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Freethinker

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**An epic battle
between
Christian
zealots - who
want the Ten
Commandments
displayed in
public - and
those who want
to maintain a
strict church/state
separation is
hotting up in the
United States**

- see p7



The Paramount Studio poster showing Charlton Heston in his role of Moses in Cecil B de Mille's 1956 biblical epic

Also in this issue:

Death with Dignity activist Patrick Kneen (pictured with his wife, Patricia) loses his fight against cancer - *page 4*

Defining Secular Moral Values - *centre pages*

Removing Muslim Veils - *page 13*



THE death a few weeks back in Ireland of a 29-day-old boy as the result of a botched circumcision (*see footnote details*) reminded me of a letter I received in July from a *Freethinker* subscriber complaining that the magazine does not take a strong enough stance against the religious mutilation of little boys.

Mr de Veauce, of Manchester, suggested that this failure to adequately highlight the problem perhaps lay with my own penis state. "If you are a CH (circumcised homosexual) it is understandable that you would want more males to be circumcised. This would put you in conflict with your duties as a secularist editor," he wrote.

While it is true that my foreskin and I parted company when I was but a few days old, and that I had absolutely no say in the matter (except perhaps to have screamed bloody murder when the crime was committed), I can assure Mr de Veauce that I am most certainly not a defender of the practice, and strongly hold to the belief that no child – male or female – should ever suffer religious or ritual mutilation.

But if an *adult*, in the position of making an informed choice, opts, for whatever reason, to be circumcised I can see no reason to condemn it.

Strange as it may seem, I did not regard myself as having been the victim of a serious assault until I was in my early 20s, when I first came to Britain and realised that circumcision was an aberration and not the norm.

In South Africa in the mid-20th century, circumcision was routinely performed, for "health reasons", on most boys. In this respect, the country was aping America, where even to this day a large number of males are given the snip for reasons other than religious.

As a consequence, I never realised that I and my peers were effectively out of step with nature – although I do recall wondering, in my early teens, why Michelangelo's male figures, notably David, looked the way they did south of the navel.)

In that same era, children were also routinely separated at a tender wee age from their tonsils, whether they were troublesome or not. But my parents, for some inexplicable reason, would not go down that road, and as a consequence I was made miserable in my teenage years by grossly enlarged tonsils that frequently became infected. They were finally whipped out when I was 19.

How much happier I would have been had the folks decided to retain the foreskin and dispense with the tonsils!

I must say my anger at having been robbed of my prepuce did not linger too long. I had more important things to do than sit around brooding over the loss of a milligramme or two of skin. In fact, to be honest, I was a damn side more depressed over the discovery that I was beginning to lose the hair on my head.

But now I learn from Mr de Veauce that all

is not lost. With time and effort I can regain my foreskin – without surgery.

He suggests I get a copy of *The Joy of Uncircumcision* by Jim Bigelow PhD. Bigelow demonstrates how, with tape, and weights of over a pound, one can induce the growth of a new foreskin.

I shall put the book at the top of my winter solstice wish list.

BARRY DUKE
considers *The Joy of Uncircumcision* and discovers that he is not alone in deploring born-again Dubya's visit to the UK



Footnote: The infant in Ireland – the son of Nigerian parents – died after an unknown circumciser, now being sought by the Irish Gardia, performed an operation at their home following the baby's birth at Waterford Regional Hospital. His parents wanted him to be circumcised "for religious reasons". Because the hospital makes no provision for carrying out religious or cultural circumcisions, a "freelancer" was recruited by the boy's parents to carry out the procedure.

Last month, a Peckham, south London, man was found not guilty at Woolwich Crown Court of unlawfully wounding two boys, aged 14 and 19 weeks, when he circumcised them. Omunnakwe Amechi, 53, had a PhD in chemistry, but called himself a doctor to create a false impression of his medical experience. Amechi, who had been carrying out circumcisions since 1995, faced two charges of grievous bodily harm. Both boys were left bleeding and needed corrective surgery.

Amechi was acquitted after the court was told that there were no formal rules in this country concerning circumcision. The practice was not regulated by the General Medical Council or any other body.

I WAS just putting the finishing touches to this month's issue when I was transfixed by an open letter, read out on BBC Radio 4 on the eve of Dubya's visit to London, by the American crime writer Reggie Nadelson.

The author, who divides her time between New York and London, pulled no punches, and I make no apologies for spreading her views among an even wider audience.

Over to you, Ms Nadelson.

Dear Mr President, You don't know me and I don't know you, but hey, we're both American citizens. Can I give you a little advice? I know that you head a very big studio and that you produce the greatest epics – the big black cars, the guys in black

suits and black shades are arriving by the plane-load but this in not Men in Black – the Presidential Version.

If you wanted the movie we would have sent for Tommy Lee Jones.

I once knew a production designer who said to the mayor of Boston, "Can't we just close it down?". You can't just close down London, George, it's not a movie. But you're my President, more or less, and you're here and I want to help out. But I don't like you and the way you mess up the environment; the way you went to war without the UN; the way you denied the Brits those tasty contracts for rebuilding Iraq – the ones you gave your pals; the way you now plan to cut and run and drop Iraq in it in time for the big sequel – in other words your election, not to mention the tariffs on steel.

We're not stupid, you know. We speak the language. I didn't vote for you, and anyhow I'm from New York, which is really not your kind of place, stuffed with non-believers, weirdos, pinkos, gays and people staying up late and having a good time. I take serious umbrage at the way you've co-opted 9/11. It's not just your politics or your sanctimonious claim of the moral high ground, or your cronies in your crew – Dickie and Donnie and Condie, or the way your lawman John Ashcroft perverts the course of real justice in my country.

I have it in for you because there is no partying at the White House, no style, no culture – just praying. This barely reminds me of my own America, but then I'm not descended from the Pilgrim Fathers. I'm not even a Christian. You'll probably hear all about people in the London streets shouting "Stop Bush". I'll probably be there myself. But we're both Americans, right? You do believe in my right to dissent, that it's critical to democracy, even if some of the papers over here call the protestors anarchist thugs? But listen, they're OK, the Brits. Were not talking France, or as Homer Simpson put it, "cheese-eating surrender monkeys".

We think you're stupid, a redneck. It's the boots, I guess – and the way you say nu-kular. You and I know it's a costume, a part of the show. But you don't care what the Brits think – it's all about American votes in the run-up to the next election.

But you could win friends here, George. Get out of the big black car, move into the crowds. Remind your guys not to shoot, of course, and then meet a few real people. Offer them that big Texas hello. You want the Brits? Get the US of Iraq out, the UN in. Find Sadam and Osama like you promised. Come clean about weapons of mass destruction and regime change because this production is going well over budget – the human budget.

And surprise us Mr President – tell the truth!

'Women in Saudi Arabia are treated like Blacks were in South Africa'

A TV scriptwriter in Saudi Arabia has found himself at the centre of a storm over an episode of the popular comedy programme *Tash Ma Tash* which roughly translates as "confusion". A *fatwa*, or religious edict, called unsuccessfully for its banning three years ago.

American-educated Abdul Rahman al-Wabily based his story-line on Saudi women needing a male relative or *mahram* to accompany them in public or in a car. Saudi women are not allowed to drive, and if they are caught in a vehicle with a man other than a *mahram* or a professional driver, they can be jailed.

The episode focused on the troubles suffered by the women in one family – a mother, sister, wife and daughter – when the only man in the house has to go away for six months.

The sister cannot go to work, the wife cannot go out shopping and the daughter is left without her beloved videos because women are not allowed in video stores.

When a policeman comes to investigate a theft at the house, he refuses to enter because there is no *mahram* present.

Al-Wabily said he based the plot on the difficulties faced by his wife and daughters when he's away.

"What's practised against women here is the same as the racism that was practised against blacks in South Africa," he said.

Saudi actor Nasser al-Qasabi, who played the policeman, has also been heavily criticised for his role in the show by Muslim fundamentalists. One branded him an "ignorant clown."

But al-Qasabi is sanguine about the flak coming his way. He told Donna Abu-Nasr of Associated Press "I've become immune to the attacks. It's just a sign of how limited the people who write this stuff are."

"In the past, few have challenged the edicts of religious scholars. But now, more Saudis, like al-Qasabi, are daring to speak out. They say they aren't criticising Islam, but fear some people are misusing the faith to block criticism and political reforms desired by many Saudis," said Donna Abu-Nasr. She quoted al-Qasabi as saying "Those who oppose the programme have a problem with people who do not think the way they do. They believe they're always right and the other is wrong, and they refuse to talk ... They want to drag us back to the Stone Age."

Abeer Mishkhas, a columnist for the daily *Arab News*, said the "heavy artillery" directed at the show indicates that "we are not used to criticism and cannot take it when it comes."

Al-Qasabi said those calling for a ban on *Tash Ma Tash* have "sick minds and narrow educations. They have built a concrete wall around them to protect their scary culture."

In Saudi Arabia, it's not just TV shows that run afoul of the religious establishment. The kingdom regulates even the minutest aspects of life in its role as the birthplace of Islam.

For instance, the Commission for the Protection of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice – the formal name of the religious police – prevented one Saudi prince who owns a factory from registering the brand name of a new product because the commission didn't like its name, Explorer.

The prince, Amr Mohammed Al-Faisal, reacted sarcastically in *Arab News*.

"The learned scholars of the Commission rightly noted that the letter X in the name was a cross, and this aroused their delicate Islamic sensibilities," the prince wrote. I am greatly relieved that, thanks to the vigilance of the Commission, a great tragedy was avoided. Until then I had innocently and, I must admit, naively assumed that the letter X was just that, a letter of the alphabet, not as it turns out a cunning and dastardly plot by Christians to corrupt our Muslim faith."

Religious sects hamper measles campaign

An increasing number of fundamentalist Christian sects in the small African kingdom of Swaziland is causing health workers a major problem in their battle against a serious outbreak of measles which has spread throughout the country.

In 2000, Swaziland had achieved a 98 percent immunisation rate against measles among children. The remaining two percent who were not immunised were mainly children of Christian Zionists, who refuse both modern and traditional medical treatment.

"These cults are proliferating, particularly in the Manzini region. The parents won't take their children to hospitals when they are ill. They refuse child inoculations. We foresaw a problem, and it was just a matter of time before a crisis occurred," said a senior nurse at Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital in Manzini, Swaziland's second city.

Sect members believe that only God may cure the ill, and it is impious to seek medical treatment.

'Big God' Boykin apologises for anti-Islamic remarks and promises to zip his lip in future

A TOP Pentagon general has apologised to those offended by his statements casting the war on terrorism in religious terms.

In a statement, Army Lt Gen William G Boykin said he never meant to offend Muslims.

"I am not anti-Islam or any other religion," Boykin said. "I support the free exercise of all religions. For those who have been offended by my statements, I offer a sincere apology."

Pentagon officials released Boykin's statement after spending hours deliberating how to calm the storm of criticism surrounding Boykin's comments.

The general's statements came in speeches – some made in uniform – at evangelical Christian churches.

In several speeches, Boykin said the real enemy was not Osama bin Laden but Satan.

"I have frequently stated that I do not see this current conflict as a war between Islam and Christianity," Boykin said. "I have asked American Christian audiences to realise that even though they cannot be in Iraq or Afghanistan, they can be part of this war by praying for America and its leaders."

'Mine was bigger than his'

A decorated veteran of foreign campaigns, the three-star general said of a 1993 battle with a Muslim militia leader in Somalia: "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol." After the man was captured, Boykin said he told the man, "You underestimated our God." Boykin's statement said that comment was misinterpreted.

Critics have said Boykin's remarks could undermine a more than two-year Bush administration effort to promote good relations with Muslims in America, as well as play into the hands of those who have fanned anti-Americanism abroad by casting the counter-terror war as an attack on Islam.

Asked about the general's church comments, Adel al-Jubeir, the foreign affairs adviser to Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, told reporters: "I thought they were insensitive. I thought they were unbecoming of a senior military official, and certainly unbecoming of a senior government official."

Boykin, the deputy under-secretary of defence for intelligence, has told Pentagon officials that he will curtail his speech-making, officials said.



THE Education Secretary, Charles Clarke, has given the go-ahead for a "National Framework for Religious Education". At present local education authorities can decide their own policy on RE, with the guidance of a Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education (SACRE).

A report in the *Times Educational Supplement* indicated that non-religious perspectives would be included in the new national framework, but the wholeheartedness of the Government's commitment to this is somewhat put in doubt when the *Church Times* described the National Framework as "a brighter day for RE dawning".

We can get some idea of the direction that all this is taking when we discover that Mr Clarke has decided to include RE and collective worship in his own personal portfolio. Traditionally, these topics are handled by a junior minister.

The decision to introduce a national RE framework was apparently taken after a "multi-faith seminar" to which – as far as I am aware – no-one from a non-religious perspective was invited. It is leading inexorably to a national RE syllabus – something the churches are very enthusiastic about because it will mean that local authorities that have paid the absolute minimum attention to this topic until now will be forced to toe the line.

Certainly the NSS was not invited, even though we had written to the minister expressing

our concerns on the matter and pointing out that, according to a survey of nearly 30,000 school children, 58 percent regarded themselves as atheist or agnostic. Another poll showed RE to be pupils' least favourite subject.

NSS Executive Director KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD examines plans from the top to force-feed religion to school children, and reports on disturbing new developments in employment regulations



NSS Council members Ian Andrews and Malcolm Trahearn attended a seminar in Birmingham on the national framework to ensure that we were as well informed as possible. There seems little doubt, however, that our exclusion from the multi-faith seminar, where the real decisions were taken, was deliberate.

Curiously, when we called them, the DfES press office seemed unable to find any information on the new framework for us, despite it being written up in the *Church Times*.

More religious concessions in employment regulations

THE Government took quite a battering when it permitted wide-scale exemptions from the new employment regulations that are due to come into force in December to religious bodies.

Despite dire warnings from impartial organisations and senior legal figures that the exemptions were in breach of the relevant European Directive, the Government pressed ahead.

Now the Government is to give independent schools, that claim to have a religious character, licence to discriminate against teachers on religious grounds and to sack them if their conduct is thought to contradict the ethos of the school.

The new regulations, introduced as an amendment to the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, read (in part) as follows:

- (2) "Preference may be given, in connection with the appointment, promotion or remuneration of teachers at the [independent school which has a religious character], to persons:
- (a) whose religious opinions are in accordance with the tenets of the religion or the religious denomination specified in relation to the school ... or
 - (b) who attend religious worship in accordance with those tenets, or
 - (c) who give, or are willing to give, religious education at the school in accordance with those tenets.
- 3) Regard may be had, in connection with the termination of the employment or engagement of any teacher at the school, to any conduct on his part which is incompatible with the precepts, or with the upholding of the tenets, of the religion or religious denomination so specified.

PATRICK Kneen, who mounted a determined campaign for doctor-assisted dying to be legalised on the Isle of Man, has died.

The 74-year-old Manxman had prostate cancer with secondaries and was told early this year that he had, at most, a few years left to live. He immediately told friends in the Manx humanist community that he intended to spend his last days campaigning for a Bill which would allow a dignified end for others like him, though he might not live long enough to benefit personally.

Mr Kneen launched his "Manx For Death With Dignity" campaign with a letter to the local newspaper in Spring 2003, asking for a local politician to push for a Bill in Tynwald, the Manx parliament. Two local politicians immediately rose to the challenge and were granted leave to introduce a Bill, subject to a Tynwald committee being formed first to consider evidence and make a report to the House of Keys.

With assistance from a small, predominantly secular humanist, group of helpers the campaign quickly got local media coverage, a website (www.Manx4DWD.org.uk), and, before long, even interest from further afield. Mr and Mrs Kneen featured in a prominent *Sunday Times* magazine article and on regional BBC

Manx Death-with-Dignity campaigner loses his battle against cancer

Report by fellow activist Stuart Harthill

and independent radio and TV programmes and also got sympathetic coverage from both Northern and Southern Irish radio and TV.

The inevitable religious backlash soon began, with "experts" flown in from the UK to panic the gullible, the elderly and the disabled with xenophobic scare stories and biblical "proof". Handily, an online poll by the local newspaper showed about 80 percent approval for a change in the law, so demolishing the fundamentalist claims to represent the "moral majority". Manx 4DWD also proved their case by distributing postcards to every island household, asking people to return them to politicians demanding a change in the law. Almost four-and-a-half thousand of the

island's usually conservative population (around 70,000 in all) did so. In addition, over 200 local submissions of evidence were sent to the Tynwald committee by the deadline of September 30.

By this point Patrick Kneen was confined to his home, having lost his sight, but continued to listen and comment publicly right to the end. An offer to appear on RTE's *Late Late Show* had to be declined as he was too ill to travel, but Border TV have been gathering material for a half hour documentary which, when complete, could reach a national – possibly even international – audience.

In less than a year Patrick's campaign has transformed this island so much, and Manx humanism in particular. His enthusiasm for new ideas, optimism, and compassion for humanity and sheer joy for life infected anyone who worked with him. We'll miss Patrick, but we will finish what he started. We also intend to enjoy doing so – because that is exactly the way Patrick would have wanted it. **STOP PRESS: On Monday, November 17 the Manx Serious Crime Squad raided Patricia Kneen's home. Patricia, 71, was arrested at 9am, and kept in custody until 3pm without being given a meal. She was subsequently charged with assisting a suicide.**

The Schools Standards and Framework Act already permits similar discrimination against teachers in maintained schools – something that the NSS has fought vigorously through parliament.

The Government has achieved this amendment of primary legislation in an unusual way – by laying down a statutory instrument (2203 no. 2037). In this way it can avoid any amendment because a statutory instrument can only be accepted or rejected *in toto*. It was laid before parliament and approved in August, a time of minimal political activity.

RC Colleges let off the hook

The Regulations anti-discrimination ambit extends beyond employment to further and higher education, which includes 16 RC sixth form colleges, and includes admission policies. The DfES declare these publicly-funded colleges perform well “attracting significant numbers of non-Catholics”, and are as a result over-subscribed. Under the Regulations “Catholic sixth form colleges will no longer be able to give preference” and “The Government has sympathy for the position of Catholic Sixth Form Colleges and their wish to ensure that their Catholic ethos is maintained.... Consequently we are seeking your views ...” I will spare you more of the sophistry in this “consultation” from this remote part of the DfES site, which very few will see.

Bully-boy tactics?

Sadly, such tactics (whether the mid-summer Statutory Instrument or the near-hidden so-called consultation) are just what we have come to expect. The Regulations themselves were hurried through both Houses of Parliament, despite opposition objections, on the very same day shortly before the summer recess. They had been cynically scheduled on the same day with the clear intent of maximising the difficulties of mounting any opposition.

This way *Hansard* would not have been published for one debate before the next one had started, so only those present in person could feed the weak points of the first debate to the other House. And indeed I only had a few hours to summarise the weak points of a highly complicated debate in the Commons before literally dashing to the Lords to inform those

mounting the opposition there.

Next steps

At the very least, these new concessions will be considered by our lawyers for infringements of either the Employment Directive and/or a complaint to a parliamentary scrutiny committee as to the propriety of the process in Westminster. Initial impressions suggest that there will be grounds for complaint.

Another issue may come into the limelight quite soon, resulting from the cruel irony that there are simply not enough Christian teachers – good or even bad – to go around. Atheists have therefore been made headteachers of church schools, and a Muslim head-teacher has just been appointed to a C of E school in difficulties. This woman has an excellent record in this respect, but the Christian Institute is furious at a Muslim being appointed and the precedent it sets. Were sufficient people of like mind to the Christian Institute to gain enough power on a board of governors to use the Regulations as the justification for dismissing someone employed in a religious school in the knowledge that they were of a different religion (or none), this would place an employment tribunal in an invidious position. There is only one fair or even sane position the tribunal adjudication could take, but ...

We are not quite alone

I THOUGHT readers might be slightly uplifted to hear the same gripe from a different quarter. UNISON have come to very similar conclusions to ourselves. In their Autumn magazine they told their members:

... But the government has in effect sanctioned such discrimination by “faith-based employers” by exempting them from the regulations.

UNISON broadly welcomes the new regulations – but is looking at ways to challenge the exemption it sees as a “betrayal” of members who work for faith-based charities and voluntary organisations.

“Betrayal is the only word to describe the way the government has backtracked on this aspect of the new law,” said UNISON general secretary Dave Prentis.

“Every time we have raised the issue of a possible exemption for religious employers, we have been given assurances there would be no wide-ranging provision to permit discrimination.

“What could have been a genuinely positive piece of legislation to protect lesbians and gay men at work has had the heart ripped out if it by the introduction of a clause to mollify bigots.”

Unison has focused on sexuality, but in religious organisations co-habitees are at risk, whatever their sex, as of course are those of the “wrong” religion or none. We will endeavour once more to raise unions’ awareness of these issues.

Teacher is cleared of assault on boy

A RELIGIOUS teacher has been cleared of allegations that he repeatedly beat a boy pupil at a Bradford mosque.

A jury at the city’s Crown Court took less than two hours to find 39-year-old Ayub Ibrahim Khalifa not guilty of two charges of causing actual bodily harm to the eight-year-old boy.

Father-of-four Khalifa, of Percival Street, Barkerend, Bradford, was also acquitted of two allegations of intimidating a witness and one of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

During the trial the prosecution alleged that trouble began in July last year when Khalifa was teaching the boy and lost his temper because he had not properly learned a lesson.

Khalifa hit him on the head with his hand and a stick, causing his nose to bleed, said prosecutor Simon Phillips.

The first nosebleed set off a series of others which eventually needed medical treatment.

The beatings continued and police were told by the boy that he was hit with a stick, said Mr Phillips.

The boy’s mother, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, also told the court she was offered a blank cheque to drop the case when Khalifa turned up at her house. She claimed that he threatened to strangle her children and called her names.

‘Excuse me, ma’am, but you’ve a ghost clinging to your waist’

A JAPANESE man has been arrested along with eight of his “disciples” on suspicion of fraud, after taking millions of yen in fees for performing exorcism rites on the public.

Police said that the group dressed in tennis clothes and carried racquets or violin cases to make them appear more “credible” when approaching potential clients in public places, such as train stations. The group members told passers-by: “Your back is possessed by the spirit of a dead woman and she has attached strings to your neck,” or “The spirit of a dead man with severed legs is cling to your waist,” the *Daily Yomiuri* reported. The group, led by 55-year-old Shunichi Miyazaki, is suspected of charging more than 1,000 people between 30,000 and 1 million yen (£160-£5,300) for an exorcism, the paper said. Most of the victims were believed to be women in their 20s or 30s.

The group are accused of operating in the Tokyo area, as well as in Nagoya, Osaka and Kanagawa. A spokesman for Kanagawa prefecture police said the victims were taken to the group’s “oratory” in the mountains near Kamakura, in Kanagawa, or to hotel rooms, where the exorcisms were performed.

Miyazaki told the *Daily Yomiuri* he did not set out to dupe the women.

“When I was a high school student, I nearly drowned. After the incident I came to have psychic power. I didn’t mean to cheat them and it is not a fraud,” he was quoted as saying.

Bradford Cathedral is in debt over the failure of its Millennium Life Force exhibition. The Church Commissioners deny that they are responsible for cathedrals, nor apparently is the Church of England. The cathedral is bankrupt. A business would be dealt with according to the law, but it looks as though a cathedral is outside the law. Some years ago the Church Commissioners also lost much larger sums of money, so one can understand why their responsibilities might have been restricted.

Some definitions are needed. In this case "Bradford Cathedral" is not the building for which, presumably, the Church Commissioners *do* have some responsibility, but an organisation responsible for an exhibition in another building (an old post office) owned by "Bradford Cathedral" – and this organisation does not appear to be the Anglican diocese. If the Church of England and Church Commissioners disown the organisation that incurred the debt, what organisation is it? Bradford Cathedral Ltd.?

Whoever decided to create this millennium exhibition must have been possessed by an irrational belief that the public would flock to it. They stuck their necks out, and so did their contractors. The contractors believed that Bradford's Anglican cathedral was part of a vast and wealthy organisation, and that debts would be paid. The people who took the decision to spend several million pounds are no longer part of the organisation that has responsibility for this debt.

Did the Anglican Church have nothing to do with the decision? Did the diocese take no part? Did "Bradford Cathedral Ltd" incur the debt? Is this another case of authority without responsibility, or merely of contractors taking too big a risk?

It seems that only when something goes badly wrong with a belief is its true nature revealed. We cannot take for granted that any organisation is what it appears to be, and that goes for all the various bits of every organisation. Large firms are liable to consist of a collection of smaller ones, and laws can exist that allow the large one to avoid being responsible for the debts of the smaller. Are any readers able to name a source of information that clearly defines the legal definition of "cathedral" in all its intricate meanings, and exactly who is financially responsible for each?

A decision was made, perhaps, to create an exhibition that would inspire people of the whole region to believe in a life force, to feel the need of it and to pay for the experience. They were wrong. At least 90 percent of the paying public was not convinced or had no idea it was happening. It now seems possible that the Bradford people of Indian origin may be able to inspire their friends to take over the building and accept part of the debt. For them

it would be a useful and popular base for several social and educational services, and perhaps a place where they can strengthen cultural traditions. It could be a more creative project than the 19th-century social and architectural traditions of Surrey that were transplanted to Simla.

The wealth or indebtedness of a religious body probably indicates, to some extent, the value ascribed to it by its followers, but it may

PETER ARNOLD reflects on the collapse of Bradford Cathedral's National Faith Centre, also known as Life Force, which is now in debt to the tune of £4.5 million

also indicate the extent to which government depends on it. Then what about Britain? Is there some truth in the saying "The Church of England is the Conservative Party at prayer"? Are there elements among the non-conformists who might represent the Labour Party at prayer? The "religious" people of Britain might think that atheists are therefore communists, or fascists perhaps, and agnostics must be Liberal Democrats! It is the kind of half-truth that is the basis of propaganda and insults one's intelligence.

The bulk of the British population is sceptical about religion but remains superstitious. They still don't like 13 and half-believe a thousand old wives tales about things they cannot explain. They still associate birth and death with religion, and many try to use churches as the venue for marriage ceremonial, possibly because it is the only conveniently large building in the neighbourhood. Many still seem to find it difficult to conceive of life, procreation and death for what they are – biological events – to deal with unknowns with common sense, logic and careful enquiry, and to believe in probability and, of course, improbability.

Probability is much more trustworthy than irrational belief. To accept this means that we have no ultimate long-stop, no "God" to make everything come right in the end, no supernatural, and therefore the human world is our responsibility. Unfortunately, we grovelling plebs still look to "God" or government to make everything come right, and it doesn't. We should be challenging religions and governments both directly and as aspects of human "biological" behaviour.

The behaviour of the adolescent male ape, deer, chipmunk, lion, elephant and others is often so bad that they are driven out of the community. Perhaps we human primates should drive out the worst of our adolescents, and give a guarded welcome to those being driven out of some other community. The

genetic requirement is fulfilled. Look at the faces of local adolescent girls as the adolescent strangers arrive. Adults usually have too much to lose to face being driven out, so we property-owning adults are usually better behaved and may have woken up to benefits to a community of interdependence.

Like the other apes, we adult males still tend to strive for dominance one way or another, and one way seems to be by encouraging irrational beliefs. The cynical politician or business person seems to be able to persuade many people on the principle that "If they believe that, they will believe anything", and they are delighted to find that yes, they do! Divide and rule. Invent an "us" and "them", friends and enemies. A President can persuade at least half the US population to agree to send their young adults to war against "communism" or "terrorism", and when they get to some foreign place, the young soldiers discover that they are perceived as invaders, fascist pigs or capitalist running-dogs who deserve to be murdered.

Communism, terrorism, fascism, capitalism are in people's minds, their thoughts, their attitudes. The religious have often encouraged governments to use force to remove wrong thoughts and attitudes by murdering the people who they believe possess them. This does not seem to be because their most basic beliefs are wrong, but because they have evolved in the same way as any other large organisation. Hierarchies and power struggles are liable to blind us to our interdependence in international relations as they did in a school playground.

Only human cooperation can postpone impending environmental disaster, and only control of one's own population can prevent biological "control" taking charge in the form of starvation, disease, and uncontrolled human behaviour. *We*, and our instincts, are responsible for human behaviour, not some ill-defined supernatural force about which no two humans seem to agree. The angels and devils are probably functions or dysfunctions of the human brain. It is likely that ill-defined anxieties are what drive the human animal to submit to organisations that promise to protect the species from its enemies. Unfortunately, we allow the *organisations* to define "enemy", and the enemy of a government is likely to be something that threatens the *government*, not the electorate or the environment.

To gain support for a rotten government, it creates an enemy. They all do, and we should be prepared for that. The religious organisations were notorious for encouraging undefined fear and superstition, after which they would offer the protection of the supernatural to those who had "faith". We tend to associate the supporters of the Church of England with a superficial courtesy, respect for the monar-

chy and a romantic vision of a quiet and ordered village life, where everybody knows their place and is content with it – though they have a suspicion that it never existed.

If we define our fears with care, we are usually able to dismiss them, to find our own solutions or endure them in the way that those who

suffer depression can understand. We are animals with an unusual level of consciousness and self-consciousness. We can develop an awareness of our interdependence with other humans and with our natural and man-made environments.

The only long-term policy for the survival of

the human race is to understand ecology, an important part of which is to understand the human reluctance to question its own beliefs, so there is some way to go if we are to succeed – and what has that to do with Bradford Cathedral? Irrational hopes and beliefs have led the human race to impending bankruptcy.

Thousands of decalogue zealots come to Washington on a whinge and a prayer

IN RECENT years America has seen an increasing number of bitter skirmishes over the public display of Ten Commandment monuments and plaques, as well as other religious symbols. But the biggest battle to date has been focused on a great lump of a decalogue installed in the rotunda of the State Judicial Building, in Montgomery, Alabama, which houses the Alabama Supreme Court.

The man responsible for siting the granite monument was Chief Justice Roy Moore, a Baptist fundamentalist who, in 2000, ran for Alabama's highest judicial post, promising a bellicose crusade to display the decalogue in the state capital.

After his election, that promise was kept. On August 1, 2001, under cover of darkness, the monument, standing four foot high and weighing about 2.6 tons, was sneaked into the building without the knowledge of fellow Supreme Court judges. In unveiling the monument, Moore delivered a speech in which he discounted all religions in America other than Christianity and Judaism. He said: "To restore morality we must first recognise the source from which all morality springs. From our earliest history in 1776 when we were declared to be the United States of America, our forefathers recognised the sovereignty of God."

In October, 2001, two groups, the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, filed a lawsuit in the US District Court for the Middle District of Alabama. The suit demanded that the monument be removed because it "sends a message to all who enter the building that the government encourages and endorses the practice of religion in general and Judeo-Christianity in particular." The court ruled in favour of the two groups, and Moore was ordered to remove the monument because it violated the First Amendment of the US Constitution and its principle of separation of church and state. He refused.

At the beginning of this year Moore lodged an appeal against the ruling. On July 1 the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta unanimously ruled that the monument's presence violated the constitution. Judge Ed Carnes, who wrote the ruling on behalf of the court, stated that if

Report: Barry Duke



The "Ten Commandments Judge" Roy Moore at the court hearing in which he was dismissed last month from his post as Alabama's Chief Justice

the monument remained, then "the chief justice would be free to adorn the walls of the Alabama Supreme Court's courtroom with sectarian religious murals and have decidedly religious quotations painted above the bench ... Every government building could be topped with a cross, or a menorah, or a statue of Buddha, depending upon the views of the officials with authority over the premises."

The court also noted that a Protestant King James translation of the Decalogue was inscribed on the monument, which is only one of a number of competing translations. The Associated Baptist Press reported that "the court's opinion took special note that different religious traditions – including different traditions within Christianity itself – have different ways of translating and arranging the Exodus passages from which the commandments are drawn." Therefore, the court said, it was difficult to view the sculpture as anything but an endorsement of Protestant Christianity.

Later that month Moore personally petitioned the US Supreme Court, saying "To prohibit the acknowledgment of God upon whom our justice system is established is to undermine our entire judicial system."

Despite his appeal being dismissed, Moore still refused to remove the monument. In August it was finally shifted to a storeroom, and in November Moore was sacked from

office for refusing to abide by the judgment.

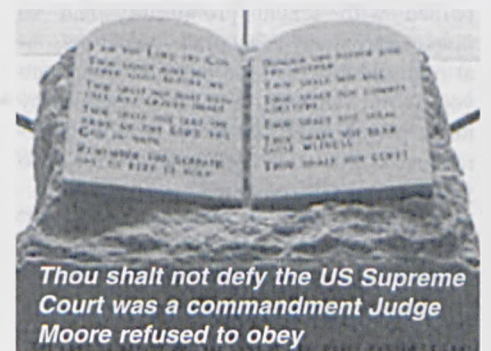
This final blow to the man who became known as the "Ten Commandments Judge" served as a clarion call to decalogue zealots throughout the country who formed themselves into the "Spirit of Montgomery – Save the Commandments Caravan", a mobile protest which last month wrapped up an epic journey from Montgomery, Alabama, to Washington, DC, with a rally at the US Supreme Court.

Under the watchful eye of Supreme Court marshals, thousands of Christians congregated on the steps of the Supreme Court building to whinge about the removal of Moore's monument, to demand unrestricted public displays of the Ten Commandments, and to pray.

The Rev Rob Schenck, one of the main organisers of the caravan, said the purpose of the rally was to voice the discontent of the vast majority of Americans who oppose limitations on their religious expression. He said Christians were upset over the way "judicial activists" were trying to remove all vestiges of America's religious heritage.

Another speaker, Sandy Rios of Concerned Women for America, made a passionate plea for a return to Ten Commandments values, pointing out that the removal of biblical laws from public schools has had terrible consequences for American society.

"Kids are killing kids – why? Did you ever stop to think it might be because they never were told 'Thou shalt not kill'? Did it ever occur to you that those in corporate America, notorious for stealing and lying and taking because of their greed, maybe never were told 'Thou shalt not steal'?" Rios asked.



If we as individuals, do not hold to the very highest ideals and principals, who are we, and who shall we become?

This article is about a personal and philosophical quest to attempt to answer this question. A quest to find values of personal morality, to question the legitimacy of those that promote the "system" in the name of unstated moral values*, and to create the conditions where it is possible to write a personal moral code for the 21st century.

Morals are now big business. It is almost impossible to open a newspaper or turn on the TV or radio without hearing various self-appointed pundits promoting the morality or otherwise of their chosen point of view and the immorality of the other person's.

The Archbishop of Canterbury launches a "moral crusade". The church claims its absolute moral authority over us all, and runs multi-million pound advertising campaigns splashed over huge billboards to preach a moral agenda; the *Moral Maze* is a regular radio programme; "moral mission statements" are issued by companies. It is possible to be arrested for the serious crime of "living off immoral earnings". People are constantly offended by other people acting immorally, and laws are passed to punish people for certain activities, on the basis that it "offends public morality". Society has "moral panics", children lack a "moral purpose" in life, adults have no "morality", and the map showing the whereabouts of the "moral high ground" appears to have been lost.

It is "agreed" (possibly by the "moral majority") that moral standards are declining as never before. It is only the lone, but determined voices of the "moral guardians" that stand between us and the complete collapse of civilised society.

Yet, amidst all the cant and angry rhetoric, morality itself is never adequately defined, the exact moral values everyone is fighting over are never mentioned and certainly never explained.

Even the very concept of morality has become confused. The church has deliberately made the very idea of moral values so intertwined with sexual promiscuity and so divorced from any concept of a wider personal responsibility, that the question "What are your moral values?" is generally regarded by many people as personal and highly embarrassing, as it is often used as a code for "Do you have sex on first dates?"

At the same time as the "moral guardians" are complaining about moral decline, there is another quite contradictory message, broadcast equally loudly – "Don't even think about

defining morality – there's really no such thing as moral values".

It is as if our moral values have been hidden from us. It is as if they have been hidden so thoroughly that we have almost forgotten that such a thing could be possible.

For thousands of years philosophers and theologians have been debating what exactly morality is, and immediately a moral value is produced, philosophers will tear it apart with multiple exceptions and "proof" that it won't work. The result is the present postmodernist philosophical mess in which we despair of ever finding universal or objective moral truths.

Way back in 405BC, the city state of Athens had been defeated by the Spartan armies. The citizens were in uproar and Sophist philosophers like Thrasymachus went around the city streets spreading rumours that there was now no such thing as morality. "Psst ... morality dead. Run for your lives!"

Ever since then philosophers have totally abandoned the idea of a unifying, universal secular morality. From Kant to Sartre, from Postmodernist Scepticism to Nietzsche, morality has foundered on the rocks of: Utilitarianism, Pluralism, Universality, Prescriptivism, Existentialism, Moral Relativism, Moral Absolutism and any other philosophical "ism" you care to name. For the philosophers, morality as a concept is impossible to define. Moral values are equally impossible to define and any attempt to do this will only lead to collapse of the arguments when all multifarious exceptions have been pointed out. Postmodernist critical theory has destroyed any hope of moral certainty and this, coupled with the knowledge that the ruthless pursuit of ethical, religious and political certainty through the ages has destroyed millions of lives, is a powerful deterrent to look further.

That's it – moral values don't exist and *Nihilism* or the conviction that there really are no moral values rules, ok! The hard reality is that there is only sex, money, power and having a bigger gun, and anything you do is ok because it is impossible to prove otherwise. There are no clear and provable moral values which we all can agree on, and so there is no way of preventing future evils performed by individuals or governments.

That's what "they" say, and they've been saying it for quite a while now. "They" seem to have proved their point and "they" must know what they are talking about.

The consequence of this argument is that we, as individuals, now believe that we inhabit a moral vacuum where there is no firm foundation for moral concepts. We are left with nothing except a feeling of powerlessness, a lack of moral awareness, a lack of a shared experience and social solidarity. We have no

respect for ourselves and for others as independent free moral beings.

The knowledge that we don't have defined moral values encourages a deep-rooted culture of suspicion in society and a lack of basic trust between people. Attempts to constantly extend mechanisms to make people more "accountable" founder, because without personal moral accountability we are reduced to doing what we are told, and we don't in turn, trust the people doing the telling. There is no duty and necessity of critique, by enquiring into one's own individual conduct and the conduct of established institutions. The consequence of people not being trusted is that they become in turn less trustworthy and the downward spiral continues.

ADRIAN BISHOP,
Director of the
Winchester
Centre for
Defined Ethics,
puts the case for a
defined core ethic



But despite all appearances to the contrary, it is obvious that people intuitively understand what is meant by morality. We act as if we are moral beings showing impressive qualities of altruism, generosity and compassion and we live in an oddly co-operative way, otherwise there wouldn't be families, tribes or societies. We do this not by instinct, but by doing what we do consciously. It is the direct result of the way that we are and the freedom we have to choose. Human beings are unstoppably communitarian.

Yet, underneath all the noise and hubbub surrounding the subject, if you went round questioning people about morality you would come across a paradox that, although they would all heartily declare that they were deeply "moral" people (and would take great offence to any suggestion that they weren't), practically nobody could tell you precisely what their moral values actually were – and it would be even rarer to find anybody brave enough to list them.

So, either you can examine society and consider it's doing rather well considering that practically nobody could tell you what their moral values are – or that the reason that there are so many problems is that nobody can articulate their moral values.

Morality is now the domain and the last cornerstone of religion. It is the last fixed point they claim all to themselves. Only through a belief in their God can one have morals and the church is the guardian of morality – and ethical absolutism rules.

In this moral void, religious organisations attempt to gain control over people by assuming that people are not innately good by pro-

moting concepts such as "original sin". Consequently people need to be controlled. These organisations deliberately obscure the idea of a personal morality whilst at the same time holding themselves up as the self-appointed moral guardians of society. But, strangely, amidst all the high-flown rhetoric and the appearance of the opposite, morality is simply not taught by the Church, because it cannot define it.

While believers claim that religion and ethical behaviour are inextricably linked, the corollary premise is that atheists are, if not immoral, then amoral, or nihilistic misanthropes, or, worst of all, moral relativists.

As rationalists we inexplicably abandoned attempts to define personal moral values and left the moral high ground to the archaic moral strictures of a celibate class adhering to the implausible plotting of the Old Testament. We left them ranting in the wind with their institutionalised superstitions and religious absolutism and slowly, by default, atheism itself has become associated with the absence of morals. Then we walked away and just let them claim an authority to talk about it to the exclusion of everybody else using moral platitudes as their currency.

We need to campaign for secular moral values and we need to wrest the so-called moral agenda from the religions which are using it as the last desperate prop to shore up the cornerstone of their crumbling edifice. As rationalists we must claim back the moral agenda and we need to do this now.

If we are going to be successful in defining moral values we will have to prepare to do battle. Like the knights of old, we must go out and slay some really nasty philosophical "dragons", which, for ages, have successfully blocked any attempt to define what morality is.

The first of these dragons is the dragon of Moral Definition which says "It is quite impossible to create a list of moral values because it is impossible even to define what morality means".

That they are impossible to define is exactly what was said about human rights, yet it seems perfectly possible to define them. We have a defined United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a defined European Convention on Human Rights, yet a Declaration of Moral Values doesn't exist!

It is the same with moral values as with human rights. Instead of trying to define what morality is, you define it by what it *does*. Moral values are how you measure the difference between right and wrong, between good and bad, between positive and negative actions.

This definition helps distinguish between

moral values and *moral virtues*. Moral virtues, often quoted as moral values, are things like bravery, patience, altruism, generosity, prudence, etc, which affirm who a person *is*, whilst morality concerns itself with defining what a person should *do*.

It is possible to understand practical moral values even if we can't precisely prove them in the way we can prove "scientific" facts. We are autonomous moral agents and the exercise of that freedom does not take place in the physical and empirical world where we are subject to fundamental scientific laws, but as part of our own personal thinking. From here it is only a short step to listing moral values.

The second dragon is Moral Distance which asserts that "morality cannot be limited by mere distance, so there is an infinite moral obligation to every person on the planet all the time". Any person who adopts a moral position cannot then claim that one's duty is limited to "not causing harm". Thus any positive actions to help people are not supererogatory* and one becomes immediately overwhelmed by an infinite burden and responsibility. And therefore morality becomes impossible to implement. Even if you do define moral values, then the obligations created by them are so huge they become impossible to implement in any meaningful way and become ridiculous.

This is a common confusion between *moral concepts* and *moral actions*. Whilst *moral concepts* are philosophical ideas not limited by time and space, *moral actions*, by their practical nature, require time and resources from the individual to implement and cannot therefore be infinite. The finite time and resources of the individual have to limit them to a personal duty of care. A duty of care to people, whilst imposing moral obligations, simultaneously frees the individual from an infinite supererogatory obligation to others.

The third is the dragon is Moral Relativism, which says "Moral relativism recognises that there is a wide variety of moral beliefs and practices which vary not only through time but between different races and classes." It claims that "each person's morality is a matter for themselves" and "there are as many perfectly valid moral positions as there are individuals". It claims that as it is impossible to prove which morals are "right" and which are "wrong". There is no guide for individuals to choose between alternative actions or systems, and therefore there is no such thing as moral "knowledge".

The British philosopher Walter T. Stace put it well a half century ago. "Certainly, if we believe that any one moral standard is as good as any other, we are likely to be more tolerant. We shall tolerate widow-burning, human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery, the infliction of

physical torture, or any other of the thousand and one abominations which are or have been from time to time approved by one moral code or another. But this is not the kind of toleration we want, and I do not think its cultivation will prove an advantage to morality."

Because the reputation of the dragon of moral relativism has been so ferocious, practically nobody has ever tried to challenge it by attempting to define moral values.

Everyone talks about moral values in a vague general sense, but once you become specific about what they are and drag them out into the clear light of day and list them, the process of actually defining what these values are becomes clearer. When we define and list our individual moral values, the dragon of moral relativism begins to shrink.

It is the very process of listing and defining moral values that creates the rules that define them. For example: they have to be consistent with each other. In practice, if one starts with the basic moral principle of not harming people, it is difficult to diverge from a narrow range of moral values that are consistent with this. One cannot say (for example), "I will accept men and women as equals" and then declare that "All women should obey men and be subservient to them". The longer a list of moral values is, the more difficult it is to make it consistent, whilst a shorter list has to stick to more basic and fundamental statements.

There must not be any gaps. The idea of the "Golden Rule", "Do as you would be done by", is often quoted as "all the morality one ever needs", but on its own it does leave a lot of gaps. If one (for example) goes with the Ten Commandments and says "I will not kill" and leaves it at that, then people are entitled to ask "What about harming people? Is it ok to torture them as long as you don't actually kill them?" etc, etc.

Moral values have to be moral. If, for example, a dedicated motorcyclist lists as his first moral value, the care and protection of his motorcycle, then people are entitled to query his basic moral values, as it doesn't attempt to measure the difference between right and wrong.

The result is that instead of everyone "driving off" in entirely different moral directions, as proposed by moral relativism, or being forced down the impossible-to-define narrow track of moral absolutism, the natural constraints of the list gets everybody driving down the same moral road. A wide road admittedly, but for the first time in history it is the same road for everyone.

By travelling along this moral road, we effectively slay the dragon of moral absolutism which says: "Individuals cannot define their own moral values because there must be

(Continued on page 14)

"Call no man happy until he is dead"

This cheering thought for the day suggests that one should always get out while winning. But here I want to argue that the so rational, timely and tidy provision of euthanasia is both morally repugnant and socially dangerous. In sufficiently dire circumstances you should – if you want a job done well – do it yourself.

Those who believe in a benevolent after-life should regret their impending departure less, however it might be arranged. It may seem improbable that any non-supernaturalist can believe in a continuing existence, but it is not logically impossible. Perhaps quantum mechanics might provide an alternative universe at the moment of extinction enabling that notorious cat to be accompanied by a whole physics faculty inclined to gobbledegook. An enthusiast for biological vitalism might regard souls as natural phenomena that simply happen to endure. The entirely new discipline of cultural neurotheology might observe that the famous, at least, multiply historically in our brain waves.

Religion is, however, a far more common ground for such hope, if somehow less fun. The after-life is almost necessarily benevolent in relation to the religion which holds the particular franchise, for why else is it likely to be adopted? However hard or unfair this world, believers have a long-term guarantee of happiness simply by maintaining their beliefs – and to do this they are (rationally) often willing to suffer much. Even better, being a whateveritis automatically accredits them to enjoy bossing around all the despicable people who aren't.

Given such beliefs, there are no direct hedonistic objections to either suicide or euthanasia except insofar as these may be specifically prohibited. If life-and-death decisions are the prerogative of God, then to usurp that is indeed a sin of pride. If there is (somehow) freewill there are also sanctions, and this prohibition ensures that the institution will grow and multiply along with its adherents who might otherwise rush ahead optimistically (or, if pessimistic heretics, refuse to reproduce).

The deal struck with religion balances present duties and future rights. So moving on is generally a good thing and, even allowing for some regret at temporary separation, some hesitation at the brink, the long-term forecast is bright. A few believers may think themselves utterly condemned and depart with Faustian reluctance (was he swindled?), but the masochists will have had plenty of penance pleasure in life.

The actual transition event is also likely to be well-managed. Effective religious rites around dying and disposal are symbolically validating, they comfort and reassure. These are real and necessary social functions and not at all to be sneezed at. Almost always death leaves a gap,

there is unfinished business. Perhaps religion is rooted in the need of the living for some means, such as prayer or ritual, to resolve, close and reformulate relationships. Without religion, planned death is perhaps attractive in reducing the distress of loose ends. Even so, both the mechanics of death and the social processes around loss have to be specifically arranged (though such formulae as humanist funerals, green burials and celebrations for the life of the deceased are increasingly available).

EDWIN SALTER argues that 'the timely and tidy provision of euthanasia is both morally repugnant and socially dangerous'

Those who believe that death simply terminates life have no reason to be up-beat about the prospect, unless of course it has all been pretty wretched and warrants oblivion (the secular alternative to the gravestone's "peace"). Rather sadly, oblivion seems to be increasingly adopted on a part-time basis with the aid of suitable chemicals and fantasies, especially by the young who may oddly regard themselves as happy and having a life. Those thoughtful persons who consider life itself a trivial accident and consciousness the merest appearance are hard put to it to find any responses to such contingent experience, except perhaps sardonic laughter. But the sensible majority, of course, strive to make the best of things, and again it could scarcely be otherwise or life would not have persisted.

How should secularists therefore view euthanasia? A common analogy appeals to the case of animal suffering – "I wouldn't let that happen to a dog" – and people do generally feel right in killing such animals. It seems doubtful if animals ever kill themselves or others in such circumstances, though a sorrowful pining away may be a kind of suicide. Perhaps our "merciful" intervention is more justified by the inability of animals to form or carry out such intentions, and our general inclination to exclude them from after-life questions (though this is not so for those religions wherein other forms of life may be soulful, or souls may transmigrate; and mediums generally reassure us that our pets are not left behind, which is nice). The analogy is surely both naive and defective.

Humans, like animals, usually experience pain as a concomitant of malfunction, and this pain itself may be severe enough to disable and bring about death. Such extreme pain, which seems otherwise pointless, has the evolutionary function of increasing selection pressure so as to weed out less fit individuals from the community (at any rate that is the explanation I prefer,

though it is not at gene level). However, pain that has the biological potential to be fatal can rightly be defied for the cultural potential of life.

There is some evidence that even early human communities were willing to sustain disabled individuals, valued perhaps for their wisdom, or socially. Conversely, all history is replete with killing (but I am uncertain as to the earliest dates recording suicide and euthanasia); and ritual killing is particularly significant because of its thought-out and institutionalised reasons, and for its often supernatural purposes.

Not only physical pain but also emotions such as guilt, humiliation and sorrow can make life intolerable. But many of these can be resolved therapeutically by appropriate personal insight or by social support. Perceptions of uselessness and failure can be mitigated by the careful provision of opportunity for action and appreciation. The "libertarian" view that people should not be restrained – for example by formal procedures and counselling – before obtaining extraordinarily dubious possibilities of transformation (sex reversal, limb amputation, biotechnics ...and yes, death) which are available because such restraint is an infringement, is surely the *laissez faire* of self-centredness and a recipe for unnatural chaos.

As for pain itself, it is disgraceful that it needs further mention. The failure of physicians to deal effectively with pain in terminal illness, for example, is shameful. Too many die not as they have lived and in ways that are familiar and hopefully respected, but in wretched states that make dying awful for them and those who care for them. Such malpractice is hardly a good justification for euthanasia.

Those without a belief in an after-life must hesitate much before commending death as a way out. If the reliability of such decisions were anything like the judicial record in cases of capital crime it would not deserve much respect. Even admission (which brings a closer analogy to the acceptance of euthanasia) is unreliable evidence and the whole sorry muddle of confession in the legal system (for example the absurdity of retaining those prisoners who deny guilt at such inordinate cost as to make their morality more likely than not, the system choosing what it prefers to believe) shows what a dog's dinner even the most elaborate and developed of institutions achieves when faced by such difficult and one-off evaluations of first-person statements.

Positive reasons for arranging death are certainly not inconceivable. One may choose to die because it will benefit others, an altruism calculated or spontaneous. It is possible to wish to be remembered at one's best, either for personal reasons or for the benefit of some greater cause (remembering that leaders are sometimes said to have lived too long). Many causes invite sacrifice:

"How can man die better than facing fearful odds ..." probably appealed to the Victorian spirit of emulating an earlier empire through daring enterprise. The opportunity of heroism is bought at the risk of life and much in culture from the earliest myths to the cinema drama exalts the role of hero.

Other reasons may be entirely private. Perhaps late in life one comes upon the situation which just feels right for departure, for a sense of merging back into the great cycle of nature or more simply of re-identifying with a central concept of self in a conclusive way. It may be as simple as rediscovering a place, a name or a relationship which gives a sense of closure. People do strive to make sense of their lives and this is to be respected as both a rational and an aesthetic value (which, allowing another aside, I think is much under-appreciated, especially where religion and ritual do not provide some elements of compensation). Again the decision is not to be rushed at and we may see therapeutically that there is an alternative understanding, a better aesthetic whole to be found in continuing life.

Under what conditions are we to believe the statement "I want to die now?" Well, we must first dismiss trivial usages (though in my case sea-sickness is pretty bad) and be infallible in spotting mistakes (eg a response to incorrect diagnosis) and decide when and if statements are to be rejected as deranged (because attributable to drugs, psychosis etc).

Even if we accept that the statement is fully true at the moment, we are unlikely to act upon it for we know that circumstances and moods change in quite unpredictable ways. We also know that those who fail in suicide often go on to good enough lives, and when we consider those who have killed themselves we often feel that their decision was sadly mistaken in its failure to see alternatives. As to how many repetitions of the statement might be required, we have to remember that the doubt is rather like that attached to a scientific theory – a single counter case overturns any amount of supportive evidence.

Another source of scepticism is even more sombre, and comprises the social pressures that are brought to bear on those who are unwanted. Few people have the privilege of being surrounded only by love and reason (and it is such fortunate people who may see only the benefits of euthanasia). Individuals are readily seen as a waste of space, a barrier to the success of others, uneconomic.

Even more widespread than malicious calculations are those attitudes which arise almost unawares from a collective giving up, from confrontation with the sheer difficulties of life which particularly affect the poor and powerless. A dysfunctional family may generate individual death as a symptom of its own problematic system: an inflexible and pathological cul-

ture that resolves its problems by procuring the non-existence of others (and if this seems far-fetched, consider the current causes of war and the issues of environment and population).

Too often the description "of no use" is adopted or ascribed erroneously because those involved cannot see a use. Unemployment, for example, is easily taken as a proof of uselessness and the old readily drift into a state of misery which those around them reflect, but these are generally economic and social malfunctions.

The loss of engagement in life, which too often comes with illness, brings a serious specific risk of euthanasia. It is that here is an opportunity to at last gain attention, to secure the involvement of others in one's own story. Presenting a demand for death gives the centre of the stage, the most dramatic of roles. The possibility is immensely seductive to those whose sense of self is not entirely secure, or to those who have too long been unheard.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that there nevertheless remain cases which are truly hopeless, where individual life is so wretched and valueless as to require death. The alternatives are suicide or euthanasia. The latter involves even wider-ranging moral problems. Some kind of permanent legislative structure has to be devised, a method of killing determined, and somebody has to be selected to do it and themselves deal with the psychological consequences. Suicide at least places moral responsibility and blame where they belong and makes the death private and idiosyncratic rather than civic and institutionalised.

Appeal may now be made to the extreme case of the wholly paralysed individual who even if handed a cut-throat razor could not wield it. A fair response might be that hard cases make bad laws. But even this person can refuse food, drink, medicines. Dehydration will terminate life in a couple of days, and there is no reason why the suffering of this period should not be relieved. In fact, even near-total paralysis does not by itself necessitate hopeless misery and there are clear instances to the contrary. There is another extreme case, that of seemingly permanent coma or brain death, but here reasonable bases for decision seem to be available and if occasionally mere bodies are sustained the price is cheap for the great principle involved.

The principle is not to kill, not to destroy consciousness. Breaching this simple principle creates a continuum of uncertainty and opportunity for misuse. It is easy to persuade the unhappy and wretched that their lives are not worth living, especially if you have the power to create those conditions. Persuasion may be innocent or deliberate, devious or direct.

Groups too may be targeted as worthless and therefore to be eliminated – and perhaps that is even claimed as for their own good, a merciful

release. Worthlessness will usually be claimed in moral terms because that gives justification, but the reality is more likely to be about wealth, power or other practical gain: an even darker cause sometimes lies in a collective psychopathology, as when a whole nation exalts itself above its victims.

Infants, the sick and handicapped have often been regarded as valueless. So too with ideological opponents, whose views condemn them to the removal of all rights and suitability for disposal. Absolute faith brings with it absolute justification.

Atheists for example are clearly staining their immortal souls, and the sooner that is terminated the better for them: the inquisition certainly had no qualms about rooting out false belief. For those with God on their side (and those nations and groups with political and economic purposes to be imposed on others do seem to like having this exclusive guarantee of righteousness), others quite literally do not count. We see this discounting and demonising of others represented by the populist media in wars which pose no threat to the victors – and oddly enough, it is always the losers who are the war criminals deserving destruction.

The concept of euthanasia is not just a simple private contract, oblivion obtained by a medical act. It does not exist in a theoretical and practical vacuum. It shares with all other forms of deliberate killing, with the many varieties of self-harm and of giving up: it overlaps with forms of sacrifice from religious martyrdom to military glory and appeals to the drama of fateful choice. Each of these is a realm, a set of historical and potential events, within which there is a continuum of highly debatable possibilities.

Societies can change very rapidly. In an ideal world at least the practical objections to euthanasia would fall away. But our world is far from ideal and far from trustworthy. There are many assaults on individual liberty being justified by the general good of an ordered and compliant society, many political decisions given the token blessing of dubious moralisations. Technology gives such inordinate power that every possible constraint of practice and moral principle should be maintained to direct and moderate its application.

To return to the case of individuals, even severe loss and damage does not automatically make life worthless. What is needed is the support of human warmth and interest and some opportunity for function, if only through self-expression. Death can be far too easy a solution. If there is a difference between bottles half empty and half full, there is a greater difference between the bottle never filled and that rich with aroma. The triumph of individuals over adversity is the greatest of inspirations to us all, and we should be prepared to do much to sustain it.

THE newly published Bloodaxe anthology *Do Not Go Gentle* (subtitled *Poems for Funerals*) arrived for review at just about the time that my father became acutely ill. I read it cursorily and noted down a few points but it soon became clear that the review itself would have to wait. Hospital visits took precedence over everything.

NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews *Do Not Go Gentle*, edited by Neil Astley, published by Bloodaxe Books, 2003, paperback, £6.99 ISBN 1 85224 635 9; and **BILL MCILROY** reviews *The Gentle Revolutionary: The Life and Work of Frank Ridley, Socialist and Secularist*, by Robert Morrell. Freethought History Research Group, £2.00.

I hoped against hope (a strange phrase) that he would live – but he did not. These comments are being written in the gap between his death and the funeral, at a time of poignant, bleak activity and intense rawness. I am not sure whether my objectivity is compromised or heightened because of this. Readers must judge for themselves.

The title is taken from Dylan Thomas's poem of the same name – the poem he wrote on the death of his own father. And it's this poem that sums up in so many ways the problems with elegiac or valedictory verse. It is rhetorical and grand and deeply felt and in many ways very beautiful – but in the end strangely unmoving. The language submerges the content so that what is important – the uniqueness, the particularity of the grief – is lost. One sees the gesture but gains no insight into the nature of the necessity that compelled the gesture to be made.

It is a characteristic shared by much of the religious language used in funerals – especially in the Christian tradition. There is one difference, however. The language of the Bible (especially that of the King James version) is not only often of great beauty in itself, but also so utterly familiar that it attains an almost mantra-like quality. It may be nonsense and quackery and downright lies, but for many it still has a power to comfort and soothe – even, or perhaps especially, for those without coherent religious beliefs. Not for me, though.

One of the good things about this anthology is that it shows that there are alternatives – and shows that for a poem to be meaningful and comforting it does not have to deploy the full baroque arsenal. A very short poem by Raymond Carver entitled *Late Fragment* perhaps exemplifies this.

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

The tone is that of Thomas Hardy's late poem *He Never Expected Much* (unforgivably not included here).

Another slightly longer poem by Carver entitled *No Need* achieves the same effect – simple words, a nod to the mythic, a few repeated colloquialisms. It results in a kind of magic that is all the more extraordinary for being so seemingly unmagical.

Another poet I was glad to see included is R S Thomas. As an atheist I find his work especially fascinating and paradoxical. A priest in the Church of Wales, he was nevertheless able often to disregard entirely the machinery of theology and belief and produce poems of stark and simple beauty. His poem "Comparisons" demonstrates this. It is about his wife.

*To all light things
I compared her, to
A snowflake, a feather.
I remember she rested
At the dance on my
Arm, as a bird
On its nest lest
The eggs break, lest she lean too heavily
On our love. Snow
Melts, feathers
Are blown away;
I have let
Her ashes down
In me like an anchor.*

That last verse is simply extraordinary.

It was good to see included too Charles Causley's mysterious and moving poem *Eden Rock* and also *After Great Pain* by Emily Dickinson. This latter is a poem that in just twelve lines expresses perhaps more completely than any I know the actual experience of grief. It ends:

*This is the hour of lead
Remembered if outlived,
As freezing persons recollect the snow –
First chill, then stupor, then the letting go.*

A problem with anthologies is that the best within them exposes the worst unmercifully. The Persian poet Rumi has become fashionable of late in perhaps the same way that Khayam and Gibran were fashionable – in other words, popularly and uncritically. It may be the work itself, or perhaps the translations, but the poems of Rumi included here seem just too vague or slight to be in any important sense moving or meaningful. And as with some of the more overtly "religious" verse in this anthology there is a glibness about them that faintly repels.

Erring on the side of the over specific is the work of C K Williams. His elegy to Howard Brodsky is clever and ironic, but fails to reach beyond its subject; and the long extract from his poem *Le Petit Salvie* seems curiously arch and sentimental. He seems to aim for some kind of philosophical grandeur in the same way that Eliot so often did – but he lacks Eliot's intellect and acuity of ear. Lovers of the diffuse and meandering may disagree.

A few of the inclusions seem pointless, and a few are frankly risible.

'*When I go, Guard my tomb well, Grasshopper*' is a haiku by Issa. As well as the tone being faintly ridiculous, the translation entirely fails to meet the seventeen syllable requirement for classification as a traditional haiku. Readers seeking good Chinese or Japanese poetry on the subject of grief and mortality and the brevity of life would do much better to seek out the Arthur Waley translations, which remain generally unsurpassed.

On the whole this is a curiously unsatisfying collection. There are some good things in it, but its editor Neil Astley has included too much substandard and left out too much excellent work for it to feel anything but a project executed in too much haste and with insufficient preparation. At £6.99 it's cheap enough, and Bloodaxe Books deserves support even when they come up with the occasional dud – but we, the grieving, need better than this.

– Norman Pridmore

"FREETHOUGHT has a rich and interesting history spanning two centuries", the newly-formed Freethought History Research Group announced in advance of its inaugural meeting in October. The Group aims to "preserve this history and make it readily available". Such sentiments and aims are commendable, though it could have added, by way of warning, that freethought history is also a source of rich pickings for the souvenir and book-dealing fraternity.

The FHRG plans to publish a journal and pamphlets. We can but hope that *The Gentle Revolutionary* does not indicate the standard of accuracy that characterises its future publications. For example, in the section on Ridley's association with the freethought movement, specifically his presidency of the National Secular Society, Robert Morrell throws objectivity to the wind and lays on the flattery with a very large trowel.

Resorting to inverted McCarthyism, he depicts Ridley as a loyal defender of secularist and libertarian principles supposedly betrayed by perfidious right-wingers in the NSS leadership. In return, he was "slighted" and his genius unrecognised.

Readers of Robert Morrell's account of NSS Executive Committee meetings may be excused for imagining that he was in attendance and writes from first-hand experience. Not so. He was not a member. I was, and therefore know that his "research" is based on a selective reading of Minutes plus the malignant tittle-tattle of under-achievers who are soured by their inadequacy and thwarted ambition. So much for the "history" that the FHRG wishes to preserve.

It is hardly surprising that Robert Morrell makes no reference to the unscrupulous campaign that a faction conducted to drive Colin McCall, the general secretary, from office.

He was a bar to their gaining total control of

the NSS and the *Freethinker*. Eventually (with the acquiescence of socialist and secularist Frank Ridley) they forced the Society's only employee to resign. It seemed that they had won the day. But as the old saying goes: "There is many a slip ...". I was appointed to succeed Colin McCall.

Frank Ridley's resignation, on the other hand, was triggered by the BBC's selection of Colin McCall to appear in a discussion programme.

NOT all that long ago I had a conversation with a Muslim shopkeeper, who was entirely affable as we discussed the need for more virtue in the world. We believed strongly in goodness, down-to-earth practical stuff. I ventured to tell him I was an atheist. His manner and attitude changed completely. He could no longer talk with me, except for business purposes, he told me. My attempts to restore conversation met with stony silence. Wishing him well, I left, feeling rather sad for him.

Not all Muslims are like that. Young men are sometimes more responsive. Also older men and women of broader outlook. Not everyone has contact with moderate Muslims, let alone communities comprised of them, and a large number of UK inhabitants may seriously doubt their existence. Some, who are better informed, give them merely passing attention, on the grounds that traditional Islam is wholly authoritarian, absolute in its demands, the will of Allah being regarded as supreme, and disagreement as rebellion. Any moderate form must therefore be a watered-down version not deserving to be called the true religion.

Having been a humanist for some 30 years (though for about half that period unaware that such was what I was – a fact not untypical of our citizenry at large) and for half a century before that a devoutly religious Christian, I grow weary of being told by some critics of religion, who prefer stationary targets, that I could not have been a real Christian since I was never a fundamentalist. Well, I did try once quite hard when, as a boy, I was invited to a summer camp, but when I started raising questions I was told that the Devil was getting at me. As he did not figure at all in my belief system except as a metaphor, I flew that cage. Many years later I came to realise that, for me, God, too, was metaphorical, not metaphysical.

Ordinary decent people, who don't profess to piety, have ill-defined beliefs, if any, and their own cobbled-together ethics. If they say they are religious, this is usually because that is the way they have been brought up, and they have not studied any religion sufficiently (least of all their own) to be more than superficially critical of some of its features, and then probably in the form of jokes.

Fundamentalism in any religion is Protean in its forms. While atheists are often more familiar with the Bible (or other scriptures) than those who profess adherence to the divine revelations they supposedly embody, they are just as frequently indifferent to theological and ethical development which, though slow-acting, per-

Both were interviewed by the producer at Broadcasting House.

To put it bluntly, there was no contest. In Robert Morrell's words "there is a world of difference between public meeting speaking and broadcasting, and it seems that the producer decided McCall was the better of the two. A consequence of this was that Ridley resigned as president." His ego was terminally dented, but not by the National Secular Society.

Removing Muslim Veils

meates every culture. Changing circumstances, by which it is driven, may occur within a religion's parameters, as with schisms, leadership battles, effects of missionary encounters and so on. Or they may be environmental, political, educational – resulting from scientific discoveries, for example. The ability to induce anaesthesia, provide reliable means of contraception, communicate with rapidity and ease, unhindered by censorship, are instances of conditions that affect religious belief. Changes in outlook and behaviour eventually follow, however ardently resisted by reactionaries, or impeded by the intellectual inertia from which so many suffer, or lack of will to change one's way of life, even when it is plainly not doing any good.

CHARLES WARD says that in time 'Muslims themselves will remove the veils their devout ancestors unintentionally cast over reality'

Nevertheless, a person's effective religion is a private one, not the public one (supposedly monolithic and immutable orthodoxy favoured by clerics) to which, outwardly, they may conform. This can be done for persuasive social reasons but also out of fear of tyrannical authority which, despite propagandist assertions regarding its divine origin, is always taken up by people with ambition (however disguised) to exercise power.

I quote the following from an article, "Defending human rights in Islamic countries" (*International Humanist News*, August, 2003, contributed to by a symposium including Ibn Warraq, raised as a Muslim, whose scholarly work *Why I am Not a Muslim* (Prometheus 1995) is a courageous apologia for apostasy:

It is still possible to find Christian and Jewish sects that try to adhere closely to the tenets of the founders, but the majority of both Christians and Jews have to a greater or lesser extent come to terms with modernity. There are today far more secular Jews than fundamentalists, and far more Christians happy with the separation of church and state than those who would like to see the return of theocratic government.

Christianity did not give up theocratic control

The disgruntled are always with us. Hovering on the fringe of the movement, they achieve little yet are ever ready to carp and snipe at others. For that purpose, it now suits them to cast Frank Ridley in the role of hero and martyr.

It is noticeable, however, that most of his present admirers did not work with or even know him. But they are not averse to manufacturing an excuse for aiming their pea-shooters at the National Secular Society. – *Bill McIlroy*

of society without a fight. Judaism is still engaged in the fight in the state of Israel. In Europe, the decline of the church's hold on government has been slow and is still not complete.

Religions, as institutions, cannot arrest or deflect change occurring unobserved. But individuals like you and me can choose to drift, let things happen, obstruct or assist.

Moreover, coming to terms with modernity does not mean sinking into a mire of seedy culture with which it may be identified. Secularism is not a synonym for lack of moral idealism, in contrast with "spirituality". Nor is it a substitution of Western for Eastern values. Our humanist goal is an ever more profound realisation, in mundane terms, of human values, perceptions of which have emerged over the centuries from every region of the globe. Reformation, like evolution, is on-going.

If we truly wish to see reformation advance in the Islamic world (to say nothing of other religions), and not merely indulge a pipe-dream that horrifying fundamentalist versions of the religion will disappear if we criticise and mock them hard enough, it is to moderate individuals we must look, giving them at least encouragement, if not some practical support, as they promote wiser interpretations of inherited ideas and confront the enmity of bigots, not seldom at their own peril. Such are more genuinely courageous than fanatical self-immolating "martyrs", whose misdirected emotion, fuelled by delusion, overlies any finer qualities they have. Destroying themselves along with their undeserving victims, dispensing sorrow, suffering and fear, negates the very notion of compassion – a word which figures prominently in Islamic vocabulary.

Some ideas simply must be ditched, as has occurred more than once in the history of Christianity, despite an emphasis by churchmen on continuity of faith. Muslims themselves will remove the veils their devout ancestors unintentionally cast over reality.

Gods are as people conceive them, but for many people it is a long and difficult business to come to this realisation. It is we who have the creative power of imagination thus, if we know no better way, to encapsulate our hopes and aspirations. We have, or can demonstrate, freedom to think and behave in the noblest manner that we can. Free men and women (and children too) are not slaves to anyone's diktat. Nor to anyone. Humans are free to believe or disbelieve.

"Death to infidels!" must go – as did the concept of Flat Earth.

Progressive education

FROM his Webwatch page in November's *Freethinker* I learn that Norman Pridmore amazingly holds favourable opinions about the progressive toffs' Summerhill School, like his fellow book-reviewer the late lamented Colin McCall. There is obviously a strong streak of anarchism/utopianism in the freethinking tradition which is still active.

However, it should be thoroughly understood that these superficially attractive ideas about education, which have been fashionable on and off for over 200 years among the Romantically-inclined upper and middle classes (since Rousseau's writing of *Emile* in fact), are always disastrous for ordinary children who need academic qualifications and don't have parents who can find something for them to do in the world if they choose not to attend enough lessons.

Isn't Norman aware that it wasn't "thought-

ful and independent-minded" kids that were produced during the dominance of "child-centred education" for three decades after the 60s in our ignorant and ill-disciplined academic and social failures, who were often functionally illiterate and innumerate. The two Blair governments' education policies have mainly been concerned with trying to recover the prestige and effectiveness of the teaching profession lost in those years, in the face of the continuing resistance of the progressives.

The progressives' ideas are based in sentiment, crude naturalism and, historically, even theism (*cf* Froebel and Pestalozzi especially). They abhor scientifically-conducted research into effective teaching methodology. Reading, for them, is as inborn an ability as speech, and they believe that infants will acquire it through mere exposure to texts and accompanying illustrations as part of their natural self-realisation.

I sincerely hope I have said enough to prevent any further promotion of this irrational and catastrophic ideology in future issues of the essentially rational *Freethinker*.

On the subject of an alternative to "atheist", what about "rational"? It may have a slightly hubristic flavour, but, as Reg Le Sueur said in his article on page 6, there really can be no humility involved in the search for scientific truth.

BRIAN KING
Cornwall

Religion and Art

WHAT an interesting article in the November *Freethinker* by Clive Greedus denouncing art as the equally time-wasting ally of religion.

A J Ayer long ago complained that the trouble with both art and morality is that all one can do is boo or cheer according to fancy.

But far better to see that art can be a splen-

Defining Secular Moral Values

Continued from centre pages

a set of universal moral truths that are always true. Inevitably, if individuals define their own moral values then their values won't be the "universal" ones.

Creating a list of moral values, and abiding by the consistent rules that the list itself creates, is as near to defining universal truths as it is ever possible to get. Personal moral values return the emphasis and moral power back to the individual and no longer can organisations or institutions, either religious or governmental, use them as a vehicle of social control. The citizenry defines the moral agenda, and the institutions then have to live up to and justify their actions to the moral agenda of the individual.

This is my personal declaration of moral values. (I believe that morality is about defining how we act towards other people. I have tried to make this list affirmative in outlook and have stuck to ten, for "political" and practical reasons).

(1) I will not harm people. *This is obviously the primary moral value. The words "unnecessarily", or "except by accident" have been deliberately omitted because history provides us with plenty of horrendous examples of atrocities committed in the name of "the greater good" by the perpetrators who argued it was "necessary" in their opinion. The open concept of "I will not harm people unnecessarily" is exactly what moral values are designed to prevent.*

(2) I will accept a duty of care to people. *Simply not causing harm is too limited by itself. There is a moral duty to aid others and it is not supererogatory. Whilst morality as a*

concept is not limited by distance, moral actions by themselves are limited by time and resources. A duty of care to others is a primary moral value but it is not infinite.

(3) I will accept responsibility for my actions and for the consequences of my actions. *Morality begins with full personal responsibility and it is the individual, not the system or society, that takes responsibility for their actions and any subsequent consequences of those actions. The excuse "I was obeying orders" or "I was only doing my duty" does not absolve the individual from this.*

(4) I will affirm the individual's right to self-determination. *If individuals are held accountable for their actions then they must have the ability to act with free will and to make their own decisions – paradoxically, even if those decisions are judged to be immoral.*

(5) I will be honest. *Being fair and just in character and not stealing or cheating.*

(6) I will put the truth first. *I will base my life and actions on reality, not spurious fantasies.*

(7) I will accept men and women as equals. *Men and women must have equal control of their lives.*

(8) I will conduct my relationships with integrity. *Relationships are based on trust.*

(9) I will affirm people's rights to diversity, equality and equal opportunities. *A positive approach to individual differences and potential.*

(10) I will not let the divisions of the past threaten the existence of the present. *There has to be a time for the enduring trait of enmity to cease.*

Inevitably, whatever the individual lists as his or her moral values will be subject to a natural peer review, and once the individual has declared his or her moral values they will be judged on them. If you think that people don't know what moral values are, just let them critically examine your list. It is not for me to tell you what your moral values are, it is for every individual to define morality for themselves within the constraints imposed by the process of writing the list and to proclaim their moral declaration freely and unequivocally to the world. If you feel your values are slightly different fine, that's great, what matters is that you *have* moral values and can clearly define them.

As rationalists we must ask ourselves who are we most afraid of? Religious organisations, or the dragons of moral definition, moral distance, moral relativism and moral absolutism? By slaying these dragons and writing our own lists of moral values within the rules that the list creates, we can now promote a unifying secular morality, which provides for individual self-determination and will remove morality from the domain of religion forever.

* Supererogation: the performance of more than duty requires.

* For simplicity the expressions moral values, moral codes or moral principles are used interchangeably.

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did ally of secularism. Appreciating the natural world as beautiful displaces any need for religiosity, and the appeal of liturgy and rite becomes not a matter of supernatural force but of a drama-giving involvement and catharsis.

Greedus justifiably complains that the arts have been too much the privilege of establishment and wealth, and this is currently reinforced by the way schooling according to the national curriculum prescribes that children learn to be unchallenging economic fodder: it largely denies creativity and expression. He also often refers to the arts as mere entertainment and pleasure, as though karaoke and porn were the typical products. But perhaps all the rubbish so vigorously poured into our lives by the media is precisely the mind-numbing (and soul destroying) bread and circuses of our day. Art proper is, in fact, hard work both in making and appreciating. The fates of Mother Courage, Petrushka and Peter Grimes are, like those of Shakespeare's nobles, complex challenges to understand our own humanity. To atheism the arts offer both explanations and opportunities, a source of meaning and spirituality wholly accessible to human agency and scrutiny.

If the powerful have often institutionalised the commemorative and purchasable visual arts, ordinary people have generally been the life blood of the performing arts, the frequent target of religious bigotry, simply because they offer joy and liberty. Frankly, secularism needs allies and also needs more to offer than grey commonsense and practical utility. Art for atheists!

EDWIN SALTER
Kings Lynn

THERE'S no point in trying to follow Clive Greedus through all the twists and turns of his rambling thoughts on the place of art in human society. His central theme, however, that of art as the "greedy twin" of religion, must not go unchallenged. That is not to deny the high degree of mutual support and dependence between art and religion to which he draws our attention: it is not the facts, but his interpretation of them that is at fault.

In the first place, he is so much concerned with what may be called the "consumers" of art – churches, kings, wealthy show-offs, and the common herd in search of entertainment – that he leaves altogether out of account the creative urge of those who paint the pictures, carve the statues, write and perform the music and the plays.

Yes, of course, they work to satisfy a market, or they could not live and continue to create; but can it be denied that the creative vision and skill of the few, as well as the readiness of the many to welcome and respond to their creations and to pay for them, are expressions of an aspiring spirit that is an essential element in the make-up of our humanity? Still

more important is his failure to understand the degree to which this essentially human quality of art, even when it is put to the service of religion, can shine triumphantly through the trappings of the myth.

Although there is undoubtedly in most religious art a degree of distortion of humanity to serve the purposes of theology, the other side of the coin is that the Church's need for illustrations of biblical stories and other religious motifs has always been readily seized upon by artists as an opportunity to display their skill in the portrayal of human figures and human emotions. Even angels are pretty girls or splendid young men, with a pair of wings somehow impossibly attached; and God the Father can't do without a human face.

On the whole, humanity has not done badly out of the exchange. Clive Greedus would be well advised to forget about his "little green men test", which does nothing to enhance the authority of his own blinkered view of humankind. We don't need to interpose any external standard of judgment to make us aware of the defects of our nature, the horrors of our history, the burdens and threats that the way we conduct our affairs imposes on future generations. But while acknowledging our weaknesses, no realistic assessment is entitled to ignore, and still less to denigrate as "obscene", one of our greatest sources of strength, the search for beauty and significance through artistic endeavour.

DEREK FANE
Bognor Regis

Homophobia

I DON'T understand why you and your homo buddies keep going on about the Church being homophobic (a nonsense word since people are not scared of gays, they just don't like their idea of sex).

As I pointed out some time back, it is a basic fact of the Bible that God hates queers (millstone round the neck and drowned, even admission guarantees an eternity burning in Hell, etc) and you might as well go on about God being anti-Satanist.

What do you and the others expect of the Church? Do you expect them to say that God and the Bible are wrong? You know that they cannot. The way you keep on at it, I begin to suspect that if they did, you might suddenly become a Christian. You don't seem to be bothered about the nonsense bit that is in the make-up of all religions. All through your writings, what you find wrong is what many Christians find wrong – the cruelty of some religionists and some religious societies. I think that you are an in-the-closet Christian.

MICHAEL HILL
Kent

EVERY month in the *Freethinker* we read about the plight of homosexuals at the hands of various religious groups and the intolerance of religion in general towards them. In the last few editions we have also been treated to photographs of hunky topless men: including one in a rather fetching pose with his trousers undone.

Well how about some articles about something else for a change? I mean, two pages about the problems of people with long hair is scraping the barrel a bit.

Women have suffered for centuries in the name of religion too, but the percentage of coverage that gets is minimal in comparison.

Or, in the interest of balance, and for the benefit of us straight males (and lesbians), how about some topless pictures of women accompanying the articles?

And don't worry if you can't find any articles that would really warrant such pictures, it has never stopped you before.

ROB JACKSON
Middlesborough

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Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, December 7, 4.30pm. Public Meeting. Speaker: Michael Irwin, Chairman, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society.

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. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Friday, December 12, 7.30pm. Peter Lee: *Frederico Garcia Lorca, Dramatist and Poet.*

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

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, December 4, 8pm. Public Meeting. Speaker from the Fabian Society.

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.

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Aquare, Leeds. Tuesday, December 9, 7.30pm. David Cove: *Is there a Gene for Happiness?*

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

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

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

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

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://homepages.stayfree.co.uk/lss>. Public Meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Thursday, December 18, 8pm. Winter Solstice party.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

Musical Heathens: Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 02476 673306.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North Stafford & South Cheshire Humanists: Information: Sue Willson on 01782 662693. Newsletter and details of programme available.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Anne Toy on 020 8360 1828.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, December 3, Annual Dinner. For details telephone 0114 2309754. Wednesday, January 7, 8pm. Public Meeting.

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: brianmccclinton@btinternet.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