.

The child said Khalifa had hit him on his first day in class. When he told his father, Khalifa started hitting him on a daily basis. The boy said that after the family complained to the police, Khalifa twice threatened his mother in the street. "He told my mum, if you don't drop the cases I will strangle your kids."

Khalifa is charged with two counts of assault causing actual bodily harm, two counts of intimidating a witness, and one count of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

He has denied all the charges. The trial was still in progress at the time of the *Freethinker* going to press.

Non-believers going to a community school

The article also detailed the discrimination suffered by NSS member and atheist Ian Abbott. Ian told the *Guardian* that when his daughter Laura travelled to a community

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD on the inequalities of the school transport system



school eight miles away "he spent more than £2,000 in travel costs over the five years. ... The local authority refused to issue her with a free bus pass, claiming that nearby St Aidan's Church of England school would have provided a suitable education."

Help urgently needed

PLEASE actively ask around to see if you can find any parent who may be in this situation (paying fares to attend a distant school where the local one is a church school). I would be very pleased to talk to them. Without them we cannot mount the strongest case, so please do everything you can. Please contact me via kpw@secularism.org.uk or 020 7404 3126. Our case would be even more compelling were the parent to be suffering financial hardship as a result of paying these fares.

Ian made a good case to the paper: "It's not about the money," he says. "My argument is and always has been that my daughter was as entitled to a non-religious education as a child from a Catholic or Church of England background is to attend a church school. We need to see an end to these hierarchical attitudes, which suggest that having faith makes you superior to someone who does not."

The NSS is especially keen to pursue this latter type of discrimination through the courts, not only because it is more relevant to secularists, but for complex legal reasons it would be a much stronger case than the discrimination described above suffered by the non-Catholic families in Durham. Unfortunately for us, Ian Abbott's daughter has just finished school and pursuing this case is no longer really practical. Our lawyers therefore urgently need to find a non-religious family who have rejected their local church school (because they wished to avoid a church school) for a more distant community school.

We have the clearest case of discrimination, and one ripe for legal challenge, if this, as yet hypothetical, family have to pay fares for their child. But, had the child been attending an RC school on "denominational" grounds, cheaper fares would have been payable – or no fares at all.

We need to find such a family to take up a case.

The type of place where we might most expect to find one would be in villages with church schools and where the nearest community school is more than three miles away. Another likely scenario is those areas where there is a concentration of church schools.

I hope some readers will follow the example of NSS member, volunteer and former teacher, Paul Stevenson. He has helped us by researching the church school distribution in his county, Norfolk. He has identified an area where church schools are highly concentrated. As he told the *Freethinker* "If you live in this area, there appear to be no secular schools at all. There are only 5 primary schools, but they are all Church of England. These schools are either Voluntary Aided (controlled by the Church) or Voluntary Controlled (controlled by the local authority). In addition, there is only one High School for 11-16 year olds, which is C of E Voluntary Aided, but no community high school whatsoever." Paul's next step will be to ascertain whether there are pupils living in there that are avoiding these schools on "religious grounds".

Who pays? Colchester tries to eliminate denominational transport

It is the local education authority that pays for the subsidised transport, not, as many believe, the church. And the cost is very substantial. Paul Stevenson has calculated that in Norfolk the cost comes to around 20 per cent of teachers' salaries. Whatever the costs are in Essex, their County Council is intent on reducing them. It has announced the intention to introduce a £300-a-year charge for each pupil using school transport to attend a denominational school.

It does seem that the prime motive was minimising cost, rather than eliminating discrimination. However, Essex County Council's education supremo also sought to justify the decision by announcing that "parents who sent their children to non-denominational secondary schools outside of their catchment area had complained they were being discriminated against because they currently paid for home-to-school transport".

Those with a vested interest protest

Catholic schools and families across Essex are reported to be outraged at the proposals and have described them as a "Catholic education tax". An RC college's principal, chairman of governors and pupils have taken part in a protest, and the Roman Catholic Bishop of Brentwood is complaining to Essex MPs. He has bemoaned that the legal requirement to provide the transport is "discretionary", pleading poverty for Catholic families, partly because "many Catholic families have three or more children".

Perhaps readers might like to ask their councillors what plans they have for the school transport budget. But please also remember to think about the family needed for a test case described in the box on the left.

THE word "dunce" derives from the name of Duns Scotus, a medieval scholastic theologian. Some of the definitions given of the word in the OED include "a hair-splitting reasoner; a cavilling sophist; a pedant; a dullard; a blockhead".

Generally speaking, no-one is actually born a dunce. The question must therefore be asked – where then do they all come from?

The writer and atheist Philip Pullman recently criticised (and did so very sensitively and thoughtfully) the rapidly growing trend for imaginative fiction to be treated as just another corpse to dissect – I paraphrase and compress his argument hideously – for the purpose of passing examinations and acquiring those so-important coursework grades. Such a narrow focus, he suggested, has had in too many cases the effect of turning young people off fiction and of blighting their ability to respond sensitively and imaginatively to the world around them.

He's not the only one to be critical of the obsession with "performance". Charles Dickens did a pretty good job with his character Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. I still shiver at the memory of the scene in which Gradgrind demands from Sissy Jupe, who had lived all her short life with horses, for the definition of the creature – and of his response when she falters. "Girl number twenty unable to define a horse ... girl number twenty possessed of no facts ..."

It's not that facts are not important – more that facts are a kind of beginning rather than an end. To quote the very great (but very neglected) writer George Moore, "Life is a rose that withers in the iron fist of dogma".

"We don't need no education" is palpably untrue. But what kind of education is needed? Secularists rail quite rightly against religious schools – but they are far from being the only issue. One solution to the problem of educating children to be thoughtful and independent-minded was the establishment many years ago

LAST month the Archbishop of Canterbury confirmed, in a press conference, that during the last two millennia the church has learned *absolutely nothing*, and is now more irrelevant than at any other time in history.

After two days discussing the issue of gay clergy, in particular the canonisation of Gene Robinson in the US, 37 Anglican church leaders from around the world issued a joint statement admitting they "deeply regret" the appointment of an openly gay bishop. They have effectively told millions of gay people, "We don't like you, and we certainly don't want you in our church". By doing so they lay bare the hypocrisy of their institution, and the utter pointlessness of its existence.

These shameful relics from the dark ages are continuing to hinder the progress of mankind towards a more rational, superstition-free existence. The statement released by the Anglican primates will do nothing to curb discrimination towards gay men and women. In fact, it posi-

of Summerhill School. It's taken a lot of flack over the years but has somehow managed to survive all the slurs and misrepresentations hurled its way. Take a look at its website at <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/>. Should this be the way in which children are educated?

Tertius Wharton, a young man with some very special educational needs, certainly thinks it's right for him. You can read about his situation at <http://www.fight4tertius.co.uk>. It was publicised on the Secular News-men discussion group board at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/secular_newsline/ – a group that is well worth a look for anyone wanting to contribute to debate about secular issues.

On matters of secular education in general, don't forget to check out the very useful sites <http://www.c.s.e.freeuk.com/> and <http://www.learning-together.org.uk/>.

One has to feel sorry for Christians. With only their thousands of churches and paid practitioners, their guaranteed slots on national media and their "by right" presence in parliament (to name but a few things), it's no wonder they feel so poorly represented.

I suppose that's why one of them has come up with a guide to making even more noise more effectively. It is a website called "ChangeActivist" and is at <http://www.changeactivist.org.uk/home.htm>. It's intended to ease the path towards yet more influence by giving clear and simple information as to how best to become an activist – a kind of workshop for axe-grinders. Thanks to Keith Porteous Wood for the link to that one. Thanks too, Keith, for the links to <http://www.rejesus.co.uk/>, designed to attract lost Christian sheep (baa! baa!) back to the fold; to the amusing "God works in a Mysterious Cubicle" at <http://www.irregularoo.com/mysteriousecubicle.html>,

and "Christians coming out of the closet" at <http://www.atheists.org/comingout/othercloset.html> (a nice essay/guide).

And thanks to Peter Tribilcock for the amusing satire "Kissing Hanks Ass" at <http://www.jhuger.com/kisshank.mv>. Lastly, thanks to Patrick Gormley for the link to his "Carmel" site at <http://www.carmel-campaign.freesevers.com> (which he describes as a "rant against religion"... And, hey, why not?).

Plymouth is famous for the (apocryphal?) game of bowls played there by Francis Drake – and, of course, for Drake himself. But it has an even greater claim to fame for secularists as the birthplace of G W Foote. Certain secularists of Plymouth are certainly proud of the Foote connection, and have even taken the trouble to include on their excellent website some of his work (amongst much else of real interest and value). It's a lively and good-looking site and well worth a visit. It's at <http://www.plymouth-secularists.org.uk>.

"Exposing the Atheist" is the title of one section of the website of the Society for the Practical Establishment and Perpetuation of the Ten Commandments, a cheery and fun-loving group of frantic Christian paranoiacs in the USA. It seems that atheists are "the biggest fools on earth", believing in a "doctrine of demons"; that they are "slaves of Satan", responsible for youth crime and the creation of criminal societies; and (to really put the boot in) that they are computer hackers too. Phew! Check out the madness at <http://www.tencommandments.org/> and break open those Bibles. There are some who claim that sites like these don't represent the views of "real" Christians. All I'd say is that (to quote the poet William Empson) "slowly the poison the whole bloodstream fills ..."

More of your top links, please to norman@npridmore.fsworld.co.uk.

Comment

tively promotes it. It is truly appalling that the British government still turns to religious leaders for advice.

The Church is now more irrelevant than at any time in history, says JONATHAN BOAK

Last month also marked the 25th anniversary of John Paul II's papacy. Here is a man who has probably done more to promote the spread of AIDS than any other. Just this week, a senior Catholic figure said in a television interview that condoms should not be used to prevent HIV, as the virus can easily pass through them. This astounding and deliberate denial of scientific fact, sanctioned by Rome, has been a contributory factor in the alarming spread of AIDS throughout the developing world. Young

men and women, with little or no information on birth control other than the advice given to them by their local priest, have needlessly risked pregnancy and/or infection because the Pope refuses to accept that the use of condoms does more good than harm.

We, as freethinkers, must ask ourselves: how much longer can we tolerate the fostering of religious superstition? Its role in maintaining extremist cultures in Africa and the Middle East should be of grave concern to us.

The world's Muslim population numbers somewhere in the billions, united in the belief that to kill an infidel in the name of *Jihad* provides a fast-track route to paradise.

It would be a tragedy for mankind if the Koran, or any other deity-based religious text, were to continue to provide a template which entire nations use to shape their moral and scientific opinion. More must surely be done to counter the growth of this malignant irrationality.

While driving recently, I happened to listen in to *Thought for the Day*, the radio programme to which the likes of myself are not allowed to contribute.

The inevitable clergyman who monopolises this programme was speaking about the wonders of modern science, with reference to genetic engineering, molecular biology and so forth. This was made possible by the work of Watson and Crick, in discovering the structure of DNA.

Having softened us up by demonstrating his approval of all things scientific, he then spoilt it by going on to call attention to a recent talk by Dr Watson in which the latter stated that the original quest of Francis Crick and himself had been to unravel the mysteries of life's processes at the molecular level, without reference to God or religion.

This of course was too much for our monopolist to stomach, and so the subject of humility, and scientist's attitude to it if any, had to be given an airing.

Humility is never really defined – it is a relative term – and one has to use it with reference to other things. Presumably he would define it in comparison to the alleged humility of the founder of his faith. Politicians, who are in most need of humility sometimes, especially if they are Blair or Bush, go along with this definition – unless of course more pragmatic issues such as oil, or the political containment of another (usually small) country takes precedence over it.

But this is not what the good clergyman had in mind when criticising Dr Watson's statement. Jesus had nothing to say about science or any other relevant issues such as housing, education, sanitation etc, and so the question of scientific humility has to be seen in the light of the ongoing war between science and religion.

There are those who would say there is no conflict – they are wrong – and the only reason they appear to be right is because they have re-defined science as "discovering the works of God", and so converted it into a sub-set of religion. But for those who see science as a pure quest for knowledge of the real world, and do not wish to see it subsumed into religion, along with everything else that is best in human achievement – it remains the ideal to keep it unsullied, and continue to probe and measure in all fields, including those considered out of bounds by our clergyman.

There can be no such thing as scientific humility, but instead a considered pragmatic judgment on what is best to do with new discoveries and provisional "truths". Post-modernists, like Jacques Derrida, deny that there is such a thing as scientific, or any other, objective truth – instead saying it is only an opinion, or only a theory, and will necessarily turn out to be wrong sooner or later, forgetting that there is a difference between well-established truths and speculative hypotheses on

the boundaries of knowledge.

The only type of humility that science should recognise is that which pertains to all knowledge: that evolution has given us imperfect cognitive powers, and that all systems of knowledge might be flawed and fallible. Nevertheless we have to have faith in it, otherwise we might as well go back 2,000 years and read the entrails, or divine the flight of birds. I use the word "divine" advisedly.

Religion must never be allowed to sully science, argues REG LE SUEUR



So what sort of humility should scientists have? They should of course be aware of the possible consequences of their research – as was Robert Oppenheimer when he voiced his misgivings over the H-bomb project to President Harry Truman (whose reply was "get that cry-baby out of here"). They should recognise that science does not (yet) know everything, but they should also oppose the assumption that therefore religion does, and that they can expect to get away with invoking the "God of the gaps", or alleged Intelligent Design. It is probable that science discovers real truths, and that a wooden table really is made of wood, for all time, and throughout the entire universe, and that the only reason why airliners do not fall out of the sky is because aerodynamics is based on real physics, which applies universally, and because engineers have got their sums right.

The recent results from Map (Microwave anisotropy probe) have pin-pointed the age of the universe to 13.7 billion years; and if we get results from LIGO (Laser Interferometry Gravitational Observatory), and the new infrared satellites, we may be able to witness the Big Bang itself, by looking back in time, and even find out why it happened. All these scientific wonders contrast with the carping of our above clergyman that we don't yet know the first Cause of the Universe, and that therefore ID did it – how exactly, is not explained.

Although there are, in fact, good theoretical reasons as to how the universe could have begun uncaused – nevertheless it is fun to hypothesise that if the creationists are right, (and this is what Intelligent Design believers actually are, in disguise), then it can still be denied that the universe has a supernatural origin. In fact Intelligent Design can be conceded to be a quite reasonable hypothesis. It is possible that the universe was designed by very

advanced aliens, and that one day humankind may also be in the business of designing universes. These aliens would necessarily have to live in another dimension, but they would still be a part of nature, and therefore unable to do supernatural acts; nor could they exist outside of all reality, and cannot therefore be considered gods. In this way metaphysical naturalists (that's atheist scientists), could pull out the rug from under the feet of the ID-ers, by subsuming creationism under the umbrella of naturalism.

"What other dimensions?" I hear you ask. Well, in the 30s and 40s, the smart cocktail party set were always going on about the fifth dimension – there were even songs about it. In 1919, the Kalusa-Klein theory was developed, which re-wrote Einstein's field equations, to include a fifth spatial dimension. It was endorsed by Einstein himself, though it was too much for even him to cope with. Then, with the discovery of Quantum Mechanics, and also two new forces of nature, the strong and weak nuclear forces, the KK theory was quietly forgotten about. In 1968, it was resurrected as String theory, and Super-Symmetry theory, which allows for the existence of at least 10 spatial dimensions, all undetectable to our senses – and unreachable.

Observations of the bending of space-time in the region of a massive star have been confirmed by astronomers. Three-dimensional space can bend only through another unknown fourth spatial dimension, so at least one more dimension must exist. Also a single quantum particle appears to interfere with its counterpart in another dimension, to form an interference pattern, when it passes through a slit.

These results alone appear to prove the existence of a multi-dimensional universe, probably seething with life. "Prove?" – I hear you ask sceptically.

This brings me to Universal Scepticism.

This pernicious creed arose in the Hellenistic era, for political and cultural (not scientific) reasons. In the wake of the apparent destruction of all value systems after the Peloponnesian War and the conquests of Alexander the Great, as well as the importation of Hindu and Buddhist ideas from India, into the Graeco-Roman world, there was a general lack of confidence in anything permanent. It produced the philosophies of the Sceptics, and the Cynics, and a new paradigm of thinking so as to become inward looking, and dwell on otherworldliness and personal salvation.

(We could tease our clergyman by suggesting that Jesus was a Buddhist.)

This mode of thought was taken up by the Christians, and by recent Post-Modernists like the hated Derrida, and Thomas Kuhn. The latter rightly said that science undergoes para-

digm shifts at intervals, but appeared not to recognise that the reason for these shifts is an increase in empirical observation and knowledge, and is parasitic upon them. For instance, Gallileo looked down his new microscope and observed what he deduced to be tiny protozoans in a sample of pond water, and so contributed to the paradigm shift of the Evil Spirit theory of disease to the Germ theory instead. The Church on the other hand judged that he had looked into Hell, and seen monsters and demons.

We should deny Universal Scepticism, and have faith (not religious faith) that the laws of physics are universal, at least in this universe,

Healthy living? It's all pure hype!

OK. So I'm not far off 80, but life is still good and I sort of hoped it would stay that way for a while – provided I continued to pay respect to those nasty biggies which feature regularly in medical records. For example, I've avoided the big C by not smoking, the big H by not eating saturated fats, the big A by remaining intellectually active, and the well-named big P by vigilant use of PSA tests; others I could mention, but you get the picture.

So it was with total peace of mind that I settled down to enjoy an uplifting Radio 4 interview with the charismatic Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, or big O, as I call him, a man who has dished out more blood on Sunday mornings than Dracula could have drunk in a millennium of Sunday nights. For a change, the subject under discussion was not the ongoing problem of paedophile priests but the Pope's health, which, according to big O, "goes up and down".

And then came the words that made my few remaining hairs stand on end.

"There are", he said, "no indications that there is in any way an immediate demise of the Pope but, of course, *it's in God's hands*".

And there we have it – the Bible truth from one who should know – death is in God's hands. The Pope can be laid low with every biggie from A to X but they will not bring about his demise. That final *coup de grace* will come from none other than Yahweh, big Y. The rest of the alphabet merely provides a secular choice for the death certificate. The Pope can go up and down more often than every

Conway Lecture 2003

PROF Peter Atkins, National Secular Society Honorary Associate will deliver his lecture Galileo's Finger: The Extraordinary Simplicity of Everything on Thursday, November 11 at 7.30pm at the SPES Main Hall, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Enquiries 0207 242 8037.

No charge, all secularists and friends welcome.

and that true knowledge is possible. We should not listen to those people who claim that it is absolutely true that there is no absolute Truth.

• Jersey resident Dr Reg Le Sueur was born in South Africa in 1940. His father, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, was deeply Calvinist. His mother was Anglican.

"At the time, everyone there was racist, and the white Afrikaners all Nazi sympathisers. And of course, everyone was religious," Dr Le Sueur says. His family moved to Britain when he was 10. He discarded religion at the age of 17 when

yo-yo in Hamley's but until he catches big Y he will remain alive. Indeed, he could play Russian Roulette with a full chamber from now until Christmas without incurring even a flesh wound because, where death is concerned, "it's in God's hands".

Of course, the same fate awaits us all, for, as we are frequently told, the Lord treats each of us equally. In particular, my future existence or otherwise is entirely up to him and all that talk of healthy living is pure hype – the terminator, big Y, decides: end of story.

ARTHUR LEDGER, almost 80, gives God two fingers, and decides to embark on a life of reckless living

But even more depressing news is to follow because I've been looking at big Y's CV in the OT and, believe me, it's dire; he has got to be the most appalling mass murderer of all time. And my life's in his hands!

I tell you by the time that programme had finished I was scared witless (or words to that effect), and still am. There are no antibiotics available to protect against this ultimate killer. Worse still, centuries of statistics prove that he has a strong preference for wiping out oldies; excluding, of course, those lucky close relatives of Adam who lived up to a thousand years or so.

What the hell then – it seems there's only one thing to do. I'm setting off on my Harley-Davidson with a locker full of fags, booze, drugs and condoms (the latter just for show) and I'm going to kick up as much dust as energy permits. Then at the end of the trail I shall engage in bungee jumping, with or without elastic – makes no difference. In brief, I'm to stick it to Him until He sticks it to me.

Postscript: I have had a few pre-trip drinks and seem to be experiencing a spot of double vision. Yet, strangely enough, my perception of big Y and big O seems to have cleared considerably, and now I see them for what they are – just a couple of YO-YOs!

he decided one day that "this is a load of codswallop".

Dr Le Sueur trained in medicine and has been a practising GP in Jersey for 26 years.

Bride died in 'honour killing'

TWO men were found guilty last month of murdering their cousin on her wedding day because her family did not approve of her choice of husband.

Rafaqat Hussain deliberately waited until just before the ceremony was about to begin before stabbing Sahjda Bibi 22 times with a kitchen knife.

Birmingham Crown Court heard that he then used the knife to fight off other wedding guests, including the groom, before escaping in a BMW driven by another cousin, Tafarak Hussain.

The jury heard that Miss Bibi, 21, had angered certain members of her Muslim family by planning to marry a divorcee, Zaffar Mughal, on Jan 11 this year.

Rafaqat, 38, learnt of the wedding only days before and made plans with Tafarak to carry out the "honour killing".

Timothy Raggatt, prosecuting, said: "It would have been the happiest day of her life, but that was shattered in the most brutal fashion. She died very quickly. There was no way of saving her."

The trial took place in the same month that Abdalla Yones was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing his 16-year-old daughter Heshu, because he thought she had become "too westernised"; and two sisters were hacked to death by their Muslim brothers in Jordan.

This "honour killing" occurred one day after the Jordanian parliament rejected a bill which sought to impose tougher sentences for the crime. The *Jordan Times* reported that the brothers used axes to kill the unidentified sisters, aged 20 and 27. The brothers, now in detention, admitted they carried out the killing to uphold the "family honour." The *Times* said the 27-year-old sister left home two years ago to marry a man without her family's permission. Three months ago, her 20-year-old sister ran away to join her.

Jordanian officials said someone tipped off the brothers about where the sisters were living. The men went into their home with axes and hacked them to death.

"It was a brutal scene," the official said. "One victim's head was nearly cut clean off."

Under current Jordanian law, sentences as light as six months' imprisonment are handed down to people guilty of honour killings.

This year alone 12 Jordanian women are reported to have been the victims of "honour killings".

No Resurrection,

As District Tutor for *Faith and Worship*, a Methodist course for lay preachers, I had organised conferences for the Circuit Tutors on vital topics such as *The Bible*, *World Religions*, *War and Peace*, *The Environment*, and *The Psychology of Religion*. But somehow or other we had failed to focus on the most powerful topic of all – the resurrection.

The Bible, however interpreted, is for any Christian the foundation source of belief, doctrine and ethic. But the importance of any belief or ethic is not necessarily relative to the solidity of its biblical foundation. The New Testament evidence for both the Virgin Birth and the resurrection is scanty and controversial but for some reason the resurrection has out-rivalled the Virgin Birth in being absolutely essential.

At a District Preachers' Committee I heard a vicar called John, say: "I heard the Rev Tim preaching about a fortnight ago. It was on the resurrection. Oh, he was perfect; he left no stone unturned. He'd got everything tied up. You should have heard him. After all, where would we be without the resurrection? We'd be nothing without the resurrection."

Where would we be without the resurrection? We'd be nothing without the resurrection.

I had presumed he was referring to the resurrection of Jesus. But perhaps to our resurrection? Although linked biblically and in theological thought, the two seem very different.

Even if we believe the stories of the resurrection of Jesus, does anyone today really believe that they will be resurrected in the same fashion, that is with their original bodies intact? Or that anyone else, past, present or future, ever had been or could be?

I was once travelling to Birmingham with an acquaintance, who told me that her father had died six weeks earlier. She said that after his funeral "my mother got a letter from some strange religious sect, rebuking her for having my father cremated. It stated that fire destroys not only flesh and blood but also any possibility that the person can be resurrected. There's nothing to resurrect".

So her mother had been more or less accused of murdering her husband after death!

This religious sect must be extreme. I had never heard anyone else question the incompatibility of cremation and resurrection. I hadn't thought about it. Indeed, I had myself recited the creed on occasion:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit –
The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.*

I had also very occasionally attended a funeral service which included a cremation. Indeed the Burial Service is for "The Burial or Cremation of the Dead" and the body is com-

mitted to the ground – earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust (or to the elements, ashes to ashes, dust to dust).

I guess I had evaded the issue as something too deep and mysterious for anyone to fathom – until that course on "Death and Dying" which I had been committed to teaching during my exchange year at the University of Evansville, Indiana. I had taken a group of students to visit a funeral home, and the Director informed us that by law in this part of America all coffins, made of wood, had to be encased in concrete so that the bodies were not completely destroyed but were "fresh" enough for resurrection when the time came.

JOAN SIMKINS, former head of Religious Studies at the City of Leicester College of Education, takes a critical look at the central tenet of Christianity – the resurrection

Did they really believe that those original bodies, each with its unique shape, age and state of decomposition, would be suddenly alive, reconstructed to appear as they were at the moment of death? The idea seemed too bizarre, and the implications of the importance of concrete encasing ominous. Were those whose bodies had never received the protection of concrete but had been buried in the earth and gradually disintegrated into the soil barred from the privilege of resurrection? And what of the unfortunates who had fallen prey to wild animals or drowned at sea or, in the sky burials of Tibet, had been deliberately offered as carrion? Or those shot to bits in warfare or mutilated in accidents?

Were all people who had ever lived, including Lucy and *homo habilis* – or only those who had heard of and believed in Jesus – resurrectable?

Billions of miracles would be needed for such a mass resurrection, far greater than that which is said to have revitalised one three-day-old corpse.

Where would we be without the resurrection? We'd be nothing without the resurrection.

This contemporary voice was echoing and continuing a long-held tradition. Augustine not only affirmed that "the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the distinctive mark of the Christian faith" and that "Christian faith consists in believing in his resurrection", but further asserted that the whole of Christ's work, including the incarnation, was in the service of the resurrection, and that his death would have profited us nothing had the resurrection not occurred.

We'd be nothing without the resurrection.

Luther wrote that the resurrection of Christ "is the chief article of our faith – the greatest power is bound up in this article of faith. For if there were no resurrection we would have no consolation or hope, and everything else Christ did or suffered would be futile." And "We can better dispense with all the other articles than this one."

The influence of this emphasis is with us today. Modern scholars repeat it. Barth writes "Strike out the word resurrection with all that it means and we are striking from Jesus what He really was! From this viewpoint we can understand why this word occupies the central point of importance in the New Testament, why it is the word that contains in itself what the whole of Christianity really is."

Thielicke agrees. "A Jesus who failed to rise from the dead avails us nothing. The resurrection is the basic teaching of Christianity. Were we to hear only of a God who fortunately for him (!) measures up to our rule and who is able to do what we can do for ourselves without him, what need have we of such a God – if Christ did not rise from the dead then his life and his work are refuted."

It is not surprising that Church leaders and officers uphold tradition. Former Archbishop Carey of Canterbury said in an Easter sermon: "You can't be a Christian unless you believe in the resurrection".

Bishop Harris of Oxford: "Without the resurrection there would be no church."

Archbishop Michael Ramsey: "Without the resurrection the Christian movement would have petered out in ignominy – it is not too much to say that without the resurrection the phenomenon of Christianity, and the apostolic age and since, is scientifically unaccountable." Therefore it is not surprising that less exalted mortals echo this belief.

After admitting that the New Testament evidence for the resurrection is somewhat confused and even inconsistent – and that this is a part of its strength – *Faith and Worship* p25 asserts that the fact of the resurrection was, to say the least, shattering! Death has been conquered; that is the first fruits of resurrection. From Sheol to full resurrection; from despair; through the beginnings of hope, to robust conviction. As for the meaning of resurrection – what has God done? what has he worked? A number of things are immediately apparent, always remembering that a lifetime of experience cannot even begin to exhaust the significance! God has conquered sin. God has established his kingdom, a new way of living, loving and being with him and each other. All the promises of God are fulfilled. We live with hope and the promise of final vindication."

Chris Patten, the Governor of Hong Kong, said in 1998 "The resurrection is the most

important thing in my life.”

A Methodist district chairman, in a training course for local Methodist preachers, wrote: “For Paul and the NT as a whole the resurrection is the historical event on which the Christian faith is founded. Paul – 15 or so years before the first gospel was penned – sees the resurrection as crucial.

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.

“So if someone discovered the bones of Jesus in a tomb somewhere around Jerusalem next week, then I would have to hand in my dog collar because I would then have to say that the whole Christian faith had been founded on a misunderstanding at best and at worst a hoax.”

But another more eminent Methodist, Lord Soper, wrote: “The resurrection of Jesus was not the physical persistence of the same body in which he suffered and died. The records explicitly detail that it was a body that passed through doors ... making the conquest of death a vital belief for his would-be apostles.”

Others are not certain enough to be dogmatic in either direction. I asked a friend: “Do you really believe in the resurrection?”

“Well I don’t really believe in it myself. But because I’m a member of a church I do.”

“If the original body of Jesus was resurrected, then it would need food and drink and so



This picture of Jesus bursting from his tomb is an amalgamation of two drawings taken from a Christian website of crafts for kids. The instructions are: “Make a copy of each of the drawings. Cut the empty tomb to fit around a small plastic cup. Cut out the Risen Jesus. Cut a slit in the bottom of the cup and insert a popsicle stick. Glue Jesus to the top of the stick. As the stick is pushed up, Jesus rises from the tomb!” How easily amused must American kids be!

on – so where is it now – floating about the universe?”

“Well, I’ll see you at the conference next week. Ask me then but not when anyone else is around.”

Barbara Theiring, *In Jesus The Man*, displays no such uncertainty or ambivalence: “Jesus did not die on the cross. He recovered from the effects of the poison, was helped to escape from the tomb by friends, and stayed with them until he reached Rome where he was present in AD64 ...

“This is not conjecture but comes from a reading of the text by the peshet method. Its basic assumption is that nothing supernatural took place, no visions: these are the fictions for the ‘babes’. When Jesus appeared in a ‘vision’ to Peter and Paul in subsequent years, as recorded in Acts, it was the real flesh and blood Jesus, holding an audience with his ministers. He was accepted by them as a high priest, generally appearing in surroundings that lent him an atmosphere of awe and mystery; this was enough to suggest the concept of a ‘vision’.

“The evidence for a real resurrection has been seen many times to be very weak. An empty tomb does not prove a resurrection, it only proves that the tomb was empty, and there could be many explanations for that. The excitement on the Day of Pentecost, sometimes cited as a psychological argument, proves nothing more than that the disciples believed in a resurrection. Mark’s gospel, in its original version, ended in Chapter 16.v.8 with the women running away from the empty tomb. It contained no appearances of Jesus; these were added in a later appendix.

“The ‘appearances’ seem to vary in each of the gospels, not, apparently giving unanimous testimony such as would obviously be required for proof of such an event. John’s gospel says that Mary Magdalene alone went to the tomb; the other three gospels say that three women went. John and Luke speak of two angels (or men in the case of Luke); Mark and Matthew of only one, and for Mark he is a young man in the tomb while for Matthew he is an angel, apparently sitting outside. Each gospel records different appearances on subsequent days.

“The rest of the New Testament does not support any assertion that the resurrection is the central event of Christianity. It certainly is there, and Paul has a long discussion about it in I. Corinthians 15, listing appearances which are apparently not the same as those of the gospels. His main argument is hardly a convincing one. ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain’. This is an argument from consequences, not from evidence. Such an argument usually betrays a weak position.

When factual matters are in question then the way to prove them is to give solid evi-

dence that will stand up to testing. There is not much to be said for the argument ‘If these facts are not right, then I am going to be very upset.’

“Moreover, Paul does not put the weight of his case on the resurrection. Rather the central event was the crucifixion. For Paul the suffering of Christ was the means of atoning for sin, removing the burden of striving for perfection under the law, and removing the need for repeated sacrifices and the Jewish priesthood.

“Throughout Christian history the resurrection has not been treated as the very pivot of the faith. This is something that has developed in recent times.”

Marguerite Shuster, referring to an international scholarly “Resurrection Summit” which met in New York at Easter 1996, and in which she participated, writes: “Affirming the centrality and necessity of Jesus’ resurrection for Christian faith does not in itself say what one means by the term ‘resurrection’, as the labours of myriad theologians and the very fact of our meeting in New York, amply confirms”.

A study of the contributions made by some of these myriad scholars who were present at the summit confirms that any agreed understanding of the resurrection is further away than ever. It appears that the sometimes-tortuous erudition, both philosophical and theological, however properly applied in the effort to understand and make clear, just confuses the issue.

Rather than straining to maintain such a vague and uncertain doctrine at the heart of the faith it might show more common sense (if that is not too secular and unscholarly a word) to accept the conclusion of scholars such as Verweyen who would ground the faith in Jesus’ life rather than in his resurrection, or to concur with Alan Padgett as follows:

“Let us take up the example of the resurrection of Jesus. Imagine that after careful historical research I concluded not only that there is limited evidence for a resurrection of a publicly available sort (which is compatible with belief in the resurrection), but that all the best evidence was against the resurrection. What then? Would that change my faith? It would certainly change my interpretation of Christianity. Gone would be all hope of my own real resurrection after death, for example.

My understanding of biblical authority would no doubt weaken, if this central historical claim turned out to be false. But I would hope that my faith in God and in Jesus would remain. I might become a liberal United Methodist theologian, but I would not cease to be a Christian”.

By now, I myself, having struggled to decipher all this theological jargon, which presumed to clarify a most dubious fact and uncertain theory, am happy no longer to call myself a Christian.

As I begin this article I suspect that I am going to upset some people, so I'll commence by saying, here and now, that I don't believe there are many opinions worth losing friends over, let alone fighting over. It's not as if voicing an opinion actually makes anything happen, any more than that empirical butterfly in the Amazon whose fluttering wings are said to cause tempests to blow across Arizona. Or is it the dustcart reversing in Arizona that causes the storms in Peru?

Anyhow, one advantage of examining any subject from a freethinking and non-theist position can be that it presupposes that there is no final arbiter in the form of God overseeing everything. Just as there is no absolute judge of right and wrong (and cannot be, because everything is relative to different viewpoints), so there can be no absolute judgement of the quality of the various entertainments we call "the arts". These are essentially things that demand a high level of skill for their production, but as they are not things subjected to any test of fitness to do a job, other than how well they please some human tastes, their true worth is harder to quantify.

Not so with the Judeo/Christian/Muslim idea that humankind is made in God's image. Here it is easier to judge right and wrong and quantify the worth of anything, as God was always close to the leader, and they usually shared the same tastes and opinions. Things that pleased the leader also pleased God, so human judgements of beauty and worth were therefore applicable throughout the universe. No wonder we humans are so arrogant!

In this way God has been the invisible protector of the so called "arts" throughout history, and has given them his seal of authority.

So an appreciation (one's brain is attuned to register pleasure in response to certain stimuli) of those things that society has traditionally accepted as art, is accredited huge value. Incidentally, I notice that folks who boast of their ability to appreciate fine art of all sorts often demonstrate an identical smugness to those Christians who talk of their great insight into the holy trinity. But I really wonder if it is that much to boast about. It's just saying that one has learnt to spot a theme that others will recognise too – a bit of abstract pattern recognition – something that the human brain is often pretty good at. Not much different to the way some women I've known seem to understand fashion!

As I see pure art as having less intrinsic value than many other commodities, by virtue of it's being an entertainment, I am personally not impressed by an ability to enjoy it.

I always like to use the "little green men test" when trying to make these sorts of judgements. What would aliens from a distant planet, maybe with different colour vision, or squeaking around with bat-like sonar, make of human art? Would they universally acknowledge the beauty that some of us see? Probably not. Then how about the craftsmanship of the sculptor or metalworker? Yes, they might appreciate how difficult those things were for us humans to make. But then they

might wonder why greater technology was not used. Then they might wonder about the use we have intended them for, and eventually they might just go off puzzled to admire the public toilet at the end of the road! We arrogant humans, of course, will expect them to have their own kind of art, in the same way that we do. But they might not go in for pleasuring the visual and acoustic senses like us – they might just be into drugs.

CLIVE GREEDUS argues that 'the two biggest wasters of human endeavour throughout history have been religion and art'

But here on earth it is not drugs that have had the worst effect on humans, it is two endeavours that might espouse to mark pinnacles of human achievement. The two biggest wasters of human endeavour throughout history have been religion and art. These greedy twins have eaten up vast resources of energy, skills and effort for thousands of years. From so many ancient civilisations we find marvellous ornamental artefacts of little purpose, great works of art, ruins of great ornate temples, pyramids and a continuous stream of art production through to the present time with vast cathedrals, mosques and churches everywhere, and all filled with it. Hundreds of thousands of workers spent whole lifetimes working on the monuments, and pyramids and their contents, in ancient Egypt alone. When so much effort is expended in support of any enterprise it begs the question as to whether the support function has not in itself become the enterprise. In this way worship of God(s) may at times have become the "worship" of art, especially as the former is invisible, silent and undetectable except through the imagination.

Oh, the suffering that human kind could have been spared if this effort had not been extracted from so many, and the wonders that could have been mankind's if only those efforts had been put to more practical use!

My guess at why this obscene waste has occurred is that, throughout human history, leaders have been mainly concerned with their own interests, their power, their glory, their comforts and pleasures, and all new knowledge has been used for those purposes. Art has been used for pleasure, for glorification and for demonstrating power, and similarly, religion has been used to keep the leaders in power and control their people.

The kings of history did not have TV, computer games, mobile phones, or fast cars to play with; if they had, then maybe these would have become "art". Instead, they had fine palaces filled with paintings, statues, and pottery and other decorated knick-knacks for themselves. They also enjoyed the best of current musical and theatrical entertainment, and all these things are now considered to be art. The power and status of these monarchs could be perversely demonstrated to the commoners and rival lead-

ers by how much money and effort was wasted on such frivolities – the more useless and the more obviously expensive the better. Maybe you can see now where my argument about art is coming from!

Because art, like gold, is so highly valued, it is traditionally put into places of worship – the only entertainment worthy of God! Of course if a God (or several) existed he might not be so dependent on the small band width of the electromagnetic spectrum that our eyes use, but share senses with many varieties of little green men – and have more besides! A statue of a saint (a human celebrated by some others) standing in the cathedral isn't really going to cut muster in these circumstances! Even less pleasing might be paintings purporting to show his actual son being put to death. I just hope that he buys St Paul's take on that one! Safer to return to non-theism!

To emphasise the links with religion, those who do not appreciate art are commonly called Philistines! Though if you actually read up on these people you will find that they were as much into art as anyone, but worshipped different gods from the Jews, so that makes it OK to use their name in derision – and you can't get done for it!

The old royal attitude of "Just think how much money and power I must have if I can waste it on these indulgences" is of course still with us today. We call it snobbery. I must say that personally I have always been more impressed with the "nobs", those seriously rich titled folk, who sometimes prefer to go around in worn unfashionable clothes supping real ale in country pubs!

But of course, "snobs" – those who want to feel superior (like little kings) – can spend their money on big cars and houses and other accepted status symbols as well as on art. It's just that following art has the advantage of sharing an interest with the aristocracy and the establishment, and allows the snob to look down with a smug and superior attitude onto those who don't.

But before I go any further I want to say that I am not criticising those who genuinely get enjoyment from the "arts". I am merely challenging the status afforded to them, and proposing that the value of the enjoyment is not above others experienced by the human brain. When some art lovers talk of their ability to appreciate a particular painting, that I might not myself enjoy or "understand", I can defer to their superiority in that regard. But I cannot believe it is more difficult than the appreciation of some "exquisite" mathematical formula that defines strange properties of the physical world, or a piece of "elegant" computer programming which I would equally be at a loss to make head or tail of. However, the former only has value because of the particular structure of the human brain, whilst the others can both please the brain and have a useful practical application that could please the little green men.

At this point I can imagine a lot of angry art

lovers preparing to write in about the pleasures and spiritual uplift they get from poetry, classical music, opera, or whatever. Yes, I agree there must be pleasure in these entertainments for some people, else they would never have been popular with the kings of yesteryear.

But who is to judge that one pleasure is in any sense better than any other, except in relation to themselves? Indeed, an argument could be put forward that all passive pleasures, be they obtained by viewing, listening, meditating, or drug-taking, are simply misusing brain chemistry to get a reward or a "high" without any achievement. It then follows that genuine pleasure comes through activity, such as interacting with others, or through creative pursuits where discovery, skills, ingenuity and new understanding come into play – often the things that the Victorians seemed to dabble in. Or, for the more energetic, in sports and physical training.

But if we want to be lazy and enjoy passive entertainment, then maybe watching sport, films or soap operas on TV is just as valid as the arts.

So does the veneration of art today really do any harm? Yes, I believe its special status does harm in several ways. People often believe art is "special" in a similarly unquestioning way to the way many believe the religion of their parents. Some will develop a genuine appreciation for particular arts they have been exposed to, but the notion of vast expenditure on pure entertainment pleasure can translate to many people as a green light to self-indulgence.

This has given the Christian churches an excuse to label this as sinful materialism, and to seek the moral high ground in calling for a return to spirituality! But consistency counts, and a society that extols the virtue of playing *or* praying above all else is a society that undervalues honest endeavour and practical skills. For this reason alone there is logic in arguing that morality has to come from outside of religion, as it is the sponsor of any moral bankruptcy in society.

But let us now look at how our value of art could even be responsible for encouraging white racist views of supremacy. Over the years, archaeologists have uncovered remarkable examples of art from civilisations all over the world, but these finds are reputedly rarest in that part of Africa populated by the various Negro races. Many times I have heard archaeologists expounding that the discovery of some ornamental knick-knack is proof that certain people were civilised, because it was probably used in some religious ceremony. Of course the more intricate and skilled the craftsmanship and the more elaborate the religious proceedings, the more advanced they assume the civilisation to be!

So the inference given is that, in the absence of discoveries of art, Black Africans were inferior to everyone else. Well, we now know that most of their art must have ended up in the stomachs of termites, as they munch through anything that is not made of metal or stone in those parts of Africa. But there is another way of look-

ing at things. This is that avoiding the monumental waste of effort on art, that has been the cancer of other societies, is actually a smart thing to do.

So if some people accorded everyday human matters with a greater importance than providing art for the king or the gods, and put more store in practical pursuits such as tracking, hunting and using the natural resources of the jungle as building materials, then maybe that was a more sensible way to live in that environment. I don't know if it is ever possible to understand those ancient Africans, but to base a judgement of people's worth solely on how much effort they put into art is, in my view, deeply flawed and prejudicial.

Another harm caused by the status of art is that it reinforces the class structure of society by setting those entertainments known as "art" at a higher level than others, and even when art does go "down market" it is still afforded higher value than useful activities.

A good example of this is our society's inability to deal with graffiti. Because some of this daubing appeals to the eye it can be defined as "art" and that is something that the leaders of our society value higher than the walls or the trains it is painted on. These "clever" folk protect it in the name of misplaced art, sometimes quoting the parallel of a weed being simply a flower growing in the wrong place. However, no weeds ever had so much protection! How I would love to see graffiti painted over the houses and cars of all those people who defend it!

For years there has been a reluctance to deal with these vandals because some can be called "artistic", which is just another way of saying that they are "skilful at art". The same label of "skilful" might honestly be applied to a perpetrator of a clever accountancy fraud, or a terrorist bomb-maker, or a man who hang-glides into an arena to disrupt some major public event. But no one in their right mind makes pleas for leniency on the grounds of any skill, except art. Obviously the skills of the bricklayer who made the wall, or the designers and craftsmen who shaped the train are not as valued by our society as those of that lad with the aerosol can. As I look through the scratched window of any train in urban Britain I can see that the noble arches, and buttressed embankments of the Victorian engineers, are now well and truly relegated to "canvasses" for art. As this view leaves me feeling dispirited and depressed it must be more confirmation of my philistine status.

So the example afforded by the high status of those royal entertainments called "arts" has led to modern entertainments also assuming a position above that of practical and useful activities. The consequential diminution of the value of the skill of labour, of practical design, and of scientific endeavour, relative to the whole of the "entertainment industry" (art, music, sport, media) corrupts moral judgements of worth in a similar way to religion. Modern entertainers, be they actors, singers, or sportsmen, are all held in high esteem

and can attract enormous wealth, so no wonder so many kids don't want to do useful work anymore.

Art in common with other forms of entertainment is just a pleasure activity – a self-indulgence. Nothing wrong with that as long as we keep it in perspective as a non-essential, and don't get carried away in praise of it and its creators. But classical painters and composers would be seriously celebrated and wealthy if they were alive today – though just like religious prophets their place in history gives them a useful immunity from critics.

The situation with paintings never ceases to amaze me as art connoisseurs are happy to lavish enormous praise on a painting and are willing to pay several million pounds simply on expert appraisal that it was painted by a "master". A new discovery about its history that casts doubt on this has the miraculous ability to not only destroy its value but also to take away much of its beauty and the skills attributable to the artist. Yet, in an uncanny resemblance with religion, where highly prized stories are sometimes discredited and downgraded into allegories, the followers themselves never lose faith, and the institution is never mortally wounded.

State funding for the traditional "arts" is society's seal of approval and perpetuates their special status, by feeding more money to the greedy twin. Yet how can it be justified to support classical music, opera, and ballet, when other entertainments that can't get bums on seats at the right price are allowed to go to the wall? Circuses, ice shows, mime, and many "spectator" sports barely survive, whilst music hall, Wild West shows, and others have all passed into history. None of these has that "art" tag, that invisible seal of God through royal connection, that marks out the class entertainments from the rest.

Another argument I've heard is that we need to retain the skills of classical musicians, ballet dancers and opera singers. But why on earth are they more important than coal miners, weaving-mill technicians, boilermakers, airship designers and the thousands of other trades and skills that are allowed to die year by year? Just why are the performing arts so special?

Surely in the 21st century there can be few who still imagine God's seal of authority on these peculiarly human activities. ("God loves a good opera, but he's got no time for coal miners!")

Finally, it could well be that the establishment's love of the arts, as well as religion, is fuelling its enthusiasm for ethnic minorities to carry on their own separate cultural traditions. Maybe there is a feeling of guilt about support for "White" British culture in the form of traditional arts, and so in desperation to avoid the heinous allegation of racism the pressure will build for more public money to go into ethnic arts. This could then become be a major factor alongside the faith schools and faith welfare in finally dividing up our community for good.

That is something that should disturb many freethinkers.

“THE Blasphemy Depot” was the name given by Keir Hardy to the Rationalist Press Association. It was not intended as a compliment. Bill Cooke has taken the phrase, so redolent of disapproval, and made it the title of his stunningly informative history of the organisation. In doing so he has turned an insult into a badge of pride.

This book is not merely the history of a publishing house, but the story of the men and women who drove it (and what extraordinary individuals they were!); of the society it worked in and helped to change; and of the ideas and conflicts that arose within and around it. Dr Cooke describes all with great skill and often not a little relish. He is as much concerned with ideas and interpretation as with simply relating facts. It's this that lifts the book far above the territory occupied by most “festschrift” or “in-house” history productions.

How actively should religion be fought against? Should secularists forge or accept links with supernaturalists? Should the tone of secularism be belligerent or soothing? What characteristics define “secularism”, “rationalism” and “atheism”? Was agnosticism an intellectually respectable stance? What place had blasphemy in the scheme of things? What of political involvement and alignment? These perpetually troubling questions were being asked in the very earliest days of the RPA just as they are now. Dr Cooke vividly shows how (in one way, at least) the very existence of the RPA was a kind of answer to a question. It's fascinating to discover the extent to which its establishment was in part a kind of reply to what many saw as the excessively lurid iconoclasm of freethinker Foote and of the Bradlaugh-inspired NSS, organisations whose methods and attitudes seemed to more emollient rationalists altogether too fevered and too antagonistic to achieve real influence.

It has been said before that the history of secularism is a neglected field. But it is not until a work like this comes along that is so comprehensive and so thoroughly researched that the consequences of that neglect become really clear. Dr Cooke is at times very sharp with historians who ignore the contributions of secularism, pointing out very reasonably that by ignoring them they are in danger of skewing or even entirely invalidating their conclusions – or at least diminishing their own credibility. With so much of value condensed within its pages, *The Blasphemy Depot* may itself (so long as it obtains the readership it deserves) help to ensure that this happens less often.

It is today quite normal for books with controversial themes to be published by major companies, and for them to be reviewed in major newspapers and magazines. No-one is much surprised that A C Grayling's recent book *What Is Good?* (and it is very, very good) was published by Weidenfeld and

Nicholson, or that Richard Dawkins' books have appeared as Penguin paperbacks.

When the RPA began, this was not the case. On the whole, the publishing trade one hundred years ago was cautious and conservative – especially in matters concerning science, religion and ethics. The dangers faced by publishers were many. The law concerning blasphemy stood then as it stands now – a sword of Damocles threatening the liberty and financial security of those who might dare to test it.

NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews
The Blasphemy Depot, by **Bill Cooke**. Published by the **Rationalist Press Association**. Paperback, £20.00 ISBN 0301003025; and **PETER HEARTY reviews** *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* edited by **Paul Kurtz**. Published by **Prometheus Books, New York** \$20 (£12) ISBN 1-59102-064-6

Even without the threat of blasphemy, reputations could be tarnished or lost at the word of a few offended bishops. And those same bishops (and others of like mind), could, if they desired, quite easily press those who dared distribute or sell “questionable” works to stop doing so – could and indeed did. The financial, the social, the personal consequences of this were too often simply unthinkable. Few were prepared to take the risk.

It was also the case that many who might have been in a position (and had the desire) to publish “difficult” material genuinely doubted the existence of a viable market. The history of the success of Darwin's works (especially *Origin* and the *Descent*, both of which sold rapidly and made a decent profit) might seem to give the lie to this – but it should be kept in mind that despite the explosive content of these books, they did not in themselves spell out the staggering implications of their conclusions for philosophy and religion.

There were occasional exceptions, of course, as there were bound to be. But these were rare and were certainly not in the form of the kind of cheap and accessible books that would become the distinctive hallmark of the RPA. Rather, they were produced in small and relatively expensive editions issued with very little notice or publicity.

What were the main achievements of the RPA? Dr Cooke includes in the epilogue of his book a list drawn up in 1942. It details, amongst much else, the millions of books sold, the many hundreds of lectures given, the RPA's role in the forming of secularist organisations around the world, and (“to crown all” as its author writes) the launching of the Thinkers Library, which incorporated in its many volumes (again in the author's words) “the ripest thought of the past and present century”. There

is also the matter of the periodicals and annuals, of the RPA's knack for garnering publicity, of its role in giving a platform to new writers, of its activity as a commissioner of translations, of its breaking new ground as a distributor of books.

Let us be clear – the RPA was important. Cheap reprints, mass-market paperbacks, the publishing and publicising of original controversial works: all were pioneered by the RPA. It was, quite simply, a force to be reckoned with. It was doing these things years before the Penguin had hatched from its egg or Dent had cast in its lot with Everyman.

The story of the opposition to the RPA is well told in this book. But what was its terrible sin? Of what great crime was it guilty? One of the many threads that Dr Cooke skilfully weaves is that concerning the conflict between the forces of the *status quo*, those fearful of the undermining effect of greater knowledge and education, and the more progressive forces in society. The trouble with the RPA was not exactly that it published the unacceptable so much as that it did so at a price that the great majority could actually afford, in a form that was easy to handle, and with pretty much universal availability. The RPA was seen almost from the beginning as a loose cannon on an increasingly rolling deck – and was accused (often quite correctly) of playing no small part in itself rocking the boat.

If the RPA truly was such a force, the question must be asked: what went wrong? Why does it seem now such a minnow amongst sharks? Dr Cooke details the story with clear-sighted thoroughness. Essentially the answer is simple. The RPA showed what could be done, led the way, and survived (often at great cost) the worst of the ammunition that the opposition could throw at it. The ground having been cleared and the path opened, others found it in their interests to follow. The “big names” of publishing, seeing that money was to be made, moved in. The RPA had been successful, but was seldom if ever in a position to accumulate the kind of financial resources that ensured security. Those profits that were made were ploughed back into new projects. Some were stunningly successful, but others, as Dr Cooke shows and explains, were of dubious viability. He does not shy away from relating the often gloomy story.

The history of the RPA was originally to have been written by Nicolas Walter. It was fortunate that, with Walter unable to complete the task (due to many reasons, which are sympathetically related in the book), the baton was taken up by Dr Cooke. His research into the life of Joseph McCabe (resulting in his magnificent biography of McCabe, *A Rebel to His Last Breath*) meant that he was in possession of an extraordinary wealth of material directly relevant to the telling of the RPA's story. It is partly for this reason that *The Blasphemy*

Depot is such an achievement. Other reasons must include Dr Cooke's familiarity with the history of ideas, his grasp of controversy, and his shrewd analytical capacity. There are some very lively passages in which many of the claims that post-modernism makes for its own intellectual novelty and insight are dismantled. Rationalism, demonstrates Dr Cooke, had not only anticipated but dealt with much of the post-modernist enchantment long before most of its progenitors had even begun learning how to whistle in the dark.

Those seeking a rich story well told, which sheds much light upon the role of secularism today, should read *The Blasphemy Depot*. It's a work that delivers far more than its subject suggests it should. Given that the RPA are its publishers, this should come as no surprise at all.

As well as telling the story of the RPA, the book also includes some wonderfully detailed appendices listing most, if not all, RPA publications, and much else of great use and interest. The chapter notes are clear and very full, and the index is of exemplary thoroughness.

— Norman Pridmore

SCIENCE and Religion, are they compatible? is a collection of essays by a variety of scientists, authors and philosophers, which examines the, at times, strained relationship between these two different world views.

Edited by the philosopher and sceptic, Paul Kurtz, the book is dominated by a pragmatic, rationalist outlook. Author after author outlines the predictive and explanatory power of the scientific method and contrasts it with the restrictive nature of blind faith and the retarded enquiry induced by dogma.

Few of the writers bother to address the subject matter of the title directly. Most prefer simply to dismiss religious convictions out of hand. As the mathematician David Shotwell expresses it: "If you admit the supernatural into your calculations, anything goes. That is why a supernatural explanation is useless to a scientist."

Some however, such as the late biologist and palaeontologist, Steven Jay Gould, try to be more accommodating. Gould outlines his view of two quite distinct and non-overlapping "magisteria", with science confined to the realm of "how-type" questions and religion concerning itself purely with questions of purpose and ethics. As the author puts it: "...we get the age of rocks, and religion retains the rock of ages; we study how the heavens go, and they determine how to go to heaven."

However well-meaning this approach might be, it is roundly condemned by Richard Dawkins. As Dawkins points out, our very readiness to ignore the legal prescriptions and proscriptions of much of the Old Testament is itself proof that we have deeper moral and ethical roots than can be derived from religious faith. Dawkins goes on to remind his readers

that the Christian concept of a human soul implies an arbitrary, and quite anti-evolutionary, distinction between humans and their immediate primate ancestors.

This theme of the human soul is taken up by several of the book's other contributors. They point out that this particular doctrine represents both an illogical and an unwarranted intrusion into the scientific domain. In the words of the physicist Jerome Elbert: "...it is ironic that we will admit that every mental ability can be destroyed by damage to the brain, but we tend to doubt that all of our mental abilities arise from the ordinary matter that makes up our brains. We may admit that our feelings can be altered in many ways by drugs, but we are hesitant to believe that naturally occurring brain chemicals can explain why we feel the way we do."

Not only does belief in a soul colour our scientific perspective, but it leads to confusion in the discussion of issues such as abortion and stem-cell research.

In other chapters, the worlds of "Creation Science" and "Turin Shroud Science" typify the contrast between the scientific and religious frames of mind. In the case of the latter, conclusions are determined in advance and everyone works backwards to seek confirmatory evidence while at the same time doing all in their power to discredit contradictory data and impugn the reputations of all those who draw different conclusions. The "Intelligent Design" proponent William Dembski presents the usual *ad hominem* attacks, strawmen proposals and arguments from ignorance which have come to be expected from those whose "science" is dictated by the blinkers of biblical literalism. The final paragraph in his essay betrays his dislike of the theory of evolution on aesthetic grounds where he encourages sceptics to "paint a more appealing world picture".

As an aside, I found that the chapter on the Turin Shroud turned out to be unexpectedly illuminating. The Catholic Church, it appears, has had documentary evidence almost from the first appearance of the shroud that it was a forgery — even going so far as to name the forger. Subsequent analyses of paints used, together with carbon-14 dating strongly indicate that the origins of the image on the shroud are anything but divine. Yet what is mere scientific data when people insist on believing in miracles?

It is to this topic that the last few chapters in the book are dedicated. Why, despite all the success of science in pushing back the barriers of ignorance; why, despite all the contradictory and erroneous claims of all the world religions, do people continue to believe such obvious nonsense? Kurtz explains this in terms of its inherent appeal: its claim to be able to reunite us with loved ones in some future life, or to see the injustices of this world finally resolved.

Perhaps we have evolved a cultural, or even a biological bias in favour of transcendental mysticism — a bias which in bygone days allowed our curious, but uninformed ancestors to ask the big questions without going insane at the seeming futility of it all.

The science columnist Chet Raymo continues this theme when he regards religion as the "Old Story". He compares it to the "New Story" thus: "We test the New Story in every way we can ... Always and in every way we try to prove the story wrong. When the story fails we change it. ... It is a universal story...It is a story that asserts our responsibility for our own lives and the future of the planet..."

It is this culturally unifying aspect of science which several of the book's authors point to as raising it above religion, making science an uplifting and inspirational endeavour. Whereas religion so frequently promotes division and hostility between races and cultures, science is the great uniter, with everyone working freely and openly to grasp at the same eternal and objective truths.

However, there is one aspect of the science versus religion debate that is only briefly touched upon: the inaccessibility of modern science to the vast majority of people. Bullough hints at this when he says that "... individual scientists know more and more about less and less". As specialisation increases, the answers to the big questions become less and less expressible in everyday terms and are understood only by a shrinking coterie of well-informed elites. Contrast the beauty and simplicity of the first chapter of Genesis with the mathematically expressed theory of the Big Bang. As much as we might wish it otherwise, there's no contest in terms of what most people would rather read.

This book is in turns informative, provocative, poetic and insightful. It is full of delightfully quotable one-liners. Hopefully it will finally bury the lie that scientists are devoid of passion or opinion; blind to ethical and spiritual matters. It also makes clear that, whatever role religion might see for itself in the modern world, it has few advocates in the world of science and fewer still who are willing to limit the bounds of scientific endeavour for the sake of religious compromises.

It is a book that will appeal to anyone with even a passing interest in the roles of science and religion in the modern world. Thoroughly recommended.

— Peter Hearty

Death of Beryl Mercer

POET and Mensa member Beryl Mercer, a founder member of the Cornwall Humanist Group, died last month of a heart attack. She will be much missed by the group, for which she acted as official contact

The Threat of Islam

THE *Freethinker* neglected to comment on the sign in Indiana which declared "Islam: America's Number One Enemy". Then, in same issue (October, 2003), added to a balanced letter from Dan Bye on Zionism, there is this weird set of ideas: "But while we rightly criticise Islamism, the secular humanist movement will lack credibility in the eyes of potential Muslim recruits..." etc.

Islam is America's number one enemy, as it is of all countries where the Greco-Roman legacy is ubiquitous and seemingly inexorable. Secondly, there is no such thing as "Islamism"; there is Islam – which, if the laws pertaining to racial harassment and incitement to violence were applied equitably, would be banned. Further, secularism will never attract "potential Muslim recruits" for there are none; only people who drop out of Islam, usually because, for a variety of reasons, they manage to read the awful Koran in their mother-tongue. To Muslims, secularism is simply a neologism for infidelism, so they won't give it a first thought. This has to be said, and regularly, because the softly, softly approach is thrust at us daily in the media, which are as determined to peddle the so-called "liberal consensus" as our treacherous politicians.

Of course, you will get the type of the Khalif of Windsor, Lord Ahmed of Rotherham and Indiana's Sayyid M Syeed, who will present Islam as just another religion – which is bad enough, given what, for example, the Catholic Church would do if it had the opportunity. Also, you will get such as Stumpy of Finsbury Park celebrity pleading for his "human rights", as if he, *qua* Muslim, could believe in the twaddle. In this flabby intellectual climate, it is worth at least remembering that Osama bin Laden is a faithful representative of Islam. I, too, hate Islam for the same reasons that I like to think I would have hated *Mein Kampf* and the rest of that message. But it is precisely because of the threat of Islam to the free world that Israel ought to get back to the 1967 frontiers. Then, we might see the melt-down of Islam quicken.

KEITH BELL
Wales

Palestinians and Jews

I HAVE been following with interest the correspondence on Arabs and Jews.

It seems to me that from a humanist perspective the problem is not so much to establish who is right and who is wrong or who is more right than wrong.

In my opinion the humanist perspective should be how to establish the environment for a lasting peace between Arabs and Jews.

I believe that religion, all religions, constitute a major obstacle to peace.

So establishing a really secular environment where Arabs and Jews could talk face to face before the cameras and where the non-religious as well as the anti-religious arguments would be

suitably represented, could be the first step.

Of course people have been brain-washed since early childhood with religious certainties based on superhuman revelations from infallible sources which cannot be mistaken. However, eventually some viewers may start to have doubts and accept that their human views about peace and war between Arabs and Jews could be mistaken. I think that when a sufficient number of Arabs and Jews start doubting their religious certainties, a lasting peace will become easier to achieve.

DAVID IBRY
London

IF a man is determined to espouse a cause without the slightest justice and without the facts to support his plea, he is bound to invent facts instead. And this is precisely what Dan Bye has done in his October letter regarding Palestinians and Jews.

In 40 years of proclaiming the justice of the Zionist claims I have never heard anyone proclaim a secret agreement made by Jordan with Israel to occupy the West Bank in 1948. How does Mr Bye know this? Can he supply the date and place and between whom the agreement was made? And was it in the middle of a war in which the entire Arab world was declaring its wish to destroy Israel?

In 1948, Jewish settlement in Palestine numbered 500,000; mainly holocaust survivors. They lacked military background and training, and had been forbidden by the departing British to bear arms. Britain had armed the Arab states by an earlier agreement, but Atlee admitted that he told Bevin he anticipated a terrible defeat for the Jews. The Arabs numbered 100,000. The Jews accepted the UN resolution. The Arabs did not. Is it seriously contended the Jews attacked the entire Arab world? Were all the reporters present in the Middle East involved in a conspiracy to misreport?

In his last line Mr Bye speaks of the "injustice" suffered those who espouse Islam. Please enlighten me. I know of none. That hoary old chestnut about Jews dispossessing Arabs is a fantastic invention. It went unreported at the time, and would not account for the 1948 war as it is alleged to have been part of it. Of which lands were the Palestinians dispossessed? Was there a Palestinian state there before?

Current Palestinian violence has no political objective. If it had, why is it not stated? And why have no demands been made? What lies behind the violence is a hatred of Jews learnt from the Nazis who took refuge after the war, and from Hitler's ally, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

DEREK WILKES
London

The James Ossuary

I WAS interested in the item on the James ossuary (*Freethinker*, October). It reminded me

of something similar in Scottish pseudo-history connected with St Andrew. A sarcophagus was found in the ruins of St Andrew's Cathedral about the end of the 18th century, and was assumed to have been the shrine of the relics of St Andrew – an arm bone and two finger bones brought from Patras in the 4th century by a monk Regulus to Muckcross (a non-existent name).

But the most recent art historical and archaeological research on the sarcophagus has proved that it never was connected with St Andrew, it was a Pictish royal tomb. Another story taught to schoolchildren is that in 735 CE Oengus MacFergus, king of the Picts and Achaius, king of the Scots, was on the point of defeat at a place in East Lothian by Athelstane, king of the Angles of Northumbria, when the white saltire cross of St Andrew appeared in the blue sky and Athelstane was defeated.

The place came to be called Athelstaneford and Andrew was adopted as the patron saint of Scotland with the national flag of the saltire. This is commemorated in the village, and the story is believed by numerous patriotic organisations. But local historians in the 19th century knew the story couldn't possibly be true for two reasons:-

1. At the time of the battle, national flags didn't exist anywhere (the first representation of St Andrew crucified doesn't appear till the 13th century, and there's no evidence of the flag till the 15th century);

2. The site of a battle would never be called after the loser.

Athelstaneford is an Old English name, and needn't necessarily have had any royal connections. The locals call it "Elstanford," so there could be another name behind it.

CHARLES COVENTRY
Edinburgh

God let off lightly

THE article by Ian Kelly "A marriage made in Eden" (*Freethinker*, October) was very entertaining, but I thought he let God off a bit lightly towards the end! It would seem to me that Adam, having no mother, would have to rely heavily on God as the father to provide a good role model, and that Adam and Eve would face difficulty themselves in being good parents without it.

A lovely lady from the Jehovah's Witnesses once explained to me how Satan was a proud angel who had refused God's orders to worship the newly-created Adam. Presumably the angels were also God's creation, and they patently had more powers than humankind, as witnessed by Satan's apparent immortality, his evil influence over humankind, and his separate creation of the kingdom of hell. So one might think that if the angels had helped him in creating the universe, then this was an insensitive way for God to treat good servants.

Anyhow, back to Adam, who must have been very imaginative, as we are told that he named



all the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air that God created. As the serpent is classed in Genesis chapter 3 as one of the beasts of the field, we are left to wonder how Adam actually managed with naming all of his father's creations, as there must be thousands of species of snakes alone. But nevertheless he is rewarded by having a helpmate (Eve) created from one of his ribs. This should at least ensure religious support from fundamentalists for the practice of cloning!

As for leaving his precious tree of the knowledge of good and evil in that garden, what kind of game was God playing? Did he not know the inquisitive nature of the man he had made in his own image?

My religious friend told me that it was actually the amazing Satan who was disguised as the serpent that later tempted Eve, so if that interpretation is accepted we at least don't have to wonder at what particular species it was. Otherwise we would have to find one that now (impossibly) eats dust rather than live food, for surely God would not be so confused as to treat all those species of snakes he had created as just one!

Later we have another example of inept management by God when he praises Abel for his sheep offering, but gives no respect for Cain's offering of fruit, and this leaves the latter in such a terrible state that he actually kills his own brother. Well, if any manager of men were to be so crassly insensitive in his appraisals that it caused a murder, then his abilities as a manager would certainly be brought into question. But God the Father takes no responsibility for his own actions, and marks Cain as an incitement for others to kill him. As all the people in existence at that time were supposedly from this same small family we really have to wonder at the kind of example this father was setting!

How can blasphemy laws exist when the Bible itself is a blasphemy against any notion of a God of sufficient intelligence to raise a small family, let alone create a universe?

CLIVE GREEDUS
Ilford

Brights

THE article by Dr Pigiucci (*Freethinker*, October) raised a point that has irritated me for some years. As a lifelong atheist it has always seemed absurd to me that I am expected to define myself in relation to someone else's fantasies and personal delusions.

So on those grounds I welcome the attempt to find another word or phrase that would more accurately define my firmly-held beliefs. Not, I emphasise, my *disbeliefs*. Though in all truth the possibility of ever describing myself as "a bright" is so vanishingly small as to be totally discounted. What is it supposed to mean? What relationship has it to any real-world concept? I sincerely hope this is just another pointless bandwagon which can quickly be de-railed. Surely someone out there can conjure up a more adult,

less Disneyesque, word or term. I have to admit I have thought about it on and off for many years without any success. But then in my defence I never came up with "bright".

K MOORE
Shropshire

St Paul's quote

IN reply to John Lawrenson's letter (*Points of View*, September) in which He claimed that when I quoted Paul's "why not do evil that good may come", I left out Paul's refutation of his own words which were (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say), I put my money on the "some affirm that we say" rather than on someone who says of people who disagree with him "Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips": Romans 3. 13. Paul might have added somewhere else that he was only joking but I couldn't find it.

It is evident to my mind that Paul's followers interpreted Paul the same way that I do. If they didn't think that they were doing evil that good may come with their torture chambers, racks, and stakes, what did they think they were doing?

JIM CASS
Co Durham

Notable books

I HAVE just noted that one can purchase (in Saudi Arabia) "a nylon prayer rug with a built-in compass"!

This information was in a review of a new book by Hilary Mantel, *Eight Months on Ghazal Street*. The review is in *The NY Review of Books*, Oct. 23, 2003. There's a website: www.nybooks.com.

In the novel Frances is reassured by an "enlightened" Muslim woman. Amputation punishments are not so cruel as Westerners think. An anaesthetic is usually used, and: "When they do an amputation ... there is a doctor in attendance. It doesn't go poisoned, they make sure of that. Really, Frances, it isn't like you think."

Another book worth noting came to light in an article entitled "Un-American Activities", in which *Enemy Aliens...* by David Cole was reviewed. It refers to the USA Patriot Act that empowers government agents to subpoena any person's records at a university, telephone company, bookstore, or public library, simply by certifying that the records are needed for an investigation of international terrorism. The Act also makes it a crime to inform the customer or patron about the subpoena ... it would be an offence to write to a newspaper about such a subpoena or telephone your Congressman. Public libraries have to tell the government about their patrons' reading habits, and a number of public libraries have stopped keeping records on who borrows what books.

There's a lot more. Judging by how eager we are to copy every bad idea from America, we

can anticipate something similar happening in our towns soon!

HELEN COX
Bath

Gays and the Church

THE controversy about gays and the Church misses the point - it is impossible to be both a practising homosexual and a practicing Christian. The Epistle of St Paul to the Romans defines Christian doctrine on the subject. Paul defines pagan sexual deviation thus: "Even their females exchanged normal relations for unnatural ones. The men likewise avoided intercourse with women and were inflamed with lust for one another; males committed indecent acts with other males, and receiving the punishment due for their perversion." (Romans 1, 26-28).

That, and only that, is what the New Testament states about homosexuality. It is unambiguous. St Paul did not, however, describe the punishment due to homosexual men. Perhaps he foresaw AIDS.

Yours against doublethink.

E GOODMAN
Surrey

The Free thinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are
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publishers.

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

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

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com

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

Annual postal subscription rates

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

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Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, November 2, 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: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.

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. Saturday, November 15, Reunion Lunch, Central London.

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

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, November 6, 8pm. Maureen Harvey: *The Samaritans*.

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. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, November 11, 7.30pm. David Hyatt: *The House of*

Lords - Reformed or Redundant?

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, November 27, 8pm: Colin Swinburn: *Humanism in New Zealand*.

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): Sunday, November 30. One day conference in Newcastle upon Tyne entitled *Truth, Spin and Decision-Making* organised in conjunction with the BHA Humanist Philosophers' Group, which is contributing three speakers. Fee for the conference is £10. Further Information and reservations from John Hodge on 01434 632936. E-mail johnhodge@blueyonder.co.uk

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: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, November 5, 8pm. Dan Bye: *Charles Bradlaugh – His Life and Legacy*. Wednesday, December 3, Annual Dinner. For details telephone 0114 2309754.

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: Ken Allen . Tel: 01892 863002.. E-mail: ken@kallen14.fsnet.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