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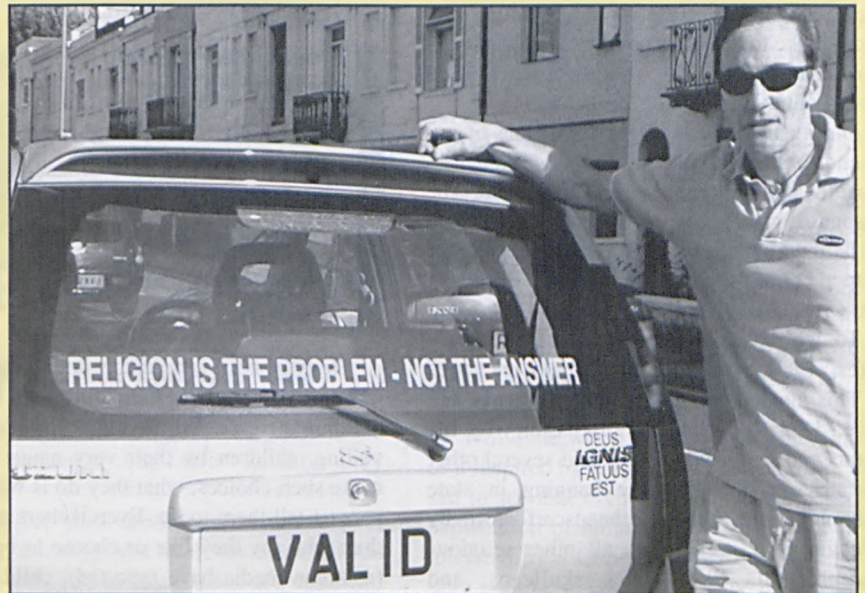
The

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# Freethinker

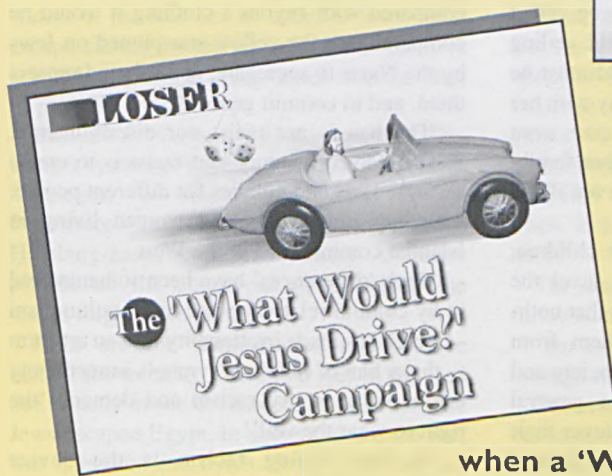
Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

How's this for  
an effective  
way of getting  
the atheist  
message  
across?



When *Freethinker* subscriber Terry Milton, from Bournemouth, parked his car with its unusual registration plate in a Brighton street recently, he was spotted by editor, Barry Duke, who promptly snapped a picture for the magazine. Terry's slogan gets a lot of attention, but has not yet generated nearly as much excitement as the 'What would Jesus Drive?' debate currently raging in the US.

The debate took an even more controversial turn when a 'What would Mohammed Drive?' cartoon arrived on the scene and found its way into publications around the world, much to the annoyance of humourphobic Muslims who are now demanding an apology  
- see report on page 6



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WAY back in the mid-70s I had a few friends over for Sunday lunch. Among them was the son of a vicar from Minehead in Somerset. The lad had moved to London, taken up residence in a squat in Brixton, and had become a militant proselyte for Britain's fledgling Gay Liberation Front.

This militancy manifested itself in the way he dressed and conducted himself in public. With his face heavily caked in make-up, his hands and wrists heavy bejewelled and his nails painted scarlet, this ridiculous young man would take to the streets of the capital and provoke trouble by baiting straight couples – and just about everyone else for that matter.

During the course of the meal, one of my friends politely asked why he thought it necessary to look and behave the way he did. The response was explosive. He banged the table so hard with his fists that several roast potatoes leaped out of their dish, and yelled: "Because I am *GAY, GAY, GAY!*"

To which the questioner sweetly retorted: "Yes, dear, I know that. But what *else* are you?"

This incident came to mind a few days ago when I found myself in a discussion over the rights and wrongs of France and several other countries considering the banning in state schools of the *hijab*, or headscarf worn by Muslim girls, as well as all other religious paraphernalia like Jewish skullcaps, and rosaries and crosses worn by Christians. Opinion was divided, until – remembering the vicar's son – I suggested that the wearing of religious garb owed more to political posturing than religious piety, and that the whole controversy boiled down to the fact that children were being manipulated by violently anti-secular Muslim groups in a deliberately provocative and cynical manner. There is nothing more these groups relish than to don the mantle of martyrs and portray themselves as victims of the infidel.

This had the effect of swaying those against the ban, as well as the waverers, and in the end everyone agreed that France was on the right path.

Several days later I was gratified to discover support for my viewpoint in a briefing document written by Maryam Namazie, Executive Director of the London-based International Federation of Iranian Refugees, and issued in January. In it she declares: "While Islamists and their supporters have proclaimed that banning religious symbols in schools and state institutions is a 'restriction of religious freedoms' or 'freedom of belief', 'religious intoler-

erance', 'a violation of women's and girls' rights', 'racist', 'discriminatory', and so on, we believe the truth is simple and quite contrary to what they claim.

A ban on conspicuous religious symbols in state schools and institutions, she says, is vital for the preservation of France's secularism and the continued separation of state and religion. She goes further, saying that such a ban is would ensure children's rights, and that it should even be extended to private schools – and indeed everywhere else.

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE thinks the wearing of the hijab is a provocative political gesture rather than a sign of piety**



"Here the issue extends beyond the principle of secularism and goes straight to the heart of children's rights. While adults may 'choose' veiling, children by their very nature cannot make such choices; what they do is what their parents tell them to do. Even if there are children who say they like or choose to be veiled (as some media have reported), child veiling must still be banned – just as a child must be protected even if she 'chooses' to stay with her abusive parents rather than in state care, even if she 'chooses' to work to support her family in violation of child labour laws or even if she 'chooses' to stop attending school.

"States must intervene to protect children, no matter what. Also, states must level the playing field for children and ensure that nothing segregates them or restricts them from accessing information, advances in society and rights, playing, swimming and in general doing things children must do. Whatever their beliefs, parents do not have the right to impose those beliefs, including the veiling of children, just because they are their own children.

"In addition to being pro-children's rights, a ban on conspicuous religious symbols is pro-women's rights. It protects women (albeit minimally) from being harassed and intimidated into veiling. Those of us who have fled political Islam know full well the levels of threats and intimidation women have faced both in the Middle East and here in the West to wear the veil, or else. The political Islamic movement behind veiling is the same movement that is waiting to execute Kobra Rahmanpour in Iran, impose *sharia* law in Iraq and enshrine Islamic inequalities in the Afghan constitution.

"It is the same movement that has blown up innocent people on buses, cafes and in office buildings across the globe. Everywhere it has had power, it has murdered and brutalised.

Women and girls have been its first victims.

"Now it is this very movement that is demanding the institutionalisation of its repressive measures against women in the heart of Europe, framed in terms of 'women's rights' and 'religious freedoms'! What cheek!

"My Hijab, My Right?" – I don't think so. Of course an adult woman has the right to practise her religion, customs and beliefs in realms other than those where she is representing the state or the educational system. Of course it is her 'personal choice' to be veiled. But if you remove all forms of intimidation and threats by Islamists, Islamic laws, racism, cultural relativism and ghettoisation by Western governments, and norms that consider women half that of men, I assure you that there will be very few women wearing the veil. Even if there are still those who do so, one must remember that it is not a positive right. 'My Hijab, My Right' is like saying 'My FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), My Right!' The veil is an instrument to control a woman's sexuality, like FGM. It is meant to segregate women. Today, more than ever before, the veil is political Islam's symbol, and women and girls are its first victims. The veil is not just another piece of clothing – just as FGM is not just another custom. I suppose if it were to be compared with anyone's clothing it would be comparable to the yellow star pinned on Jews by the Nazis to segregate, control, and repress them, and to commit genocide.

"The ban is not racist nor discriminatory. What *is* discriminatory and racist is to create separate laws and policies for different people, including immigrants and women living in Islamist communities in the West.

"Such 'differences' have been so hammered in by cultural relativism and multi-culturalism – which has made irrationality into an art form – that a ban of religious symbols immediately causes some to cry racism and demand 'the right to wear the veil'!

"In fact, crying racism is the device Islamists and the political Islamic movement, along with their supporters, employ in order to shut people up and hinder opposition.

"There are those who claim that defending secularism equates with support for the 'imperialist French state and its education system'. The truth is that the struggle for secularism and women's rights has nothing to do with supporting the French government – but everything to do with defending progressive human values."

• In carrying out research into the *hijab*, I discovered numerous companies selling the garment on the internet. Significantly, many of these ads blur, or eliminate, the female face completely, as this photo shows. How sinister and perverse can you get?



Illustration by Tzigane

## Russian Christians given carte blanche to vandalise 'offensive' art

AFTER decades of persecution under communism, organised religion is now flourishing in Russia, according to the Moscow newspaper *Moskovskie Novosti*. And like Marxist Leninism, it brooks no challenge to its dignity.

The paper reports that a year ago the Andrei Sakharov museum in Moscow mounted an irreverent exhibition called "Beware Religion!"

Works on show included an icon of Christ pictured against a Coca-Cola ad with the inscription "this is my blood"; a photo of a nude woman crucified on a cross; and an

image of an Orthodox cross garlanded with sausages.

All this enraged a set of Christians, who trashed the show, ripping up canvases, smashing frames and trampling on sculptures.

The police arrested them, but a chorus of politicians demanded their release, claiming they had been provoked by blasphemy, and that it was the "heretical artists" who should be punished.

Unsure what to do, prosecutors appointed a panel of experts – art historians for the most part – whose report has now been published.

The exhibits, it says, were the "work of the devil" and the vandals deserved praise for standing up against the "moral decline of society."

Museum director Yuri Samodurov and the four exhibition organisers have now been charged with "conspiracy to create ethnic tensions" and face five years in jail if found guilty.

As the title of their exhibition rightly said: "Beware Religion!"

Meanwhile, news of a more recent act of vandalism comes from Sheffield, where the Sheffield Humanist Society mounted a display in the entrance to the city's Central Library, which ran from January 24 to February 14.

Towards the end of an exhibition a Christian zealot scrawled graffiti over many of the papers and information on the display.

"While the world is split by conflict, much of it inspired by religious fundamentalism, it is sad to see that even in Sheffield the peaceful explanation of humanist principles cannot be tolerated by a Christian. This type of bigotry does nothing to contribute to the peace of this world," said John Hughes, a Society committee member.

"The damage to the display will be repaired. Our resolve will be strengthened. All that has been achieved by the perpetrator is that he or she has shown to the public that every religion has its fanatics, by whom freedom of thought and expression are prohibited.

"Our message has been attacked when we are trying peaceably to put our point of view; that our code of ethics and morality is based not on a book of rules from a supernatural divinity but from common sense and our common humanity.

"This will merely confirm in many people's minds that the superstition and divisiveness that are present in the extremes of religion are to be avoided at all costs."

## 'Law of physics' used to part the Red Sea, says experts

TWO mathematicians – one from St Petersburg, Russia and the other from Hamburg, Germany – have concluded that the biblical story of Moses parting the rushing waters of the Red Sea so 600,000 Jews could escape slavery by the Egyptians was possible scientifically and in concurrence with the laws of physics.

Russia's *St Petersburg Times* reports that by using a system of differential equations, Naum Volzinger, a senior researcher at St Petersburg's Institute of Oceanology, and his Hamburg-based colleague Alexei Androsov established the conditions under which the waves might have parted.

Here are the mathematics and science behind the miracle: There is a reef in the Red Sea exactly at the documented spot where the Jews escaped Egypt. In ancient times, the reef was unbroken and much closer to the surface of the sea than it is today. The Bible story cites the "strong east wind that blew all that night." So mathematically, the two scientists wrote an equation that considered wind speed, the strength of the storm that would leave the reef

high and dry at low tide, how long before the waters returned, and how quickly they returned.

Volzinger, who specializes in ocean phenomena, flooding, and tidal waves, calculated that the wind had to have blown at a sustained speed of 67 miles per hour to make the reef. Once the reef formed, he told the *St Petersburg Times*, "It would take the Jews—there were 600,000 of them—four hours to cross the 4.2-mile reef that runs from one coast to another. Then, in half an hour, the waters would come back."

The story says that when the Egyptian army followed them into the Red Sea, they drowned. "I am convinced that God rules the Earth through the laws of physics," he said.

The study, which took almost six months to complete, is titled "Modeling of the Hydrodynamic Situation During the Exodus" and has been published in the *Bulletin of the Russian Academy of Sciences*.

Mark Grubarg, the head of the Jewish community in St Petersburg, said the spiritual value of this miracle is immense for Jews.

## Wiccan sparks investigation into Christian imagery

"Christian imagery" and other items that caused the city's Human Relations Commission to probe allegations that the homeless shelter violated the state's fair housing laws.

The mission is supported mostly by private donations but also receives some state and federal money. The City Mission's lawyers say

the investigation raises serious questions about the length religious groups need to go to separate their beliefs from their charitable work. They filed a lawsuit in the US District Court in Huntington to abort the investigation.

"Enough is enough," said attorney Dave Duffield. "How would you like them to come into your church and tear the cross down?"

He points the finger at Napier, who wrote a piece on his website criticising major religions for their condemnation of homosexuality.

"Nobody, unless they had an agenda, would do this," Duffield said.

A CHRISTIAN mission serving homeless people since 1939 in the US is under investigation for discrimination because its walls are adorned with crosses and other religious imagery.

The probe was prompted by a city fair-housing investigator, who also happens to be a cross-dressing Wiccan openly contemptuous of mainstream religions, according to a recent report in the *Charleston, West Virginia Daily Mail*.

The investigation began last year when Okey Napier Jr walked into the Huntington City Mission in West Virginia and noticed the

## Is atheism finally to be recognised in schools?

THE independent Think Tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, has recommended that the scope of Religious Education should be expanded to teach about different belief systems including atheism, agnosticism and humanism – as well as the major faiths. Religious Education should be renamed and should develop children's ability to weigh up ethical dilemmas.

This sensible, long-overdue development is welcome, but the acid test is whether the Government will take any notice of it in its forthcoming review of religious education. The NSS has already made recommendations in principle to the Secretary of State for Education along the same lines as the IPPR has

suggested. We are aware, however, that the churches are beavering away at resisting any non-religious encroachment into RE or, failing that, consigning any non-religious philosophy or ethics to separate lessons so as not to cut down on the ludicrous amount of time devoted to traditional RE.

Coincidentally, a review of religious observance and allied topics in Scottish schools is about to be published. The Society has already complained to the Scottish Executive that the membership of the Review Group included several religious representatives but excluded anyone to speak from a non-religious or humanist standpoint.

The IPPR announcement was particularly welcome because it opened up the topic to public debate and the Society was approached by the media almost non-stop over the weekend of the announcement in mid February. We had to glean the broad thrust of the report from journalists,

however, as only they had been given details about the report in advance of its publication.

### What we told the media

The key points we made were that a large survey showed nearly 60 percent of children identify themselves as atheist or agnostic, and that raising moral awareness in them was likely to be much more effective if it were done through experiences to which they could relate. Attempting to do so through revealed truth was unlikely to resonate with them, and much of the religious teaching on moral issues – such as on contraception and homosexuality – ran counter to older children's experience of the world.

We emphasised that non-religious moral perspectives and philosophy should therefore be

**KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, welcomes the possibility of schools recognising atheism, but deplores the government-assisted expansionism of the C of E**



## Women chosen to do militant Islam's dirty work

A NEW development in the exploitation and destruction of women by Islamic fanatics was revealed last month, when it emerged that a Palestinian mother of two small children, who killed four Israelis by blowing herself up at a border crossing, carried out the suicide bombing to "atone" for having committed adultery.

This was the first time that the group Hamas had used a female bomber, telling her that women who are "disgraced" by sexual activity outside marriage can "purify" themselves by blowing themselves up.

Israeli security officials, who closely monitor the evolving ideology of the Islamic militant organisation, spoke to reporters in the wake of the attack by 22-year-old Reem

Raiyshi two weeks ago. Raiyshi left her 18-month-old daughter, Doha, and her 3-year-old son, Obedia, and blew herself up at the Erez crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel, killing three soldiers and a private Israeli security guard.

The Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* first reported that the woman was compelled to carry out the attack as atonement for betraying her husband with another man. According to Israeli television's Channel Two, a new theology is emerging about female suicide bombers among some Palestinian Muslim clerics.

Male "martyrs" who blow themselves up in suicide attacks are already promised a place in paradise alongside 72 dark-eyed virgins. According to Arab affairs analyst Ehud Ya'ari, the women are promised to dwell forever alongside the husband or fiancé they have left behind. It is not uncommon for Palestinian women accused of adultery, or of having sex before marriage, to be killed by their families trying to rid themselves of perceived disgrace.

The officials told AP on condition of anonymity that Raiyshi's illicit lover recruited her, giving her the suicide bomb belt. Palestinian security officials said her husband drove her to Erez to carry out the attack.

Hamas "spiritual leader" Sheik Ahmed Yassin told reporters in the Gaza Strip that the fanatical group would look to women to step up and fulfill their "obligations", because male bombers were increasingly being held back by Israeli security measures.

introduced at the start of the curriculum, not the end as at present. Children are taught the need to respect others' religious beliefs, but noticeably absent is any equivalent in respect of non-believers' life-stances or any recognition that the non-religious can live just as moral lives as those who are religious. The report was not recommending the teaching of atheism, and of course we do not consider the state should be funding proselytism of any kind.

Our opinions garnered plenty of television and radio coverage: national, regional and local – as well as mention in the broadsheets.

## Is the Church of England becoming more of an educational body?

THE Government has invited the Church of England "to play a leading part in its Academies programme". Academies, originally called City Academies, were ostensibly introduced to raise education standards in areas of social deprivation, and the Government is very enthusiastic about them. Academies are controlled by a sponsor who has complete control over them (including of admissions) in exchange for a small financial contribution. The remaining funding comes directly from government. Most other schools are controlled by and funded by local authorities.

### Soaps 'misrepresent Christians' says the Salvation Army

AN editorial in the Salvation Army paper, the *Warcry* (January 17) complains bitterly that Christians in TV soaps "are portrayed as unbalanced extremists."

The paper was commenting on a recent storyline in *Coronation Street* in which "born-again" Brenda Fearn, little Bethany's grandmother, abducts the child and attempts to kill herself and the little girl.

"It is as though attractive Christianity doesn't exist," complains the paper. While great care is taken to create story lines that are not racist or homophobic ("in fact, some minority views are positively promoted through soaps"), there is one group that is seldom portrayed positively – Christians, the editorial said.



This invitation to the Church was made at a meeting attended by both the head of policy at Downing Street, Andrew Adonis, and the head of the academy programme. The Church was represented by the politically adept and influential Lord Dearing, chairman of their Board of Education, and the bumbling Bishop of Portsmouth.

Ron Dearing was responsible for a formal review of C of E schools in 2000/2001 which came to the predicable conclusion that there should be more of them. We said at the time that the review was simply a propaganda exercise giving the Government an opportunity say it agreed with the C of E proposals for more church schools and that it would do all it could to assist the C of E expansionism. The reality is turning out to be even more disturbing than our worst predications, which had assumed that the C of E would not have the funds to finance many schools. Around 12 C of E comprehensives have opened since Dearing's review, and the *Church Times* (which is the source of some of the information in this article) estimates 20 more to be in the pipeline.

Being sponsor driven, the academy programme is tailor-made for the Church and other organisations whose business is proselytising. It offers *carte blanche* on selective admissions, 100 percent funding of running costs and huge sums of Government money towards building costs. All this for a paltry 10 percent contribution by sponsors to capital costs – and even of this the Church acknowledges rarely having to pay much out of its own pocket.

It beggars belief that the bishops' reaction to the Government's offer – to be given just about as many schools as they want for practically nothing – was to give it "a cautious welcome". To be fair, I suppose we should view the context: the C of E's near bankruptcy – and to avoid any misunderstanding I should emphasise that I mean financial bankruptcy.

One of the C of E's quibbles is that it wants to safeguard its investment, such as it is. The C of E's former Church schools specialist, Colin Hopkins, makes no bones about it: "We have to secure the Church's interest not just for five years but for fifty". I do not doubt for a moment that the Government is helping them every step of the way, and as far as I can see it is not fifty years the Church's interest has been secured for, but "for ever and ever, world without end".

Hopkins was the Secretary to Dearing's review and has worked at Church House where a cash crisis has forced a major redundancy programme. He has clearly thought through the mechanisms for achieving this perpetual commitment at no ongoing cost: "It is essential to protect the Church foundation via the memorandum and articles of association [the founding/governing documents] and the Church's place on the academy's trust".

Hopkins is now Southwark diocese's "innovations and partnership officer". Presumably the focus of this job is to extract as much out of co-sponsors as possible, and he seems to have succeeded with the Archbishop Michael Ramsay School in Camberwell.

### C of E/Toc H joint sponsorship

There, the co-sponsorship is with Toc H, a charitable organisation with a religious ethos. It describes itself as being concerned with conflict resolution, community volunteering, and community support. A Toc H job advertisement refers to the organisation having "experienced a long period of slow decline. Membership has gone down and branches have closed." It seems Toc H is using this gravy train as a means of revitalising itself.

Toc H and the C of E have already been involved in a joint venture for several years in connection with Bradford Cathedral Community College, which Toc H describes as "a previously failing school which is now rapidly improving". Their priorities for it now are "citizenship and conflict resolution", which sounds appealing. It is not clear, however, how a Christian school – indeed a school aligned to any religion – is better placed to deal with conflict resolution in one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse parts of the country.

Toc H has provided £1 million and boasts "Our investment will unlock £20 million of Government funding" (and of course many more millions of running costs). I have not found any mention of how much, if anything, the C of E is contributing, but as part of the deal, the school was passed to the Anglican Diocese of Bradford, whose cathedral, I reported last month, is failing to pay its debts.

### Leicester

Leicester has approved a C of E academy, and a Muslim one is anticipated. I suspect that many of those involved with education in Leicester would prefer not to be taking this route but feel they have no option because the two spanking new academies will cost their ratepayers much less than had they been integrated local authority schools. The longer term price will be higher, though – educational apartheid in the city.

### A level playing field?

The whole programme raises huge questions. The ready availability of such large amounts of Government cash gives academies an unfair advantage over schools being financed by local authorities themselves. Local education authorities have been running schools successfully for the best part of a century, so there is no need to find anyone else to fulfil this function. Despite this, the Government is in effect keeping them out of the loop for many new schools. Nor is it even

taking over the running itself, which would be the next best thing.

### What is the Government thinking about?

What the Government is doing is seeking a new unelected unaccountable agency to run a new educational sector, which involves the expenditure of vast amounts of public money. And is there a feasibility study of possible contenders and a forensic audit of a short list? No. The Government has opted for a shortlist of one, and no questions asked. And what organisation has it chosen? A near bankrupt organisation whose support by the population and financial base has been eroding continuously for the last 70 years and is in the middle of a power struggle which could well result in its destruction.

And given this madness, is the Government making contingency arrangements to ensure that this – what will amount over time to a billion-pound taxpayer-funded crusade suspected by many to be lead personally by the Prime Minister – can be returned to the control of the taxpayers who paid for it, if/when the ill considered scheme comes to grief? Almost certainly not, but we're working on finding out. What we are much more likely to find is deals beneficial to the Church.

### Where is the C of E heading, longer term?

Presumably having seen its own demise approaching with increasing rapidity, the Church is quietly repositioning itself into becoming an educational organisation where Anglicans or at least those claiming to be Christian get privileged access to state-funded schools.

Of course they would need top up finance for the central administration – unless the Government stumps up for that too. But they won't need to, for there should be plenty of money generated by land sales from the almost unending supply of sparsely attended churches and even schools with falling rolls through our well-below-replacement level birth rate (1.6 children per couple rather than the replacement rate necessary for a stable population of around 2.1).

In retrospect, maybe this is what Lord Dearing was alluding to in his 2001 report, *The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium*: "The General Synod and the Archbishops' Council ... has confirmed the crucial importance of Church schools to the whole mission of the Church to children and young people, *and indeed to the long-term well-being of the Church of England.*"

When the Church can't afford to keep any churches open, there will always be these state-funded schools available as places of worship. Indeed, in his first major speech on education The Archbishop of Canterbury affirmed: "The church school is a church."

# Australian Muslim group takes legal action against Christians who 'vilified' Islam

A CHRISTIAN seminar that Muslims say vilified them was "a proper religious activity common to both religions", a barrister for the Christian group that ran the seminar told a judge last month.

According to a report in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Age*, David Perkins said that the seminar was exempt under Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001, and the case should be dismissed.

He told the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal that Catch the Fire Ministries denied vilifying Muslims, but even if it had, the act exempted conduct carried out for a genuine religious purpose.

"If a Muslim cleric were to say from the pulpit that homosexuals should be treated in a particular way, then that entire conduct is converted from something illegal to something perfectly legal, so that although there is vilification it is legal vilification," he said.

In the first case under the new law, the Islamic Council of Victoria has complained that Catch the Fire Ministries, Pastor Danny Nalliah and speaker Daniel Scot vilified Muslims at the seminar in March 2002.

Mr Perkins said the seminar was presented by a Christian pastor, in a church, on a subject of religion. It began with a prayer and was attended by a big congregation.

"It was a proper, reasonable, Christian event, whether you agree with it or not," he said.

Mr Perkins said the purpose was to teach

Christians to proselytise, an activity common to both faiths and a widely known civil right.

On the second day of the hearing Mr Perkins claimed that Islam was an illegal religion because the Koran preached violence against Christians and Jews. He pointed out that Christianity was established under Australia's constitution and had special protection, especially through the blasphemy law and added that if the state's new religious hatred law intended to fetter the teaching of Christian doctrine it was invalid.

Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 referred to lawful religion, and it was in that sense, he said, that by preaching violence Islam was disqualified.

"The Koran contradicts Christian doctrine in a number of places and, under the blasphemy law, is therefore illegal," he said.

Mr Perkins declared that as Christianity was embedded in the constitution, the law still entitled Christian religious principles to a special place. The reference in the constitution to the people "humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God" referred to Christianity and was inserted at the request of Christians.

He argued that Australia's blasphemy law — still in force, if little used — took precedence over the state act, and the Victorian Parliament could not legislate away protection given by the blasphemy law.

Mr Perkins cited the Choudhury case in England, involving Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, which held that the blasphemy

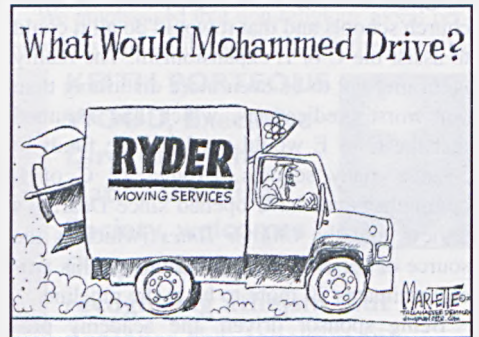
law protected only Christianity, not Islam.

Judge Michael Higgins asked if Mr Perkins meant that the Victorian law did not protect Muslims. Mr Perkins replied: "Yes"

Judge Higgins: "So it might protect Christians but not Muslims from vilification?"

Mr Perkins: "Yes."

A ruling is expected soon.



Meanwhile the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is demanding an apology from editorial cartoonist Doug Marlette and his employer, the *Tallahassee Democrat*, for a cartoon portraying the Prophet Mohammed driving a nuclear-bomb laden truck. The cartoon was a spin-off from the recent debate in the US over what Jesus would drive. It shows Mohammed driving a truck similar to that used by Timothy McVeigh in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

The "What Would Jesus Drive?" debate surfaced shortly after a US evangelical group launched a "What Would Jesus Do?" poster campaign.

Tongue-in-cheek, Roy Rivenburg at [www.offkilter.org](http://www.offkilter.org) suggested that: "For centuries, theologians have squabbled over the type of transportation the Lord would use. Public transit or private car? Stick shift or automatic? A sport-utility vehicle roomy enough for all 12 apostles, or an economy model?"

"Researchers then came up with other suggestions. In Psalm 83, for example, the Almighty clearly owns a Pontiac and a Geo. The passage urges the Lord to 'pursue your enemies with your Tempest and terrify them with your Storm.' Some theorised that Jesus would tool around in an old Plymouth because 'the Bible says God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden in a Fury.'"

Meanwhile, Moses drove a British Triumph sports car, as evidenced by a Bible passage declaring that "the roar of Moses' Triumph is heard in the hills."

And the Apostles shared a Honda: "The Apostles were in one Accord."

## Travel company's mock 'bible-speak' poster campaign was not offensive to Christians

TRAVEL company [lastminute.com](http://lastminute.com) has been cleared of "mocking the Christian faith" after running a series of ads calling on people to "keep weekends sacred".

The captions accompanying a series of posters (which showed streams of bright sunlight through the clouds) were written in mock bible-speak. One declared: "Thou shalt not spend thine Sabbath arguing in a Swedish furniture store, but shalt see a West End show for less silver pieces than a fancy lamp."

Another said: "And as David returned on the eighth day from Ibiza he told of how little he had paid. And his work colleagues didst have dark and beastly thoughts."

Then there was this one: "And on the sixth day Mary didst flee the office for a humbly

priced trip to New York. And she shopp'd til she didst hobble in her kitten heels."

Of course, not everyone was amused. The advertising watchdog (ASA) received a complaint from someone who claimed that the use of religious language in the posters was "offensive" and mocked the Christian faith. But according to [lastminute.com](http://lastminute.com), the captions were meant to "humorously remind their target audience of 'cash rich, time poor' 25- to 34- year-olds to balance their work and leisure time, by juxtaposing ancient language and ideals with modern lifestyles".

On reflection, the ASA agreed and reckoned that the ads were unlikely to cause serious or widespread offence or to be seen as mocking the Christian faith.

HIGH up on the long list of people the Christian Institute hates are transsexuals, so when the CI learned that a vote was to be taken in the House of Lords last month on the Gender Recognition Bill, it urgently called on supporters to pray that the Bill would fall.

In an email to members, the CI said: "We greatly value your prayers as this evening (Tuesday, February 10) the House of Lords debates the Gender Recognition Bill. The Bill's Third Reading in the Lords will be the last debate there before the Bill passes to the House of Commons.

"The Gender Recognition Bill allows a man to become a woman in law and then to marry another man. It will be used to create real problems for Christians and other people who believe it is not possible to 'change sex'.

"This evening Lady O'Cathain [the CI's patron in the Lords] will be arguing that churches and other religious bodies need legal protection from being sued by transsexuals under the Bill."

The CI exhorted supporters to:

- Give thanks to God for Lady O'Cathain, who has faithfully spoken out on this issue.
- Pray that God will have mercy on our country and that Parliament will even at this late stage take the right course to protect religious liberties.
- Pray that the Government will provide the same kind of exemptions from the Bill for religious bodies that it has recently granted to sporting bodies.
- Pray for Lady O'Cathain, that she will have

## Prayer fails the Christian Institute once again

strength, wisdom and great eloquence in the debate and that she would get a fair hearing.

- Pray that the Prime Minister would have a change of heart and intervene to protect religious bodies.
- Pray for churches who are seeking to help transsexual people, that they may have great wisdom and care as they hold forth the Word of life.

It is impossible to ascertain how many joined in this latest prayer marathon, but – like earlier prayer sessions instigated by the CI to prevent, for example, the lowering of the homosexual age of consent to 16 – it signally failed, and the Bill was passed.

The "real problems for Christians" posed in the change of the law are laid out in a question and answer briefing prepared for the CI by its legal representatives. This document states that "the Gender Recognition Bill grants no exemptions to religious organisations. Clause 9 of the Bill states that the acquired gender is for all purposes. Thus, the potential employee will have the benefit of the Sex Discrimination

Act 1975. This will apply to teaching posts in faith schools."

One question posed was:

*What potential does the Bill create for litigation against a church or other religious body which refuses to allow a transsexual to be a member, to receive the administration of sacraments, or to attend services of worship? Please refer in particular to the following scenarios:*

a) *A transsexual man in women's clothes attends worship in a small church. Many members of the congregation complain to the minister that they feel unable to worship. They believe the man is denying the image of God in himself by dressing as a woman and that his attendance at worship dressed that way constitutes blasphemy. What new potential does the Bill create for litigation against the church if it prohibits the man from attending?*

b) *1 Corinthians 5:11 commands Christians not to keep company with anyone who claims to be a Christian but is engaged in gross immorality. What are the potential legal implications if a minister reminds his congregation of this duty in relation to:*

1. *transsexuals in general*

2. *a particular transsexual who has been attending the church?*

c) *The elders of a church (or the vicar and church wardens of an Anglican church) meet with a transsexual man and advise him that he is committing gross sin by seeking to assume the identity of a woman. He refuses to repent so they tell him he will be denied communion. The minister then announces the ban and the basic reasons for it to the congregation.*

"Answer: a) ... It is to be expected that the Gender Recognition Bill will increase the potential for litigation ...

"b) This question is whether preaching against sexual minorities is a form of 'hate speech'. On 9th November 2003, the Bishop of Chester was investigated by the Police over an article on homosexuality; in *Hammond v DPP (The Times of 28th January)*, the Divisional Court held that the Public Order Act 1986 can be used to limit non-violent religious speech that sexual minorities object to. In this case, a 69-year preacher was attacked by a group of 40 pro-homosexual supporters when he displayed a placard reading 'Stop Homosexuality'.

"He was arrested and convicted. In both cases the speech was made in a public forum, but there is a clear threat to freedom of 'religious' expression ...

"In the current militant climate, such litigation should (even on the issue of communion) be anticipated. There will be a potential for litigation in relation to the parish duties of the Anglican Church and in relationship to terms of membership."

THIS month we went trawling internet message boards for examples of religious stupidity for our Toshpot, and boy, did we ever return with a rich haul! Here are three examples of what you get when illiterate fundies engage brain cell and typing finger to unleash their views on the net.

"and then those wonderful gallapogos (cant be arsed to spell it properly) birds. evolved? nope. they are all finches. they have not evolved... dont say that im speaking out of my ass, because this article [from *Scientific American*, on creationist misconceptions] you have given me is speaking out of about 50 million evolutionists asses, or however many there are on this planet. the article is FULL of mistakes, and bad research. if you want me to go through every single point...ask me."

- *nevermind, posting a message on Totse.com Community*

"Don't you think it's absolutely insulting to man to say claim that he had been around for millions of years, and yet just invented the automobile 100 years ago? That may be a bad example, but do you see what I'm getting at? I mean...do you really think it took man millions of years for someone to get on a boat, sail to America, and find out the world is round?"

- *GPickypick, Christianity.com Forums*

"Now i think God made bacteria, because bacteria are important for eating our poo and keeping us from getting sick... although some bacteria do make us sick for some reason (i dont get that, i think some bacteria get influenced by satan and deviate from goodness or something). But i heard viruses arent even alive. they just make more of themselves and kill things, so whats the point of that? I think viruses are the work of satan, because all they bring is death and destruction (as well as colds, apparently caused by some sort of rhinocerosvirus)"

- *Shimmerstar, in a message posted on ChristianForums.com*



IN my youth, the stock-in-trade of stand-up comics in this country was mainly jokes at the expense of women (especially mothers-in-law), Jews, Irishmen, and Scotsmen – but in deference to PC the same jokes would not be tolerated today on radio or television. They were never really clever or very funny, but at least they were out in the open, not suppressed by guilty self-censorship.

It is not easy to resist PC, and when we all find ourselves under pressure to embrace the currently approved euphemisms, it becomes a sort of linguistic fascism. An extreme form of it, with the deliberately innocuous name Newspeak, was introduced by George Orwell in his book *1984* – its purpose being not to facilitate argument against an opponent, but to render him incapable of expressing his views and ideas altogether. To Orwell, this made it a most important weapon in enforcing ideological conformity.

Some of the movements which have had recourse to linguistic PC have been excellent causes in themselves – such as feminism and racial equality – but PC just doesn't seem to know when to stop.

Paradoxically, a hallmark of PC is its generalisation and stereotyping at the cost of personal individuality – the very things it is ostensibly opposing. While, of course, it includes social behaviour, it is largely characterised by the ideological misuse of language and it is this linguistic PC that I will begin by discussing.

### Anti-sexism

I WAS always a feminist until the *avant garde* American feminists began publicly burning their bras in the 1960s.

Some women don't really need bras, so why did they buy them in the first place, only to destroy what they had paid good money for? But that was up to them; it was when they began to change the English language that the rot really set in.

Some of their more extreme changes have fortunately never caught on generally: for



ONE of the world's best-known Beatles posters, taken from the *Abbey Road* album cover, fell victim to political correctness when an American poster publisher saw fit to eliminate the cigarette from Paul McCartney's hand (marked with the white square) when it recently re-issued the famous image.

instance, the spelling WIMMIN for women, to avoid the syllable MEN as part of the word, was often seen about thirty years ago, but now only the most entrenched feminists continue to use it. However, the gender policing of pronouns has become almost compulsory, especially if you want something to be published or accepted in official documents.

### Political Correctness has gone too far, argues BARBARA SMOKER



Because the English language had lost most of its indications of gender except in its pronouns, the ignorant idea took root that gender was synonymous with sex, feminine with female, and masculine with male – as though, for instance, German speakers think of a table (*eine Tafel*) as being female and a chair (*ein Stuhl*) as being male.

The survival of gender in English pronouns must therefore be suppressed. At first the unsexed third-person singular nominative pronoun – namely “he”, which had always been used to indicate non-sex-specific human beings – was changed from “he” to “he or she”. But this, being too cumbersome in repetition, was soon shortened to “he/she”, which was then shortened further to “s/he” – an unpronounceable alternative, since there is no “s” sound in “she”. The logical conclusion came fast on its heels: the word “she” must simply replace “he” – though the former had previously only the one meaning, indicating a specifically female person, whereas the latter had two distinct meanings, indicating either a male person or an unspecified individual of the human species.

Not wishing to upset the Women's Lib protagonists, Richard Dawkins accordingly substituted “she” for “he” throughout one of his books – only to be castigated by a feminist reviewer for cynically patronising feminism!

At the 2003 AGM of the National Secular Society, most of the time was taken up with arguing about “updating” the articles of association by getting rid of all the masculine pronouns (now misunderstood as male pronouns). This is called “inclusivity” – though the old use of masculine pronouns to mean both male and female was already, of course, inclusive.

The most articulate of the reformers had won over the Council of Management to the proposal that “they”, “them”, and “their” be adopted for reference to singular nouns, insisting that this usage was no longer regarded (by whom?) as ungrammatical.

These changes required ratification by the AGM, which, after a lengthy debate, duly

# The Cultural Political Correctness

accepted them with the requisite 75 percent majority. However, the further demand to avoid words like “mankind” and “chairman” fortunately did not quite reach that magic number for adoption. The words “tradesman”, “huntsman”, “watchman”, “workman” and “footman” were not mentioned, and I decided not to raise an enquiry about “hangman” and “madman”.

After the meeting, one of the men broached the subject of inclusivity with me, and was surprised to learn that I did not mind being called a “chairman” and actually preferred it to the title “chair”. (In fact, I must say I always rather liked being addressed as “Madam Chairman”.) But I have to admit that nowadays my preference is probably indicative more of my age than my sex.

However, I have recently come across the PC variant “chairwoman”, which seems highly perverse – especially as the word “actress” has now given way to “actor”, and the sex of the person who chairs a meeting is obviously less relevant than that of the person who impersonates a character on stage or screen.

In present-day English Newspeak, the word “sex” is reserved for sexual activity, while its original meaning is taken over by the word “gender”. As my sex is almost entirely female but I feel that my gender is no more than 50 percent feminine, I am tempted, when faced with a form demanding my gender, to put “About half and half” – but I suppose that would only raise problems.

### Anti-racism

AT the same time as the obliteration of gender in pronouns, labels indicating race have changed rapidly in deference to PC. When I was a child, it was rude to say “black man”: it had to be “negro” or “coloured” (though we learned that the two words had different meanings in South Africa). After the war, this linguistic PC was reversed by the Caribbean immigrants to Britain, who insisted on being called “black”. Moreover, in a friendly way, they insisted we apply the same word to all other non-white people – though many of the immigrants from Asia dis-

THE Derbyshire-based Oddsocks Theatre Company last summer decided to change the name of their production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to the *Bellringer of Notre Dame* to avoid giving offence to disabled people. Producer Ellie MacKenzie decided to alter the title after being alerted to the insensitivity of the word “hunchback” by the company's disability advisor.



# Course of Correctness

liked it. They have now succeeded in being renamed Asian, at least by educated people. (The uneducated call them all "Paki", whether or not they come from Pakistan.)

To some extent, linguistic PC with regard to race is a result of greater sensitivity to the feelings of those most concerned, and to that extent it must be applauded; but to my mind it has gone too far, and the frequent changes of approved vocabulary make us unnaturally wary in conversation.

As for the extension of these linguistic strictures to social behaviour, that too, has surely gone too far – and in Britain much further than in the rest of Europe. It is called "multiculturalism".

Similar changes have been seen in the United States, where the old immigration "melting-pot" has likewise given way to PC multiculturalism, while the old concept of social equality has been sidelined by "positive discrimination". I recognise the justice in compensating those who have personally suffered injustice in the past, but cannot see what basis there is for perpetuating compensation indefinitely to their descendants.

It is rather reminiscent of the self-righteous logic of God's penalising us all for the alleged disobedience of Adam and Eve!

France is not nearly so weak-kneed as Britain with regard to the demands of its own Muslim population – and that is the main reason why so many Muslim asylum seekers have even risked their lives to enter Britain illegally from France.

In the 1980s, the NSS was almost a lone voice among liberals warning of the social menace in Britain of immigrant religious extremism, with its opposition to free speech, its totalitarian hold on those under its thumb – particularly females – and its demands that the laws and culture of this country bend to accommodate them.

Every British university has its Muslim society, and when I was president of the NSS I was often invited by these societies to take part in a university debate on secularism. Though I realised it was a ruse to bring an imam with the gift of the gab to talk me down, I felt one should not decline such opportunities, but I did object to the sex-segregation in audience. Though female students were always in the minority, they were allotted the whole of one side of the hall, while the male students had to squeeze into the other side, often with insufficient seats. On one occasion, a white man who had arrived early, before the segregation was obvious,

unwittingly sat on the "wrong" side, and was hounded out of the meeting and spat at.

After that, I wrote to the university administrators before each debate, asking for a ruling on sex-segregation – but the PC reply was always that it was for the students themselves to decide. So I would call for a show of hands about it at the beginning of the meeting, only to be met with a majority of the men and 100 percent of the women in favour of segregation. The women's motive was, I discovered, not only religio-cultural conformity, but also the avoidance of being groped – this being a habit of sex-starved young men when they get the chance.

In respect of this vote, the meeting would go along with the principle of democracy, though otherwise the Muslims denounced democracy as substituting the will of the people for the will of Allah. But they had great hopes for Britain, because of its compliance with Islam. Time and again I was informed that Britain was going to become the first true Islamic state – which was the reason for founding the Muslim Parliament in this country. When I queried the word "first" and asked about Pakistan, for instance, the idea that Pakistan or any other existing state was *truly* Muslim was derided.

The only humanist publication at that time in this country to take the Muslim threat seriously was the *Freethinker*. It also foresaw that when the Labour Party got into power it would be even more committed to the multicultural myth and more conciliatory to Muslim extremism than the Conservatives were – partly because the Muslim vote has always benefited Labour.

## Appeasement

IN 1989, the Labour Party's pledge of appeasement to the Muslim community was enshrined in an official policy document entitled *Multicultural Education*. This political support for publicly funded "faith" schools went along with support for concerted Muslim demands for "parity" (with the established Church) of protection under an extension of the blasphemy law – as though two wrongs make a right. And the

A GROUP of red-headed New Zealand men have forced an amusing TV commercial for Coruba Ginja rum off the air because they said it reinforced negative stereotypes. After receiving a complaint from a number of redheads, the Advertising Standards Complaints Board found that the ad had "indeed caused serious offence to red-headed males in particular."

The board quoted from a complaint lodged by Mr C Irwin, a 21-year-old who said the commercial "is mocking people like myself in a nasty fashion ... it will add to the atmosphere of denigration that currently exists in New Zealand towards red-headed males."

transmutation of Labour into New Labour only reinforced this blinkered approach.

Strangely enough, some of the very politicians who were to the fore in this Muslim appeasement – Jack Straw notably comes to mind – were also loudest later in their support for the war against Iraq.



Earlier, when Ken Livingstone wrote a regular column for the erstwhile *London Evening News*, he devoted most of one edition to denouncing me as a racist, in response to my researched campaign against the oppression of girls and women among the London communities of Hasidic Jews and fundamentalist Muslims. There was no newspaper space to spare, of course, for my retort that race and religion were not the same, and that ethnic groups should not be exclusively represented by male interests.

Muslim girls are often kept (with impunity) from attending school from the age of about twelve, and are thereafter taught nothing but domestic skills and religious doctrine. Many are then taken to Pakistan, or wherever, to be given in marriage to an unknown man whose intention it is to use a wife's British passport so as to acquire the right to domicile in Britain.

Teenage girls who want the same rights of personal choice as their white schoolfriends are punished for having become "too westernised", and some have even been the victims of murder by their fathers or brothers (justified as "family honour killings") for this. If these families are so opposed to westernisation, why do they choose to live in a western country? But to speak out in favour of assimilation is to be dubbed "eurocentric".

How perverse it is that so many of the immigrants who come to Britain claiming asylum on grounds of persecution in their countries of origin tenaciously cling to the very customs

(Continued on page 10)

and conflicts they are supposedly escaping, and not only import them to this country but impart them to their own children.

It is humbug to pretend that only a very small minority of Muslims here are in favour of Koranic penology, fatwas, genital mutilation, religious censorship, and terrorism (especially when it entails the "martyrdom" of suicide-bombers). When a Muslim demonstration, triggered by the alleged blasphemy of novelist Salman Rushdie, was held in London on May 27, 1987, some 20,000 men (no women) took part, and the demand for an extension of the blasphemy law – which was the ostensible theme of the demonstration – was swamped by overt incitement, with bloodthirsty placards and effigies, to murder Rushdie.

LOCAL officials in the council of Hume in Australia banned the serving of ham and pork at public events in order to avoid offending the area's Muslims, reports the *Herald Sun*. "Rather than having a situation where staff or members of the community are made uncomfortable or put in a position where they are unable to participate in the meal we share, I felt it would be better to remove the meat," said Darrell Treloar, Hume's chief executive. "Instead of ham and cheese sandwiches, we can have tomato and cheese," he said. But after six weeks the ban was lifted following a huge number of complaints, reported the *Australian*. Hume Mayor Burhan Yigit said the outcry forced him to rethink the edict. "Some people unjustifiably were feeling excluded as a result of this," Yigit said of the ban. "The intent of this decision was to be more inclusive, so obviously it wasn't working the way we intended."

I stood beside the route of that march – which, in the event, was an emotional surge rather than a march – peaceably holding a small banner proclaiming FREE SPEECH, which I had mistakenly supposed was still allowed in Britain. On catching sight of my banner, a dozen of the demonstrators broke ranks to rush at me, yelling "Kill! Kill! Kill!" Fortunately, a plain-clothes policeman who had apparently anticipated this saved me from serious injury. By coincidence, the late Nicolas Walter and his wife stood nearby, holding a banner that read FREE SPEECH FOR ALL, and they were likewise assaulted – but in their case it was a moderate Muslim who intervened.

Later the same afternoon, more than a hundred of the demonstrators were arrested for causing Actual Bodily Harm, most of the victims having been policemen. However, all those arrested were later released without charge – presumably on a Home Office directive, as the police are not usually so forgiving.

No arrests were made for the incitement to

murder Salman Rushdie, even when it was repeated by Muslim spokesmen in interviews on mainstream television. Such incitement is (or was at that time) apparently immune from prosecution in this country if committed in the name of Islam – as are several other criminal offences, one of which I will deal with below.

Two years ago a Muslim community in Finsbury Park were shown on the television news publicly mocking the American September 11 anniversary commemoration with a banner proclaiming FREE SPEECH FOR MUSLIMS.

I assume there was insufficient space on the banner for the rest of the slogan: BUT NO ONE ELSE.

### Another Law for Religion

LEGAL exemptions in favour of Islam and other religions are actually written into the criminal law in this country. For instance, though Britain has comparatively humane regulations for the slaughter of animals for meat, these are waived for the religious requirements of kosher (Jewish) and halal (Muslim) meat – both of which, by sacred decree, interdict the general practice of pre-stunning, which is otherwise compulsory.

At least twice in the past two decades, the Farm Animal Welfare Council, an official advisory body, has recommended that an end be put to these Jewish and Muslim exemptions from the law of this country, which prohibits the slaughter of animals for meat without pre-stunning; but no government has dared to enact this reform – least of all Labour governments, which rely in many areas on the solid Muslim vote.

Since orthodox Jews eat only a one-third part of the animal that has been killed in accordance with their own *shechita* tradition, the rest of it is sold off in ordinary butchers and supermarkets – without being labelled to indicate the method of slaughter. The National Secular Society has campaigned in vain that, as long as the law is not reformed, at least informative labelling should be made mandatory.

The religions that oppose pre-stunning are up in arms at the prospect of having to obey the general law of the land, and insist on their "religious rights" in this matter. But what about the rights of meat-eaters of other religions, or none, who are given no opportunity to choose meat that has not been cruelly slaughtered? And, indeed, what about animal rights, and the rights of those of us who feel strongly about them?

Many state schools in areas of the country with a sizeable Muslim population serve only halal meat in their school lunches, to save having to provide separate dishes for the different religions. But surely those who object to eating meat that has been killed comparatively humanely should be expected to become vege-

tarian during the school day, rather than deny choice to the non-Muslims.

If the *shechita* and halal methods of slaughter are, as is claimed, not cruel, then the law that demands pre-stunning in other abattoirs should be repealed. Otherwise, the same British law should apply to all. And that applies to the whole legal system. If laws are rational and beneficial, they should apply universally; if not, they should be repealed.

Suppose the majority of Muslims in Britain were to demand the right to obey the Koranic injunctions to chop off a hand of members of their own community found guilty of theft and to stone to death women – but only their own women, you understand – found guilty of adultery? Would New Labour connive at this in the name of politically correct multiculturalism?

I vehemently support the rights of minorities to be different; but the most vulnerable of all minorities, and the one most in need of support, is the smallest minority of them all – the individual.

Better to be joked about in the open than be tyrannised in seclusion.

A PRISON officer, who was left "a broken man" after being sacked for being rude about Osama bin Laden following the September 11 attacks, won his claim for unfair dismissal last month.

In "a damning indictment of political correctness and incompetence within the Prison Service", according to a report in the *Telegraph*, an employment tribunal described a governor's conduct as "reprehensible, and wholly disproportionate to the off-the-cuff remark made by Colin Rose, who was fired after 21 years' impeccable service."

The Norwich tribunal said Jerry Knight, then governor of Blundeston Prison, appeared to have been swayed by his keenness to "parade his racial awareness qualifications".

Mr Rose was sacked because, unknown to him, four Muslim visitors to the jail, near Lowestoft, Suffolk, were nearby when he made his "insensitive" comments about the world's most reviled terrorist. An assistant governor overheard the remark, which was made shortly after Mr Knight ordered staff to say nothing about the terrorist attacks because of the large number of Muslims in the prison. A future hearing will determine the level of compensation that Mr Rose, a father of three, will receive.

A Prison Service spokesman said: "We are very disappointed by the decision of the tribunal ... The decision to dismiss Mr Rose was fully consistent with Prison Service policy ... to eradicate racism in prisons."

AMONG many delights to be found in the book *Mencken on Religion* is a brief reference to the *Freethinker* in a piece Mencken wrote in 1929 for the *American Mercury*. He is reflecting upon the difficulties of providing a "suave and soothing burial service for the admittedly damned". At one service, that of a "socialist of the militantly anticlerical kind", he recalled that one of the two celebrants (both, it seems, were drunk) traced the career of Karl Marx in "great detail", while the other "read half a dozen cantos of dreadful poetry out of the *Freethinker*". Ah, those were the days ...

Why should anyone today read H L Mencken? In his latest book, the excellent *How Mumbo-Junbo Conquered The World* (published by Fourth Estate) Francis Wheen calls him an "unashamed snob". Wheen is right. He also, however, describes him as a "great reporter" and his despatches from the Scopes trial in Tennessee as "lacerating". "Why" asks Wheen, "were even the most intelligent Tennesseans so reluctant to assist the cause of enlightenment by repudiating the antediluvian nonsense taught in local schools and endorsed by local nabobs?". He quotes Mencken's answer. "I suspect that politics is what keeps them silent and makes their state ridiculous. Most of them seem to be candidates for office, and a candidate for office, if he would get the votes of the fundamentalists, must bawl for Genesis before he begins to bawl for anything else". Ring any bells?

Mencken was not only, on matters of religion at least, usually right but also managed to be brilliantly entertaining and exquisitely readable. Most journalism dates quickly and there are few commentators whose best work was done in the 20s and 30s of the last century that one would now turn to for both pleasure and insight. Mencken is one of the rare exceptions.

It is possible to pick up Mencken collections in second-hand bookshops. The best are probably his self-selected *A Mencken Chrestomathy* and Alistair Cooke's anthology *The Vintage Mencken*. Now a new collection is available courtesy of Prometheus Books. Mencken's output was prodigious, and the range of his interests was very great. Previous collections (including Mencken's own) have suffered from a certain diffuseness in attempting to reflect this. The present collection does not make the same mistake.

Concentrating on religion, it includes in its 300 or so pages much of the very best of what Mencken wrote on the subject. It ranges from the imbecilities of creationism and the three-ring circus that was the Scopes trial, through the disaster of Prohibition (a fabulously successful Methodist-Baptist conspiracy) and the Klu Klux Klan (with its foundations in an extraordinarily malignant anti-Catholic fundamentalism), to the

necessity of maintaining and strengthening the separation of church and state. It also includes writings on various choice examples of religious dogma (on children in hell and on the malign influence of the church on sexual matters, for example), on religious morality (a possible oxymoron) and on the various cults and cultmeisters of the time (he is especially withering about Baker-Eddy and Blavatsky, and very interesting on Buddhism).

**NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews**  
***H L Mencken on Religion,***  
**edited by ST Joshi. Published**  
**by Prometheus**  
**Books, 2002**  
**ISBN 1 57392 982 4,**  
**330 pages, hard-**  
**back; and *God's***  
***Defenders* by ST**  
**Joshi. Published by**  
**Prometheus Books,**  
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**pages, hardback**



The cigar-chomping Mencken is not usually thought of as a prophet. But in places his ideas seem oddly prescient. In 1923 he was urging African Americans (whom he called, amongst other less acceptable names, 'Aframericans') to convert to Islam. He suggested that the "enemies and victims of the Klan get together, make up a war fund of \$1,000,000 cash, and employ it to import Mohammedan missionaries from Turkey and turn them loose upon the Aframericans of the South." Vast numbers of conversions would ensue, he suggested. He goes on: "The American courts have decided more than once that a crime committed by a large body of persons acting deliberately in concert, is not punishable under our laws ... Such a rising of Moslems as I have pictured would not amount to a rebellion. In the analogous case of public massacres of blacks the Federal government, in fact, has always refused to interfere. What is sauce for the goose should surely be sauce for the gander." The satire is astute, the hyperbole rich – and the anger that led to the suggestion is no less livid than Swift's in calling for Irish infants to be fattened for the table in *A Modest Proposal*.

Mencken was above all a libertarian, a believer in free speech and in the free expression of opinions. He could be rough and cruel, and he was, when faced with what he considered to be stupidity or hypocrisy (and how often these two are found together), and frequently merciless. This is the common view of Mencken, and there is a great deal to it. This collection shows that he could also be tender and subtle and humane. Whatever he was, he was always provocative and never less than interesting.

S T Joshi, the editor of the book, is a Mencken expert, and it shows. His introduction, some 15 pages in length, not only places Mencken in the context of his time but also attempts to explain his passion, his power and his importance. It does this so well that I would have liked more. Mencken was, and remains, an important writer. All freethinkers, but especially those who urge gentility in disputation, should read this book.

Mr Joshi has not only edited *Mencken on Religion* but has produced another fine book. It is called *God's Defenders* and is also published by Prometheus Books. Its subtitle is *What They Believe And Why They Are Wrong*. In it he looks closely at the ideas of William James, T S Eliot, G K Chesterton, C S Lewis, William F Buckley, Jr, Stephen L Carter, Jerry Falwell, Reynolds Price and Annie Dillard, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Neale Donald Walsch and Guenter Lewy.

Many of these names will be familiar, others not. This hardly matters, though. The book is so sharp and intelligent that even those without detailed knowledge of the work of the fulminating Buckley, say, or the faeryland-craving Kubler-Ross, or the ego-driven and frankly raving Walsch, will enjoy Mr Joshi's precise and lucid dissections of their ideas.

In some ways his task is not particularly difficult. Any moderately rational person should be able to come up with decently damning criticisms of these writers' works without too much trouble, since none are especially subtle in their thinking (not even James or Eliot). But it is fair to say that few critics would be able to do so with such verve or energy, or manage to combine, as he does, such colloquial informality with such genuine rigour.

He is also strikingly fair-minded. In his essay on Lewis, for example, he admits that as a child he enjoyed *H L Mencken: Of the Lewis's fantasy Americans he once said* fiction, and praises "[they are] the most (quite rightly) *timorous, snivelling, poltroonish, ignominious* and enduringly relevant scholarly *crit-steppers who ever* ical work. This *gathered under one flag* makes his com- *in Christendom since* ments concerning *the end of the Middle* the confused inani- *Agas*"

ties of Lewis's theological thinking even more punishing. Lewis remains a moderately impor-



(Continued on page 12)

tant figure in the bizarre world of Christian apologetics (I remember myself being half convinced, as a young and earnest adolescent, by *The Problem of Pain* and *The Screwtape Letters*) so Mr Joshi's comments may have some sting for the pious. I only wish that criticism as good as this had been available to me then.

Another Christian favourite has for many years been G K Chesterton (who has weathered rather better than the preposterous Belloc, but less well than Lewis). Joshi exposes his fabled "paradoxical method" to the light of reason and demonstrates it to be nothing more than verbal huffing and puffing. Chesterton was, Joshi shows, a kind of steam-driven thing that went nowhere whatever at an almost eye-blurring velocity (*Father Brown* and *A Man Called Thursday* notwithstanding).

Those doyens of the religious right Buckley and Falwell also come out badly bruised by their encounter with Joshi. After all their searchings for the philosopher's stone of religious truth, all that they managed to discover, Joshi demonstrates, was the imbecile's flannel. They each wield it with rhetorical aplomb, for sure, and with astonishing confidence – but as far as thinking goes their wet rag remains

just that. Joshi is very good indeed on Buckley's crass and callow maunderings about his time at the wickedly secular Yale. The veneration in which Buckley's legion of fans hold him suggests levels of intelligence among them of little more than amoebic proportions.

One of the revelations in the book concerns a writer whose name has long been familiar to me but whose works of fiction I have never managed to read in chunks of more than paragraphic length. The writer in question is H P Lovecraft. He has no essay to himself, since he was an out-and-out atheist so does not qualify for the dubious distinction of being one of "God's defenders", but Mr Joshi quotes him frequently on the subject of religion and belief. Lovecraft was, I discovered, a passionate critic of religious and moral humbuggery. The satisfyingly terse style of his criticism (a style very unlike that which he used in his fantasies) makes him well-deserving of quotation. "If religion were true, its followers would not try to bludgeon their young into an artificial conformity ...". "It is easy to remove the mind from harping on the lost illusion of immortality. The disciplined intellect fears nothing and craves no

suger-plum at the day's end...". "It is rather hard to believe in 'soul' when one has not a jot of evidence for its existence...". "Half of what Buddha or Christus or Mahomet said is either simply idiocy or downright destructiveness...".

Some readers may find Mr Joshi a little too "black and white" in his judgments. He himself warns in his introduction to *God's Defenders*, though – "Either there is one god, multiple gods, or none ... That the essential doctrines of the world's major religions are matters of truth or falsity is itself a fact around which no amount of sophistry or special pleading can get... The greatest harm that religion has done, and continues to do – well beyond such malffeasances as the killing of witches and heretics, the suppression of civil liberties, the disastrous uniting of religion with morality, and the terrorising of its own adherents with thoughts of hellfire and eternal damnation – is the subversion of clear thinking." And so says this reviewer, too.

As an aid to clear thinking, both books are well-indexed, copiously annotated and referenced, and very well printed and bound. Top marks to Prometheus for two splendid productions.

## George Lee's Chesterfield house gives a welcome boost to G W Foote's investment portfolio

IN the 1950s, G W Foote & Co was bequeathed a number of properties by an ardent supporter, George Lee.

All but one of these properties – a house in Chesterfield – were sold off to meet the costs of producing the *Freethinker*.

Up until last year, the house – desperately in need of a substantial make-over – was occupied by a sitting tenant. When he moved into sheltered accommodation, a decision was taken by the G W Foote Board to invest several thousand pounds in modernising and extending the property – thus more than doubling its value – and let it out.

The man chosen to carry out the refurbishment was, as chance would have it, George Lee (no relation to the man who left the property to G W Foote). The project was overseen by Helen McIlroy, daughter of Bill McIlroy, a former *Freethinker* editor.

The work was completed in the New Year, when a topping-out ceremony was staged at the property. Among those who attended the event were Board members Dan Bye, Denis Cobell, who is also President of the National Secular Society, Jim Herrick, Chairman of G W Foote (pictured planting a ceremonial tree), Bill McIlroy, John Metcalf and company secretary Colin Swinburn.



### Freethinker Fund

THE *Freethinker* fund has attracted donations of £922.50 between January 23 and February 22, £100 of which was a bequest from Victor Petheram, a life-long humanist who died last year at the age of 80.

We are grateful to the following subscribers who donated so generously to the fund in during this period: K A Abbas, B L Able, A Adler, J Ainsworth, F Bacon, Mr & Mrs Baxter, G R Bigley, A Blewitt, A J Brown, P Brown, J Cass, E Cicuendez, R Craddock, W Donovan,

D Dow, J Fawbert, G Fitch, D Gibbard, N Gibbard, A Griffin, J D Groom, A Harland, M Henderson, J Hood, W Hutton, T W Hill, C Howard, H J Jakeman, M T Johnson, C Kershaw, D Kirkland, G L Lucas, J Lummis, B McCullough, A McQuaid, J Manley, G Mapp, J A Markey, L Martin, N Moia, A Moliver, T Morrison, M Nicholls, R H Peirce, F Pidgeon, C Pinel, J Povey, S W Rayment, J R Rees, L Sage, T G Simon, M J Skinner, J R Skoyles, A Stevens, E Strauss, D A Thompson, N Thompson, S Trent, A Varlet, I Williams, J G Wilson.

## Islamic fascism

THE situation is a more serious matter than Mr McBay's letter to the Muslim Council of Great Britain and the Commission for Racial Equality (*Freethinker*, February) suggests. What is at issue is not merely the lack of judgment of the BBC and the unctuousness of the nobility of the race relations racketeers, it is the collusion between the governors of our media and the House of Commons to prevent the Arabic brand of fascism, Islam, from being talked about.

You can talk about how upsetting it is for the word "Britain" to be deleted. You can talk about the daftness of Sheikh Omar Bakri's fatwa against the country, etc. What you may not address is Islam. Our rulers DO know that it is a political system which insists on its own sovereignty against the claims of ANY local State. They DO know that, like Nazism, it is a set-up where, everything being "moral", all power is, necessarily, in the priest-ruler. Nothing is negotiable. Myself, I have since my return from Djeddah in 1995, several times sent brief notes to the BBC for getting the mere facts of Islam wrong – such as John Humphreys finding it ridiculous, or pretending to find it ridiculous that a man in Kuwait should have his wife and children taken from him and his life imperilled. The man had only converted to Christianity.

Once, I had a reply – from a BBC tea-lady in Glasgow I think – to the effect that, to be fair to ethnic minorities, the BBC had a responsibility to represent all shades of opinion – and, I am saying, all shades of a very big lie.

KEITH BELL  
Wales

## Derogatory and pessimistic views

I WOULD like to add my voice to what I expect and hope will be a loud howl of protest from humanists against Jack Hastie's derogatory and pessimistic interpretation (*Freethinker*, October 2003) of the views held by humanists. Perhaps if he were better informed he would be more inclined to consider himself one.

Contrary to holding the view that the evolution of nature has come to an end with *homo sapiens*, humanists understand that the processes of evolutionary change will continue as long as life exists and consequently that human beings and all other animals will inevitably alter over time, although for better or worse we cannot know in advance.

The inevitability of change, however, presents human beings with opportunities for individual improvement and social progress, both of which are seen by humanists as highly desirable developments which should be encouraged and fostered. Human evolution also provides the means for achieving a more enlightened, peaceful and ecologically sustainable future and is, therefore, a source of great hope.

Far from considering other species as exist-

ing "only to be exploited by man", an instrumental perspective more in keeping with religious theology (see Genesis 1:26) than humanist philosophy, humanists of my acquaintance respect the dignity and rights of other animals, recognising as they do the interconnectedness, diversity, vulnerability and inherent beauty of all forms of life.

ZELDA BAILEY  
President  
Humanist Society of Queensland,  
Australia

## Wrong sort of dummy

IN the January issue of the *Freethinker* you included an article of mine, under an editorially-provided headline, "God for Dummies", which suggested that believers are generally two neurons – or more – short of a full set!

In fact it was not my intention to imply that the "God"-phantasist is necessarily less intelligent (or even less sincere, though certainly in this respect at least less rational) than the "God"-dismitter. I, and no doubt you and many other rationalists, number many intelligent and apparently sincere believers among my relatives, friends, and acquaintances, whose faith is not to be shaken by any argument whatsoever. However, as a rationalist Edith Cavell might say, "Sincerity is not enough. I must have sufficient demonstrable grounds for my belief." This I feel is what the believer not only fails to establish but even to understand! For him intuition (ie unexamined assertion) suffices. But unfortunately false belief is not a negligible matter: it can affect and distort the whole of one's moral opinions and inflict very real harm.

The particular point I was trying to make then is not that "God is for dummies" but that a belief in "God" serves as a mental dummy, or baby-comforter, for the perplexed or credulous, be their general intelligence never so great.

ALBERT ADLER  
London

IT was recently claimed in the *Freethinker* that being an intelligent and learned person could be consistent with religious belief. I wonder.

Recently I lost a very dear, long-standing friend. He was an irreligious Jew, but his wife was a practising Catholic. Immediately after his death the widow rang me, urgently requesting my attendance at his religious funeral service. I pleaded my militant atheism, and said that I could and would not utter prayers. She pressed me hard, pleading that without my presence there might well not be a *minyán* or quorum of ten persons necessary for the recital of prayers.

Hurt by the suggestion that I might be a disloyal friend, and anxious to comfort the mourners – relatives who were orthodox Jews – I reluctantly attended the service.

Afterwards I sought the guidance of a rabbi as to whether I, as an unbeliever unable to pray, could form part of the *minyán*. To my surprise, he said all that was necessary to be part of a *minyán* was that I should be an adult Jew who had not formally converted to another faith. No theological qualification was laid down in the *halacha* or code of religious practice. My unbelief or non-utterance of prayers was not relevant.

How extraordinary. Nine learned and pious persons could not conduct a service where prayers might be effectual. Nor could eleven religious women. Yet eleven militant atheists not uttering prayers could conduct a valid service!

I do concede that I have met highly intelligent, honest and learned people who are religious believers. But not many. I wonder how they do it.

It is not easy to name people who have made a really major contribution to civilisation who were or are religious believers. Think of Einstein, Freud, Marx, Winston Churchill, Michail Gorbachev, Nehru, Bertrand Russell, Verdi, Puccini, and, I am sure, William Shakespeare, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Voltaire and Thomas Paine. I could go on forever. I can only say with Voltaire "Thank the Almighty I am an atheist."

DEREK WILKES  
London

## Circumcision

I HAD thought my letter on circumcision to be moderate and balanced, as I advocated caution before rushing to condemn it totally, but I did condemn "back-street" circumcisions, with their tragic consequences. All very prudent and reasonable I thought, so imagine my surprise to see it branded a "rant" by Stewart Valdar. Of course I should not be too surprised that someone who lacks the imagination to think of a better criticism should dismiss something so casually. Indeed, by his own admission, his preferred reaction would have been censorship.

At least Stewart Ware makes an attempt at detailed argumentation. In fact I even agree with him on some points. Anyone who relies for protection on circumcision, rather than safer sex, is indeed a fool. I never suggested otherwise, but circumcision can still help. As for the studies proving its effectiveness supposedly being "deeply flawed", what? All of them? One can dismiss a few in this way, but not 40+.

The anti-circ. brigade have been stymied by the proven link between foreskins and AIDS, and are desperate to discredit it. I could cite examples of their supposed "flaws" that are easily demolished but, instead, Mr Ware has generously offered a preposterous one of his own. African AIDS "is mostly caused by contaminated needles and medical equipment", he says. How strange then that the epidemic is worst in a

belt of countries where most men have foreskins. In those countries where some tribes circumcise, and some don't, it is the latter who are the more afflicted. Is he telling us that only those with foreskins encounter dirty needles?

I also agree with Mr Ware that "men who want to restore their foreskins are psychologically disturbed ...". Anyone (with the exception of yourself, of course, dear editor) who wants to dangle a weight from their willy for months to ruin an otherwise perfectly good circumcised organ obviously needs their head looked at. As for why they should want to subject themselves to such a bizarre ritual, Mr Ware has again volunteered an answer. Lawsuits.

The prospect of financial gain is, however, only part of the story. The anti-circumcision hysteria is a product of the counselling/therapy industry. It is no coincidence that some of the leading lights of the movement are also therapists. They spread their malicious propaganda, making boys and men who were previously happy with their cut status feel "unjustifiably bad about their bodies". These newly miserable people then queue up for "psychiatric treatment", often at the hands of those who made them feel bad in the first place.

One of the latest, and most ludicrous, manifestations of this craze is the appearance of dupes claiming to have recovered memories of their infant circumcisions. This is a neurological impossibility, as the neonate's brain cannot form narrative-style memories (although it can feel pain, contrary to the equally ludicrous pro-circumcision claim that it cannot).

False memories are nothing new, as shown by the satanic abuse scares or the alien abduction craze, both also products of counsellors and therapists. These are all part of a larger phenomenon – the "I am a victim" bandwagon. Anyone with a complaint, real or imagined, now seeks out others so they can form support groups to pat each other on the back and hire lawyers. They can be categorised as completely justified, as with victims of crime; controversial, as with "Gulf War" syndrome; unlikely, as with the MMR vaccine fuss; exag-

gerated, as with organ retention cases where second funerals are held for a handful of guts; and absurd, as with alien abductees.

Seen in this context, the whining circumcision "victims" are just another bunch of attention-seeking, sympathy-grabbing moaning minnies who scent the prospect of compensation money. They fall into the category of "groundless".

DR STEPHEN MORETON  
Cheshire

IT'S becoming increasingly obvious that bioethics is likely to be a major preoccupation of freethinkers – indeed, of all thinkers – in the 21st century. Demonstrating that it is not obsessed with sexual activity, gay or otherwise, the *Freethinker* (December 2003) highlights male circumcision and euthanasia in a context of "personal moral values/defined ethics".

The issue of male circumcision shouldn't be caught up in that of female circumcision by defining it emotively as "mutilation", much less as a "crime", when performed on infants unable to give consent. A similar objection could, but I trust won't, be levelled by freethinkers against a battery of postpartem immunisation jabs, again without consent and likely to produce screams of bloody murder.

Nobody is more opposed than I to unnecessary interventions in the natural order, whether through diet supplements, cosmetic surgery, recreational or performance-enhancing drugs, hair dyeing, etc. and I understand why removal of the prepuce (foreskin) is so classified by opponents. Clearly the structure evolved for a purpose – to protect the glans penis. But nature assumed nudity. The wearing of clothes has sidelined this function, and there's good evidence that male circumcision (which I understand is widespread globally, and not an aberration of South Africa and America), if properly performed, assists hygiene and reduces infection and possibly cancer. I can attest that it doesn't reduce sexual pleasure. But what has all this to do with homosexuality?

Religious practices shouldn't automatically be rejected by freethinkers, but where they have the potential for adverse side-effects they need to be regulated. No doubt some rabbis and Muslim operators are more expert circumcisers than your average doctor, but others aren't and need to be regulated as doctors are.

Female circumcision, on the other hand, can correctly be called mutilation. It has nothing to commend it medically. It is designed by men to control women by reducing or eliminating their sexual pleasure and capacity for illicit sex, and can have disastrous physical and mental consequences.

The issue of euthanasia is more complex, and I hope the editor will afford me space in

the future for an article on this subject.

DAVID TRIBE  
Australia

### Frank Ridley

I WAS interested to see Bill McIlroy (*Freethinker*, February, 2004) now acknowledges I was correct in my reference to the minutes of the NSS Executive Committee for the period leading up to the resignation of F A Ridley as president not being as detailed as one would wish, and so do not provide, as I contended, any evidence of a plot to oust the then secretary, Colin McCall. Mindful of the implications this admission carries, he plays what he appears to believe is his trump card, his membership of the NSS executive committee.

However, Mr McIlroy is not alone in having been a member of the EC at that time and there are others who were but do not subscribe to his version of events. Does he expect me to have discounted what they told me in preference to what he did? My approach was to weigh carefully the information given me by all those I consulted and compared it against what written sources there are, including the NSS minutes, and so draw my own conclusions. I found not the slightest evidence of a plot to oust the then secretary; had I done so, I would have recorded the fact. Strangely, in light of what Mr McIlroy now pontificates about, why is it that he did not raise the matter when I discussed Ridley with him?

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, since the publication of *The Gentle Revolutionary* I have been shown several letters from people opposed to Ridley which suggest that far from there being a plot to get rid of McCall the boot may have been on the other foot, and there were some people on the EC anxious to oust a president they felt he did not fit in with the image of the society they sought to cultivate. However, as I do not desire to extend the discussion I will not say anything further on this.

ROBERT MORRELL  
Nottingham

I KNEW, and often crossed swords with Frank Ridley more than 50 years ago, both in conversation and in the *Socialist Leader*, the paper of the now-defunct Independent Labour Party for which he wrote regularly.

I heard him speak at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, but did not consider him to be a particularly good soapbox orator, unlike such "stars" as Philip Sampson, Tony Turner and Donald "Sopey" Soper. He did look impressive, however, with his rather large head and a scar, which was quite prominent even at a distance.

He was, of course, very knowledgeable and

## Quotable quotes

RELIGION has done more to bust up humanity than anything.

– Actress Whoopi Goldberg, during a guest appearance in *New York last month on the Graham Norton Show*.

THE fact that a believer is happier than a sceptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality.

– George Bernard Shaw



a prolific writer.

I always felt that Ridley was more of a political controversialist than a freethinker. He seemed to me to be more concerned with defending Lenin or Trotsky than, say, Foote or Chapman Cohen.

And, yes, like Joseph McCabe, he had something of a fixation regarding the Catholic church; more for its reactionary politics than its obscurantist theology, maybe. And, like me, he sometimes overdid the exclamation marks (!)...

Nevertheless, F A Ridley always provoked arguments and controversies, including comments from a youthful Peter Newell. So that must have been a good thing.

P.S. His pamphlet *Socialism and Religion* is still worth reading.

PETER NEWELL  
Colchester

**The future**

IF one looks at world population figures it is difficult to understand why governments are concerned about anything else, or is this situation too frightening for them or us to think about?

It seems to have taken the first one or two million years of human development to raise the human population to one million.

Ten thousand years ago there might have been five million humans at the end of the last Ice Age.

Two thousand years ago there may have been fifty million.

By 1800 there were about one thousand million.

By 1900 there were about one thousand six hundred million.

In 2000 there were about six thousand million and in 2050 it is estimated that there will be nine thousand million.

I hope you enjoy it. I won't be around by then.

PETER ARNOLD,  
Alderney, CI

**Better balanced libraries**

HAVE you looked on your local library shelves lately? My own library has a section on religion much favouring books on mind control of *Why You Should Be A Christian* variety. Another section nearby is vastly devoted to the spooky, which can certainly destroy your mind.

I suggested to the county librarian that religion might be more appropriately balanced (for example between Christianity; other religions; scholarly and comparative; sceptical and humanist) and that some debunking of the spooky was appropriate. A courteous reply was followed by modest evidence of new purchases.

Perhaps the *Freethinker* could devote a feature to identifying books etc which would be

acceptable recommendations to broaden library resources on belief.

Libraries (often pressured by evangelicals) are sensitive to readers' suggestions, whether casual or systematic. Plenty of perky proposals could achieve a discernible shift. And if a religious periodical is taken, why not one irreligious?

EDWIN SALTER  
King's Lynn

**Burning effigies**

I GO away for a few years, and when I return everyone is referring to November 5 as "bonfire night". And Queen Mary Stuart (1553-1558) was simply our Catholic queen, according to what I read nowadays.

Should we forget that November 5 commemorates the Gunpowder Plot and Guy Fawkes, a Catholic who with others attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605?

Should we forget that Queen Mary was called Bloody Mary because she burned about three hundred Protestants at the stake?

Is it now "inappropriate" (Anne Widdecombe, Catholic) to recall these Catholic atrocities? Should we now just have a nice kiddies' party around a nice bonfire? The kiddies, no doubt, wondering what it's all about – and will (or can) their parents explain?

The Catholic *Guy Fawkes* was a brave man and I would not actually burn him or Catholic Bloody Mary or anyone else. But let's remember whom we are commemorating and/or deprecating on *Guy Fawkes' Day* on November 5. And by all means let's *burn in effigy* those we hate, and tell the kiddies why.

HELEN COX  
Bath

**God moves in mysterious ways**

ON January 24, Ahmed Versi suggested in the *Independent* that Kilroy-Silk should join the *hajj*, [the annual pilgrimage by Muslims to Mecca] by way of persuading him that his remarks about Arabs were not very nice. Mr Kilroy-Silk is not a Muslim, and therefore would not be able to take up this kind invitation, but if he did, what would he find? "Believers of all colour, race, and nationalities perform *hajj* together so they will meet – pray, sleep, exchange views, make friends, walk, embrace, shake hands, and perform pilgrimage – with the most hospitable people on earth." says Mr Versi.

Two weeks later, on February 2, the paper reported "300 pilgrims were crushed and trampled to death while stoning the three pillars at Mina which millions of Muslims regard as the impersonation of Satan".

Well, Mr Versi may have issued his impossible-to-attend invitation with the best of intentions – turning the other cheek concept – if that's not too inappropriate in this case. On the

other hand... "300 crushed to death". Wow! More to Mr Versi than meets the eye!

Yet, either way, it would have worked out. Had Kilroy-Silk become a Muslim in time to attend the *hajj* and got crushed to death he would be in heaven now. That would have been an apt punishment for someone who criticises Muslims.

FABIAN ACKER  
London

**Editor's note:** On February 11 last year 14 *hajj* pilgrims were crushed to death as they headed towards the satanic pillars. A day later a further 21 were trampled to death. In 2001, 35 people died in a stampede there, and in 1998 180 died performing the same ritual. A year earlier, more than 340 people died in a fire that ripped through pilgrims' tents at Mina. If a horrible death is the reward for piety, atheism must surely be the healthier alternative.

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## Events & Contacts

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Group:** Information on 01273 733215. Vallance Community Centre, Sackville Road and Clarendon Road, Hove. Sunday, March 7, 4.30pm. Angela Panthar: *Crisis in Human Rights*.

**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](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com).

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, March 9, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

**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: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. Email: [info@devonhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk). Website: [www.devon-humanists.org.uk](http://www.devon-humanists.org.uk).

**Ealing Humanists:** Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 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, March 12, 7.30pm. Neil McKenna, author of *The Secret Life of Oscar Wild*.

**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, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, April 1, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

**Humanist Association Dorset:** Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428502. Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, Bournemouth. Saturday, April 3, 2pm. David Warden: *The History of Humanism and Freethought*.

**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](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Humanist Society of Scotland – Dundee Group:** Contact secretary Ron McLaren, Spierhill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. Email: [humanist@spierhill.fsworld.co.uk](mailto:humanist@spierhill.fsworld.co.uk).

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, March 9, 7.30pm. John Bosley and Nina Boyd: *Humanism the*

*National Scene.*

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Hennes. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: [alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

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

**Perth Group:** Information: [perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk](mailto:perth@humanism.scotland.org.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](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Thursday, March 25, 8pm. David Porter: *Cults in Psychology*.

**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.

**Reigate & District Humanist Group.** Information: Roy Adderley on 01342 323882.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, March 3, 8pm. Katie Drake: *Asylum Seekers – the Ethical Issues*.

**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](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto: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](mailto:ken@kallen14.fsnet.com).

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

E-mail: [brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com)

website: [www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com](http://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