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The **Free**thinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

Old Presidents and New Theocrats, page 6



Gary Sloan reports on the efforts of neo-conservatives to break the barrier between church and state in the US

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One of these Scottish comedians has just died. Thankfully it wasn't Billy Connolly

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BY now, just about everyone on the planet will be aware of the fact that smoke is billowing out of the ears of Jewish leaders around the world over the way Jews are portrayed as horrible nasties in Mel Gibson's over-hyped gore-fest, *The Passion of the Christ*.

Fewer, I suspect, will be aware of the fact that smoke literally came out of the ears of devout Catholic Jim Caviezel, the actor portraying Jesus, when he was struck by lightning during the filming of Gibson's bloody offering. This bizarre little factlet unexpectedly came to light while I was attempting to find out what sort of age restrictions were being imposed on the film by censors in different countries.

According to a BBC report filed last October, the lightning bolt hit Caviezel and the film's assistant director Jan Michellini while they were filming in a remote location a few hours from Rome.

Describing the lightning strike, the film's producer Steve McEveety said: "I was about a hundred feet away from them when I glanced over and saw smoke coming out of Caviezel's ears." Both the actor, and Michellini, who had been struck earlier by lightning during filming, escaped serious injury.

My curiosity regarding age restrictions in respect of *The Passion of the Christ* was aroused by a report in the New Zealand *Herald* that Evangelical churches and the Catholic Communications Office are seriously cheesed off over the fact that New Zealand's Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) has made the film inaccessible to anyone under 16.

"Foul," they cried, saying, in effect, "we want younger children exposed to long scenes of eye-popping, stomach-churning gore."

These po-faced articles, who are normally engaged in castigating the censors for being too lax and allowing "filth", "depravity", "blasphemy" and "gratuitous violence" into the cinemas, argued that it was not merely OK but *beneficial* for youngsters to see Christ caned by two Roman soldiers until he is covered with bleeding wounds and then scourged with cat-o-nine-tails with hooks and blades attached.

A crown of thorns is hammered onto his head and he is repeatedly whipped as he stumbles along the route to his crucifixion, where nails being driven through his palms are shown in close-up.

Media watchdog group, the Society for the Promotion of Community Standards (SPCS) – New Zealand's answer to Mary Whitehouse's old National Viewers and Listeners Association (now Mediawatch-UK) – lodged an application for the rating to be lowered to allow younger children to see the film, accompanied by an adult.

"...the story of the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus and His subsequent Resurrection is of such a high level of significance, historically, culturally, socially and spiritually, that many children aged 13-15 would want to see this film and would greatly benefit from seeing it. This story, more than any other, has shaped the direc-

tion of Western civilisation." the application stated.

The group was backed by the Catholic Communications Office – mouthpiece for the Catholic Church – and a grouping of 350 evangelical Christian churches and organisations called "Vision Network NZ" which includes some Anglican and Presbyterian members.

**Freethinker editor
BARRY DUKE
wonders how scenes
of extreme violence
and torture can possibly
be of benefit to
young cinema audiences**



Mr Lane said the film's violence was not gratuitous and it had a "superb moral message of the triumph of love over persecution". He urged the OFLC to reclassify it as an educational film, open to accompanied viewers as young as 13.

Mr Lane said while SPCS contained many Christians it was a secular organisation which aimed to reduce the amount of gratuitous violence, especially sexual violence, on movie screens.

Lindsay Freer, of the Catholic Communications Office, said they supported the application to lower the rating so that Year 11 students – 15-year-olds – could be shown the movie in Catholic schools.

Mrs Freer said past films about Christ had been "rather sanitised".

But chief censor Bill Hastings was resolute that the rating would not be lowered. "If I was to reconsider it, I might consider raising it upwards. We made a finding that the extent and degree – the very intense degree, the huge extent and the manner and which the violence is shown in this film – would disturb children if not actually traumatise them."

"Once parents got into the theatre and saw hooks and blades hooked into Christ's flesh and then whipped out again, for example, they would have a lot of traumatised kids on their hands and regret having taken their kids there."

In the US the film has been given a 17 certificate, in Britain, an 18, but in Ireland 15-year-olds can view it.

Call me twisted if you will, but I reckon purveyors of fetish paraphernalia – and sado-masochists everywhere – will be licking their lips in anticipation of a fresh crop of flagellation and bondage enthusiasts emerging from *The Passion of the Christ*. One thing is for sure, Gibson's ghastly gift to the world of cinema won't have folk flocking to church in search of gratification.

HOW sad I was to learn that my favourite Scottish comedian has fallen off the perch. No, not Billy Connolly but another goateed comic: Pastor Jack Glass, founder of the Zion Sovereign Grace Baptist Church in Glasgow.

Glass, who died of cancer inflicted on him "by Satan", had a bee in his bonnet about a great number of things – most recently sex shops in Glasgow. But most of his invective was reserved for the Pope and Billy Connolly and homosexuality.

In probably one of the funniest obituaries ever written, the *Telegraph* pointed out that "even Ian Paisley considered him an extremist". According to the paper, "Glass's finest moment was undoubtedly during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Scotland in 1982, when he led protests against the 'Antichrist' from Rome, proclaiming that the Pope had 'no right to set foot on a Protestant island' and that his visit 'violated the British Bill of Rights'."

When it was rumoured that the Pope intended to visit the ecumenical community at Iona, he turned up one lunchtime in the abbey, mounted the pulpit, informed those present that they were "the lickspittle of the Antichrist", then departed to catch the ferry.

And when Leah Tutu, wife of Archbishop Desmond, opened the Macleod Centre on Iona, Glass bellowed from the crowd "Hang Mandela!", a suggestion which Mrs Tutu took as testimony to British traditions of free speech.

Jack Glass was born in 1936 and joined the Salvation Army as a child. After studying moral philosophy and English at Glasgow University, he founded his Zion Baptist Church in 1967 and began his unrelenting one-man mission to lead the people of Scotland away from Satan.

Over a period of some 30 years, he picketed shows by the comedian Billy Connolly in protest at a sketch in which Connolly translated the Last Supper to the Saracen's Head pub in Glasgow's East End.

"Connolly depicts Christ as wearing a jaggy bunnet and entering a pub, steamin' drunk," Glass fulminated. "We call upon every Christian who loves the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to organise a protest outside the halls in Scotland where Connolly – the blasphemous buffoon – will be performing," adding "If the Forth was lava, I would throw him in."

Connolly regarded Glass and his followers as his "lucky mascots", since the more they ranted, the bigger his audiences became.

At the 1999 Edinburgh Festival, wearing a crown of thorns, Glass led an 80-strong demonstration to picket the opening night of Terence McNally's play *Corpus Christi*, in which the Son of God discovers his sexuality with Judas. Protesting that the Lord had been "spoofed as a poof", Glass confronted the actor who was playing Judas in front of the assembled television cameras and hurled a bag of money at him with the words: "There's your 30 pieces of silver, you Judas!" When the coins were counted, there were only 29."

So amused was I by the *Telegraph* piece that I immediately forwarded it to a number of friends, including *Freethinker* book reviewer Norman Pridmore, who declared it "an obituary to die for."

Christian seminar told that Muslims under-valued women and Islam permitted men to beat their wives

GIVING evidence in Victoria's first religious hatred case, Pastor Daniel Scot claimed that although domestic violence was common in all cultures, Islam allowed it.

The Assemblies of God minister had told a Christian seminar in Melbourne in 2002 that violence was common in Muslim homes in Australia, because the Koran allowed Muslim men to beat their wives.

Pastor Scot told the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal that a female teacher at an Islamic school claimed the principal admitted bashing his wife every day.

The case has been brought against Catch the Fire Ministries' minister Danny Nalliah and Pastor Scot by the Islamic Council of Victoria because it is claimed that Muslims were vilified at the 2002 seminar.

The Council says that Muslims were described as terrorists and rapists.

The seminar was arranged after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, to increase understanding of Islam.

Scot, a guest speaker at the seminar, was questioned at length by Islamic Council barrister Brind Woinarski, QC, over his speech.

Scot, who was born to British parents in Pakistan, says he has read and re-read the Koran in its entirety at least 100 times and extensively read and studied commentaries on it. He admitted telling the seminar that the Koran suggested that women had little value and prostitution was acceptable, that Muslims controlled the Australian immigration department, and it was an open secret that Muslims wanted Australia to become an Islamic state.

The pastor said he told the seminar that Australian Bureau of Statistics figures showed the Muslim population in Australia had increased from 201,000 in 1996 to 350,000 in 2001.

He now accepted this was incorrect and that the Muslim population was in fact 280,000 and growing at eight per cent a year.

He denied exaggerating the figures to alarm his audience or to make them afraid of Muslims, but he did refer them to chapter 5, verse 38, of the Koran, which said that under Islamic law the right hand of a thief should be chopped off and no one spared, even if someone had stolen an egg. He agreed he omitted to tell the audience the next verse: "But who so repents after his wrongdoing, Allah will relent towards him, Allah is forgiving, merciful." Scot said he did not think the verse was relevant.

He said that people attending the seminar laughed when he read out excerpts from the Koran but he had not intended to ridicule or mock Muslims.

"If I read from the holy Koran that King Solomon heard the speech of an ant, some people might think it funny an ant can make a speech. That's not my fault. Sometimes people laugh for different reasons."

He admitted telling the seminar that Muslims could trade in their wives like used cars but denied this was a criticism. This was simply how Muslims valued women, according to the Koran, he said.

Barrister David Perkins, representing Catch the Fire Ministries, told the tribunal that Muslim thinkers pulled no punches when describing other religions, and pointed out that a Muslim speaker at a seminar in Brisbane said "the most atrocious things about Christianity".

Arguing that the tribunal should watch a video of that seminar, Mr Perkins said it showed the Christian seminar should not be seen in isolation.

Mr Perkins said: "It shows Islamic thinkers are out there taking part in the debate, pulling

no punches, commenting on the Bible in caustic ways. The debate has been on the boil for years. That's what in this country, if not this state, we call free speech."

Scot, asked by Islamic Council barrister Debbie Mortimer whether he would change his message at his next seminar, said he would not. "I teach what the Koran says, and if Muslims find these topics offensive, that's something they have to deal with – it's not the fault of the teacher."

Asked to clarify his comment at his seminar that Islam did not value women, Pastor Scot said the Koran and Hadith taught that a woman had less intellectual capacity, was a toy, was like a field to be ploughed, and the husband's desire should be met at any cost.

Ms Mortimer complained that he was using the hearing, under cover of privilege, to further vilify her clients.

The case was still being heard at the time of the *Freethinker* going to press.

Teacher cleared of religiously-motivated abuse and assault

A TEACHER accused of religiously abusing and assaulting a Muslim pupil has been found not guilty. According to a BBC report last month, Hazel Dick, 43, the head of science at Bretton Woods Community School in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, was cleared of the charge at Peterborough Crown Court, where she denied forcibly removing 15-year-old Seleena Sabeel's headscarf during an argument.

The court heard that the girl had a record of poor behaviour including violence and abuse. The jury was told that Dick called Islam a "joke" during an incident in March 2003 after the girl was told to change her hijab scarf because it was not correct school uniform.

The prosecution alleged that Dick became annoyed and pulled the scarf from the girl's neck, causing a 2cm (1in) pin scratch.

Ms Dick told the court she merely helped the girl remove the hijab so that her head was not exposed in public for any length of time. But the scarf had been totally unfastened and "slipped" off the girl's head with ease, she said.

She admitted accusing the now 16-year-old of having little respect for Islam after the girl exposed her head while changing the hijab in full view of two boys in the school corridor.

Discharging the science head, Judge Nicholas Coleman said: "I hope, Ms Dick, that

you can resume your career as soon as possible and put this behind you. "You go with the good wishes of the court."

The head of Bretton Woods Community School, John Gribble, said he was absolutely delighted with the verdict for Ms Dick. "She has been through a year-long trial and her relief is deserved," he said.

He added that the teacher had never been suspended from the school and had continued to serve her pupils with great dignity and resilience.

Mr Gribble said Seleena would be allowed to continue at school while an internal investigation was carried out into her false claims of assault.

After the verdict Judge Coleman removed a court order which had banned the naming of Ms Dick's accuser.

The teacher was supported by her union the NUT. Doug McAvoy, NUT General Secretary, said: "Hazel Dick is another in a long list of teachers who have been subjected to malicious and unfounded allegations of assault."



Hazel Dick



RATHER than rejecting the figure of Jesus, maybe we should scratch away the spirituality surrounding the man and see his message for what it is – a call to humanism, perhaps?

Like most working-class boys from large Catholic families, money was scarce. The direct consequence was that when other boys had glossy posters of Man United stars on their wall, I had the Sacred Heart! And while the well-off had the Eagle Eyes Action Man to role-play with, I had the pantheon of saints and apostles. When other gangs played cops and robbers, we played Mass. Jesus was then my David Beckham – a man made distant to me by forced reverence and my reluctance to challenge the celebrity of the divine.

Only now that I have hit my mid-thirties am I able to shoulder the flippant blasphemy of this observation and express my true feelings. The thrust of my argument is that the innocent delusions of my childhood now chime with the cynicism of maturity. Organised religion has stretched the reality of the Man from Palestine. He has been airbrushed with dogma. What remains is a depiction of Jesus that has a greater affinity with Pop Idol than popular idolatry.

Before I justify this, let me be honest. My comments aren't based on years of digenesis and study of the Great Book. I think that one of the worst things a critic of Christianity can do

is to use the Bible as a rhetorical weapon – generations of churchmen have been doing that to their congregations very well themselves! Instead, my beliefs are based on that simple precept that struck me so profoundly as a child it still forms the foundation of this fall-

**PATRICK TOLAND
argues that it is not us,
but Jesus, who needs to
be saved**

en Catholic's attempt to live well – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. This “Golden Rule” connects the core of all the world's faiths and has been articulated with true resonance by such ethical greats as Plato, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, Krishna and Jesus. Yet millennia of interpretation, doctrinal detritus and clerical camouflage have hidden this “humanist” message – a message that implicitly instructs people to live in an atmosphere of respect, tolerance and mutual co-existence.

No doubt, arguments will always rage about the status of Jesus and the purpose of his residency on earth, but one fact remains. Jesus lived as a man and spoke of the kinship of all people. He was beyond question a moralist and universalist who spoke to his culture in the language, symbolism and narratives of the time.

But, following the New Testament's nature analogies and chunky metaphors, rather than seeing through this to the seed of his insights, the weeds of theocracy have choked the democracy of Jesus' message. Meaningful attitudes have become meaningless platitudes that channel us towards being a Christian rather than becoming – Jesusarian?

I believe the humanist message is not a rejection of the religious but an affirmation of that altruistic intent that sits at the centre of the best human instincts. All religious “saviours” who have become iconic were, at some moment in history, absolutely flesh and blood whose words overcame these temporal obstacles only to hit the “speed bump” that is divinity.

Being portrayed as the avenue to salvation diluted their original aspiration – to encourage humanity to strive for what is most humane. As humanists, I think we should tackle the main faiths' appropriation of these remarkable men and their message – a plea for universal love and selfless understanding.

In particular, Jesus has become a victim of the worst kind of priestly perfidiousness – he has been made remote and incommunicable unless we seek the intercession of flawed men. This leaves us only able to speculate what kind of world it would be if the early gospel writers had left Jesus as a man who lived and idealised, rather than converting him into the

“living” Christ.

The power of Jesus' message becomes more powerful when it is expressed as a human rather than a sacrificial adjunct to God. This is why I think it particularly ironic that evangelical Christians attempt to convert with the words “Jesus saves”. If anyone needs to be saved, it is Jesus himself – saved from the mythology of faith, saved from the competing Churches who swamp the most human of philosophies with holy baggage, and saved from those clerical go-betweens who would seek to distance us from this man by portraying him as a flawless escapologist who will sit in final judgment and thus contradict his own message of mercy. I believe that Jesus represents that which is most supremely humane – a pathfinder who may not have directed us first and foremost towards eternal redemption but towards discovering our own potential for eternal good. When we concede that Christianity was an appropriate vehicle for the survival of Jesus' message into this millennium, it now seems right that we find ways to seek a new revelation of the figure of Jesus. Perhaps when others begin to preach this message we can begin to learn to love Jesus the man rather than Jesus the Messiah. It could be the first step towards humanism's understanding its Christian cousin. This could be the first step towards true salvation itself.

**No beauty contests here
– we're Jewish, Orthodox
and armed!**

A BEAUTY pageant in a West Bank settlement to find the prettiest teenager has incensed religiously Orthodox Jewish settlers.

The beauty contest is scheduled to take place in the settlement of Ariel, some 30km west of Tel Aviv, but posters advertising the contest in Ariel and surrounding areas have been ripped down by religious settlers angered by what they saw as indecency.

But the organiser, local photographer Avner Auster, is determined to press ahead, according to a BBC report.

“I've had some unpleasant reactions from religious people,” he said. “A guy came into my shop and said I'm not keeping Israeli girls' purity.”

“My reaction to that was an unpleasant one which I won't go into, but after that I told him, “You live in Immanuel. I live in Ariel. I'm not telling you how to live your life. Don't tell me how to live mine.”

While Ariel is a secular settlement built on occupied land in the West Bank, there are more Orthodox settlements nearby, including the deeply religious and ideological Immanuel, where the people are armed, suspicious – and fanatically puritanical.

**US university is sued
over its refusal to fund
a Christian newspaper**

TWO students have sued the University of Oklahoma, claiming the school discriminated against them by refusing to fund a Christian newspaper.

The students claim they were told funding for the Beacon OU newspaper was rejected “because it is religious propaganda and takes a stance on many issues”.

According to the lawsuit filed earlier this year in the US District Court, the University of Oklahoma Student Association's 2004 handbook prohibits use of funds for “religious services of any nature.”

The students – Ricky Thomas and James Wickett – claim the university is restricting their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech, religion and the press. They also claim the university violated their constitutional rights to due process, equal protection and freedom of association.

The lawsuit demands the university's regulations be overturned and unspecified damages be awarded to the students.

Dear God, not more junk mail!

NOT content with merely praying, many believers are overcome with the desire to put their prayers onto paper, and post them to God. But where do these letters – and thousands of them are posted each year – wind up?

According to a recent CNN report, many are forwarded to an Israeli post office in Jerusalem, where they are read, and then sent on to the holy Western Wall.

The letters come from all over the world in a host of languages. The elderly ask for good health. Others seek heavenly remedies for debts, relationship assistance, or help finding jobs.

Children mainly ask God to spring them from homework assignments. The trickle of requests turns into a flood around Christmas and the Jewish holidays.

"We have hundreds and thousands of letters sent to either God or Jesus Christ and for some unknown reason they all come to Jerusalem," said Yitzhak Rabihiya, a postal spokesman.

"Dear Sir," begins one letter whose address reads "God of Israel" and whose request is for assistance landing a job as a bulldozer driver.

One Israeli man used to write twice a year in the same distinctive handwriting, addressing the envelopes to "Angels above in Seventh Heaven."

As long as anyone at the post office can remember, the letters to God have turned up at the Postal Authority's centre for undeliverable mail in an industrial zone in Jerusalem.

In the tiny warehouse, eight workers sort

problem envelopes into pigeon-holes labelled for junk mail, government bureaux, social security and health insurance offices and "Letters to God."

Ten such pleas for divine intervention have arrived in the last couple of days, some from the United States, France, Nigeria, Australia and Ecuador.

One came – somehow – with no stamps.

Puzzled by what to do with the letters, one worker started taking them to the Western Wall, a remnant of the ancient Second Temple compound and Judaism's holiest site, where Jews traditionally stuff tiny notes of prayer in the cracks between its hulking stones.

"From there, it's not in our hands," Rabihiya said. Eventually, the notes and letters left at the Wall are buried on Jerusalem's outskirts along with damaged religious texts and other materials considered too holy for the garbage dump.

The notes offer a sometimes charming glimpse into people's private wishes. One man asks for forgiveness for stealing money from a grocery store as a child.

Another man from Saulsbury, Tennessee, wrote a tiny message and asked the postmaster to deliver it to the Western Wall, because he heard a rumour that would work. It reads: "Please help me to be happy. Please help me find a nice job in Tallahassee or Monroe or some nice place and find a good wife – soon. Amen, Daryl."

Cardinal Newman, a state secondary school, accepts students from other denominations if they provide written evidence of regular worship signed by their parish priest or minister of religion.

Ms Mishon said she could have sent her son to another school closer to home, but she wanted him to attend Cardinal Newman because of its religious ethos.

Brighton and Hove City Council is responsible for administering bus passes.

A council spokesman told the *Argus*: "To qualify for a bus pass to attend a Catholic school more than three miles away from your home you do actually have to be a Catholic.

"Children who aren't Catholic but who by choice attend Catholic schools more than three miles away do not qualify for bus passes here, or, to our knowledge, anywhere else. There are nationally recognised rules relating to this and they are very clear. Our school transport staff check baptism certificates with the schools involved to ensure that passes are only given to Catholics."

One writer asked God to answer a friend's prayers, and in a postscript gives the friend's address, adding, "But you knew that."

A chain-letter in Arabic from "the Virgin Mary" called for peace in Bosnia and asked the recipient to send the letter to 20 other people.

The notes also speak of tragedy, relaying desperate prayers from people who are in trouble or lonely.

The postal workers recently suffered their own loss and grief. Yitzhak Moyal, 63, one of the workers who took the letters to the Western Wall, was killed in a suicide bombing.

Avi Yaniv, head of the undeliverable mail department, said friends have told him he and his crew are like God's deputies because they shuttle people's prayers to the Wall.

Some letters touch him, such as one from a Kenyan man asking God to save his marriage. "I believe in God, so I want to help these people," the 60-year-old Yaniv said.

The postal workers' favorite anecdote is about an Israeli man who, years ago, wrote a letter to God describing his crippling poverty and asking for 5,000 shekels (about £500.00). Postal workers were so moved they collected 4,300 shekels and mailed it back.

"After a month the same person writes again to God," Rabihiya recalled, "but this time he writes, 'Oh, thank you God for the contribution, but next time please don't send it through those postmen. They're thieves; they stole 700 shekels.'"

Brighton boy told 'No school bus pass if you are non-Catholic'

THE mother of a Brighton, East Sussex schoolboy has described as "discriminatory" Brighton and Hove City Council's refusal to provide a free school bus pass for her 13-year-old son Harry because he is not a Catholic.

Harry attends Cardinal Newman Catholic school in Hove, and has to pay £1.20 to travel from his home in Patcham. When his mum, qualified homoeopath Lynne Mishon, applied to the council for a free bus pass, she was refused by an official who said that Harry needed to be Catholic to get a pass.

Ms Mishon's reaction was "You must be joking!"

She told local newspaper, the *Argus*: "I was adamant I wasn't going to lie and say Harry was a Catholic, because I don't lie." She added: "You can't discriminate like that. I bring up my children to respect equal opportunities."

Preacher demands the right to erect an anti-gay memorial

REVEREND Fred Phelps, the Baptist fanatic who created the notorious *Godhatesfags* website, has indicated his desire to erect a memorial to slain University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard – one declaring that Shepard is in hell!

The student – the victim of a vicious homophobic attack – was murdered on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. Phelps and his supporters turned up *en masse* at his funeral, brandishing signs which declared "Matt is in Hell" and "Fags Die, God Laughs."

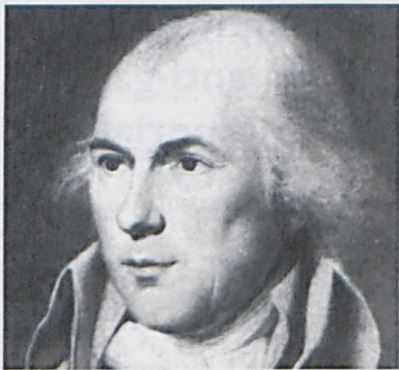
Phelps wants to erect the monument in Casper, Wyoming, Shepard's home town.

ON the editorial pages of US newspapers and at sundry websites, proponents of an impregnable wall between church and state intermittently clash with modern theocrats (aka Christian fundamentalists) who would delve beneath the wall and, as Hamlet might say, "blow it at the moon." Whether the immediate provocation be placement of the Ten Commandments in courthouses and statehouses, Bible classes in public schools, school prayer, school vouchers, public display of nativity scenes, tax exemptions for churches, federal funds for faith-based initiatives, or official permission to use the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, the new theocrats seek to undermine the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

A favorite ploy is to attribute Christianish remarks to the first US presidents. Modified or wrenched from context, when not altogether spurious, the remarks are supposed to demonstrate that the most eminent founders of the nation sanctioned state furtherance of religion.

Hence, in his farewell address to the fledgling nation, George Washington, the theocrats often point out, warned that when the body politic is devoid of religious sentiment, the nation must suffer: "Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

On a similar count, John Adams is customarily cited: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." A local letter writer theocratized Washington in a most brazen way. "The mission of America and the church is one and the same: to further the cause of Christ," the father of our country



James Madison: "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution."

supposedly pontificated.

The early presidents, it seems, were all devotees of Scripture who deemed the Bible a *desideratum* for both governor and governed. Did not Washington postulate that "it is impossible to rightly govern without God and the Bible"? Did not Adams eulogize the Book: "I have examined all religions, as well as my narrow sphere, my straitened means, and my busy life, would allow; and the result is that the Bible is the best Book in the world"? In the theocratic eye view of American history, James Madison, the father of the Constitution, was an ideological forbear of Judge Roy Moore. After all, it is frequently alleged (falsely, it turns out), that Madison remarked: "We have staked the future of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God."

Even were all these presidential puffs for religion authentic, they would scarcely validate a liaison between church and state. Even could it be shown that the "religious principle" heightens civic morality and nourishes polity, it doesn't follow that the state should conspire with the church to inculcate the principle. The state has no expertise in soul making; that is the bailiwick of the church. If the church falters, it shouldn't expect the state to bail it out.

Notwithstanding the above quotations, the first presidents weren't exactly gung ho for institutionalized religion, including Christianity, supported or unsupported by the state. In an 1831 sermon delivered in Albany, New York, the Reverend Doctor Bird Wilson, an Episcopal minister and historian, lamented that "the founders of our nation were nearly all Infidels". Certainly, the first five or six presidents, all deists, fill the bill.

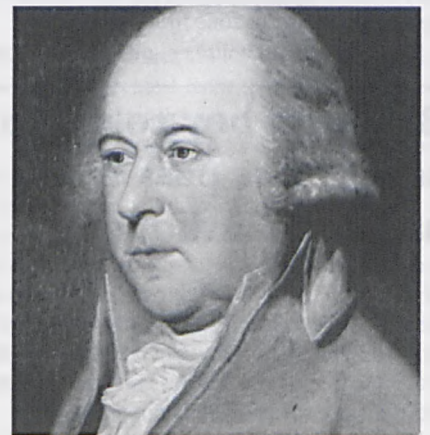
In their private correspondence, they inveighed against "superstitious" or "dogmatic" Christianity. In an 1816 letter to F A Van der Kamp, John Adams mused: "How has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed?" In a kindred vein, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Adams: "I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world, and do not find in our particular superstition [Christianity] one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded upon fables and mythologies." Jefferson concocted his own version of the Gospels, expurgating the miraculous, legendary, and dogmatic elements. Vetoing a bill granting public lands to a church, Madison observed: "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy,

ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution." James Monroe was a loyal friend of Thomas Paine, author of the incendiary *Age of Reason*, which skewered the Bible and national religions.

America's new theocrats are relentless in their efforts to breach the wall between church and state, and frequently distort the views of past presidents to support their attempts, says GARY SLOAN, a retired English professor in who lives in Ruston, Louisiana



Although George Washington maintained a politic silence on his religious beliefs, Thomas Jefferson quoted a revelatory contemporary witness to Washington's disrelish for Christianity: "Dr. Rush told me (he had it from Asa Green [chaplain to Congress during Washington's administration]) that when the clergy addressed General Washington, on his departure from the government, it was observed in their consultation that he had never, on any occasion, said a word to the public which showed a belief in the Christian



John Adams: "How has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed?"

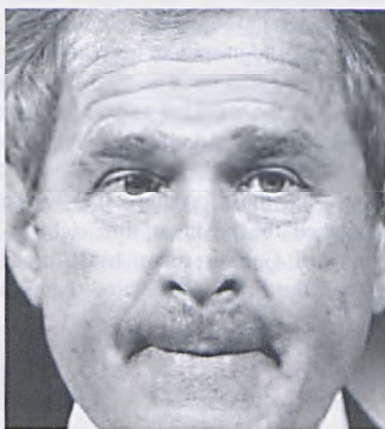
religion, and they thought they should so pen their address as to force him at length to disclose publicly whether he was a Christian or not. However, he observed, the old fox was too cunning for them. He answered every article

of their address particularly, except that, which he passed over without notice" (*Jefferson's Works*, Vol. iv, p.572). At the Episcopal church he attended while president, Washington was invariably absent on Communion days.

Given their distaste for clericalism, it isn't surprising that the presidents wanted to quarantine the national government from sectarian contamination. Washington reminded members of the New Church in Baltimore that the nation had no religious bias: "In this Land the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition. In this enlightened Age and in this Land of equal liberty it is our boast, that a man's religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the Laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest Offices that are known in the United States."

The Treaty of Tripoli, carried unanimously by the Senate and signed into law by John Adams in 1797, specifically disavowed any proprietary influence of Christianity on shaping the guiding principles of the new government: "As the Government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion, it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity, of Musselmen [Muslims]."

The first presidents left ample evidence that



George W Bush has instigated the channelling of billions of dollars into faith-based organisations. "We want to fund programs that save Americans one soul at a time."

they favored a broad interpretation of the Establishment Clause. The testimony of James Madison, since he was the prime architect of both the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, is especially enlightening. In an 1803 letter objecting to the use of government land for churches, Madison wrote: "The bill in reserving a certain parcel of land in the United States for the use of said Baptist Church comprises a principle and a precedent for the appropriation of funds of the United States for the use and

support of religious societies, contrary to the article of the Constitution which declares that 'Congress shall make no law respecting a religious establishment'." As president, Madison vetoed an 1811 bill giving a charter to an Episcopal church to dispense charity and education in the District of Columbia. He said the bill would blur "the essential distinction between civil and religious functions".

In an 1822 letter to Edward Livingston, Madison noted that strict separation of church and state benefits both: "Every new & successful example therefore of a perfect separation between ecclesiastical and civil matters, is of importance. And I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion & Government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together."

Despite the demurrals of wistful theocrats, separation of church and state is an even better idea today than it was in 1791, when the First Amendment was duly ratified. The nation is far more pluralistic now than it was in its formative years. Once, an intrusion of Christian baggage into the affairs of state was prejudicial to few since nearly all citizens were at least nominally Christian. Now that the nation includes twenty to thirty million (estimates vary) agnostics, atheists, skeptics, freethinkers, and secular humanists, state aggrandizement of theism, even when stripped of sectarianism, is inevitably discriminatory.

In his most recent State of the Union address, George W Bush plumped for legislation allowing religious organizations to receive federal funds for faith-based initiatives – presumably even when, as some funded church organizations now do, they pursue religious agendas and engage in discriminatory hiring practices. Bush grouched that "government has often denied social service grants and contracts to [religious institutions] just because they have a cross or Star of David or crescent on the wall."

Bush touted his crusade to correct the alleged putative injustice: "By Executive Order, I have opened billions of dollars in grant money to competition that includes faith-based charities. Tonight I ask you [Congress] to codify this into law, so people of faith can know that the law will never discriminate against them again."

In a January speech in New Orleans, Bush characterized the Bible as the ideal handbook for carrying out child-care services at a local church. In the same speech, he enunciated the grandiose intent of his administration's faith-based initiatives: "We want to fund programs that save Americans one soul at a time".

Instead of agitating for an amendment to ban homosexual marriages, the new theocrats should re-examine an amendment cherished by old presidents and trampled by the latest avatar to High Office.

"Secular schools can never be tolerated because such schools have no religious instruction, and a general moral instruction without a religious foundation is built on air; consequently, all character training and religion must be derived from faith ... we need believing people."

– Adolf Hitler, from a speech made during negotiations leading to the Nazi-Vatican Concordant, 26 April 1933.

"God has entrusted me with the virus [HIV] and He never tests us beyond what we can stand. You can decide whether to break down or break through. Even if you've got to die, what does it do to worry about it? This is not my home. Zambia is not my home. The world is not my home. My citizenship is not here, it's in heaven"

– *Zambian AIDS campaigner Princess Zulu, who is herself HIV+, on a recent visit to the UK.*

"It doesn't give me displeasure to hear of a virgin being raped. The lot of women is to be fornicated."

– *the late Lafayette Ron Hubbard, science fiction writer and founder of the Church of Scientology (Affirmations, 1947).*

"Killing is a form of mercy because it rectifies the person. Sometimes a person cannot be reformed unless he is cut up and burnt. ... You must kill, burn and lock up those in opposition."

– *The late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, in a speech made on February 3, 1984.*

"There is on earth among all dangers no more dangerous thing than a richly endowed and adroit reason ... Reason must be deluded, blinded, and destroyed."

– *Martin Luther*



The Bible's report of the great flood (Genesis 7/8/9) is one of those many biblical descriptive achievements which is capable of leaving any serious reader gasping for air. There may well be remnants of truth latent in the memory of mankind of a relatively recent period on our planet when immense flooding or floods took place. It still happens in many areas today.

Nevertheless, the ructions these waters cause are almost invariably man-made and under other circumstances would be looked upon as natural. Heavy local flooding has always taken place during given seasons, the flooding of the Mississippi and Nile Deltas being good examples. The memory of really heavy flooding does, however, seem to be borne out by various studies, and during the early part of the 20th century, Sir Leonard Woolley, a British archaeologist, believed he had identified a layer of clay at Ur, in Iraq, one possibly stemming from a flood deposit about 4,000 BC.

However, the Bible's report about the flooding of the whole earth is in itself so full of contradictions and so empty of common sense that it cannot conceivably have been the recorded result of any truth-seeking intelligence.

Like all other biblical legends, the story of the Ark, based on the callous and heedless destruction of all men, women and children who happened to be living on this planet at that time, is one intended to put fear and terror into the hearts and minds of those poor people and peoples who have suffered throughout the centuries and still suffer today under the suppression of their rights, their opinions, of processes and procedures formed and supported by "dignitaries" and "leaders" from the world-wide walks of all religions, politics and finance.

If we look into the chapters previous to Genesis 7/8/9, we see some very odd statements indeed, statements which, considering the Bible to be the true Word of God, rather tend to call the words of Erich von Däniken to mind, suggesting the possibility that man did indeed develop from extra-terrestrial beings. In chapter 6 we can read the following words (passage shortened for ease): *Men began to multiply upon the face of the earth and bore fair daughters, the SONS of God then took these fair daughters as wives whose children then became mighty men.*

So, apart from all other suppositions we now know that Jesus (4,000 years or so later) is not the only son of God (in spite of *I am God's only begotten son*); in fact, according to Genesis 6.2, there are a number of sons (there don't appear to be any daughters), and these sons in turn picked those earth daughters which pleased them most and then had children by them. It is worth noting here that the mothers of the children of the gods were not picked for their personal qualities but for their

outward appearance – once again mankind being set a good example by religious figures. Nevertheless, and in spite of his own sons now being partnered with earth women, God wasn't pleased about the mankind he had created and their wicked thoughts and deeds (chapter 6.5), so he decided to rid the earth of his mistaken planning – all those creatures into whom he had breathed the breath of life right at the beginning of Genesis; man, beast, creeping things and the fowls of the air – being now

sorry he had made them. (Today, because of our globally successful and wonderful business acumen – ahem – we would call it *not getting it right the first time*). In Genesis 6.11, God complains about the violence on the Earth – one passage confusingly states that the Earth was corrupt before (previous to?) God, and we, simple as we are, thought he had made the Earth – so, abiding by the compassionate and loving law of an *eye for an eye*, as still practised on this planet today, God decided to set another good example and use violence himself to destroy the whole of existing mankind.

But – and this is a big but – there was one man still in God's good books, a 500-year-old-called Noah, who, together with his family, was ordered by God to build the Ark. God's intention was *to bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh; and everything that is in the earth shall die.*

Except, that is, for Noah, his wife, their sons and the sons' wives. We are not quite sure about God's own sons, they who took the fair daughters of the earth – they seem to have dropped out of the picture.

The Ark was to be built to God's specifications. The joints to be plugged with pitch, inside and outside. There was to be one "window" and inside there were to be three storeys. By whom it was to be built, how, where and how quickly this was achieved is unknown. However, as it clearly states in Genesis 7.11, *the windows of heaven were opened* in the 600th year of Noah's life, so presumably it took him about 100 years to build the Ark. (Plenty of time for three or so normal generations of mankind to be born, live and die in vain, not knowing that there was no future for their still-to-come and presumably still innocent offspring). God also specified the size: the Ark was to be three hundred cubits long; fifty cubits wide; and thirty cubits high. According to my encyclopaedia one cubit is between 18 and 22 inches, based originally on the distance from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow. Let's say 20 inches. So the Ark would be approx. 166 yards long, 28 yards wide, 17 yards high.

Probably about the size of a modern cruise ship. Not really very big for one pair of every sort of creature in existence, even leaving out the fish kingdom which apparently would be able to continue (or not) to exist in a mixture of salt and fresh water. But it would be a somewhat ridiculous logistical letdown to have to take living fish into a ship because of flooding. Better not mention it.

We all know the picture of the animals going into the Ark two by two, up the gangway, por-

Poor Noah's Logistics

Swiss resident IAN KELLY reveals how Noah's Ark – and finds it ridiculous

trayed often by the wide behinds of an elephant couple, disappearing into the bowels of the Ark side by side, Noah standing dutifully by.

There are millions of creatures and other life-forms of all sizes and species on this planet. Most of them are peculiar to countries, climates and continents. Many of those creatures that existed on the planet 4,000 years ago, have, in the meantime been (or are being – in the name of environmental and animal protection) eradicated by us, so-called Christians, Muslims, Jews etc., in some way – shot, sacrificed, chopped to pieces, thrown into boiling water, poisoned or eaten. Only true Buddhists and Hindus refuse to eat flesh, accepting responsibility and showing understanding for the evolution of life above plant level. But really, let's face it, it is a wonderful thought that the Ark was to be filled with such a wide collection of such diverse creatures from the four corners of the earth. Such a super solution. Mind you, although it is not very uplifting, there are, unfortunately, several problems, just small details really, so irrelevant that it's almost a shame to spoil the picturesqueness of the Bible's tale. But how, we have to ask, did a pair of penguins of each living species manage to get to the Middle East? How were they notified? Were they given a route-plan? What did they eat on their way across country and desert? Or polar bears? It must have been hard work crossing the desert in such heavy fur. What did the chickens in the Ark eat? There was only one pair of worms. How about brown bears, pandas, rattlesnakes, kangaroos, butterflies, water buffalo, giraffes, stick insects, zebras, Indian elephants, the duck-billed platypus and other egg-bearers, grass snakes, anacondas, field mice, burrowing bandicoots and thousands, no, hundreds-of-thousands of other life-forms, viruses, bacteria, amphibians, silver fish, garden worms, snails, tortoises and all the

others.

How did they manage to turn up at the Ark on time in the Middle East (or thereabouts)? How come they didn't eat each other? All of these individual pilgrimages apparently took place because God intended that everything that wasn't in the Ark when the planet was flooded would perish. So there had to be representatives of all the life-forms and species which existed on this planet in the Ark. Even those animals and insects which have a short

life spans there would have been a lot of putrefying flesh lying around in the Ark for about ten months – the "window" only being opened after the waters had subsided. It must have been either too hot or too cold depending upon the sort of animals' coats supplied by nature (God?). There would be elephants having to avoid treading on mice, bats feeling really at home for once, snakes sliding over the backs of monkeys, spiders tucked nicely away in the corners waiting for the original fly pairs' off-

"And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven ... and the waters prevailed upon the earth 150 days."

Then (fortunately, as it obviously wasn't so important), *God remembered Noah* (Genesis 8.1), and set about getting things back to normal now that all men, women and children had been drowned and his problem had been solved. He restrained the rains from heaven and the waters returned from off the earth continually; *and after 150 days the waters were abated*. On the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains were to be seen. Forty days later Noah opened the "window" of the Ark. He sent forth a raven, then a dove, both had no luck at first, then the dove returned in the evening *and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from the earth*. Noah then waited a further seven days before letting the dove out again, however the dove failed to return to him. As we have doves in 2004 we can assume that the missing dove's partner still in the Ark was later fortunate enough to meet up with its partner again.

The story as reported in the Bible ends here, more or less. There is nothing to tell us how the penguins got back to their pack-ice without food – after all there was nothing on the earth to eat: the waters had subsided, so there were no fish on hand.

Of all the existing species of brown bear, one pair had to get back to the country we know today as Alaska, so they had a problem too, having lived off wild salmon for so many centuries and not being able to find any plant life which could have been used as a substitute. And so on. No, I'm sorry, in spite of the wonder of the story of the Ark, it still leaves me somewhat sceptical. I'm willing to accept that there are many things which are beyond human comprehension, but this nonsense really takes the bacon.

I would also like to know whence the olive leaf came if all the living substances (plants, trees, grasses etc.) of the earth were dead (as they would be after ten months under water); and from where all the water came, and where it went when the waters abated?

What did Noah and his family eat before the fields were again plentiful?

Once the rain had fallen, flooding the planet Earth as it did, could it support both salt-water and fresh-water life?

What about the volcanoes? Weren't they extinguished by all that water rushing into them?

When the water dispersed was it because of the heat of the sun? Or did it turn into ice-caps? Is that the reason they are there?

Any other questions?

istical Nightmare

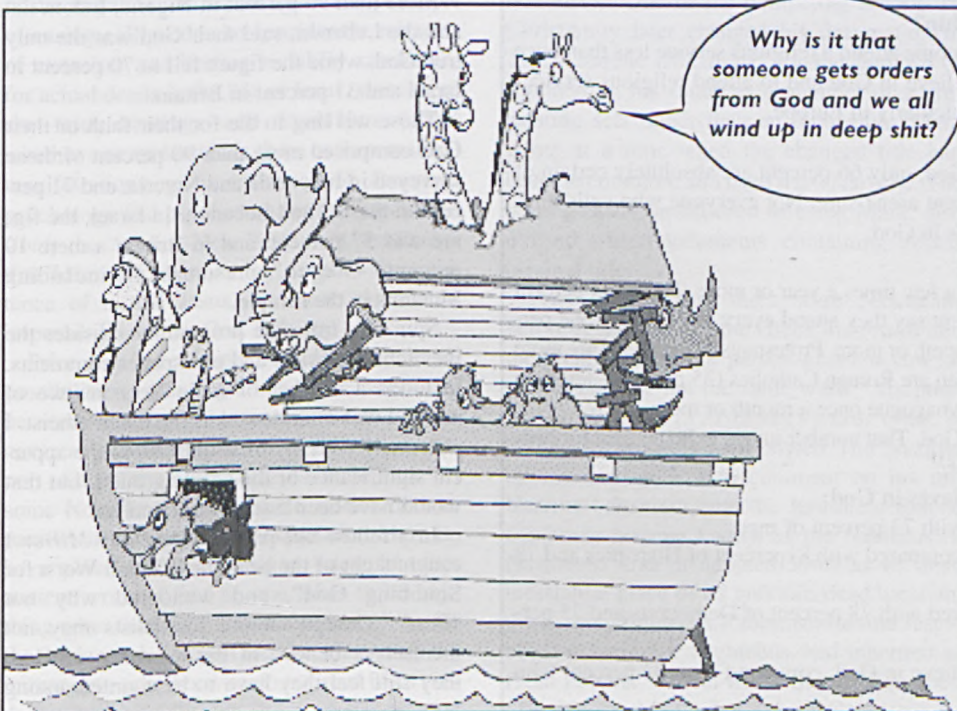
revisits the Old Testament tale of
flooded with holes

life-cycle and need to reproduce every few hours or days or weeks. Noah and his family would hopefully have had an upper deck cabin well away from all deprivation; must have been a bore though, ten months spent living so close to each other. With no light. One wonders what they ate.

The conditions prevailing in the Ark during the period the earth was flooded must have been atrocious. It was dark, pitch black in fact because the window was closed and all the seams were plugged with tar. The air must have been terrible. And all the creatures had to eat, they all had to evacuate their bowels, urinate, bear their young, feed themselves. It must have been a terrible life for them. In addition – and because of some creatures having short

spring. And so on. A real hell. In fact the story of the Ark reminds me of an article I once read about an Australian cattle freighter, ocean bound and packed with sheep, the sheep on the upper decks being the lucky ones in spite of the bad weather the ship went through, simply because they weren't bombarded with the sea water, dung and urine which seeped through the multiple, open floored lower decks, from the animals above onto the heads and backs of the animals below.

The Bible goes on to tell us that these waters covered the whole earth, *and that all the high hills that were under the heavens were covered*. Fifteen cubits deep *and the mountains were covered* – biblical confusion again reigning here (excuse the pun), this time about the height and depth of things. If the whole earth was covered with water then no oxygen was able to get to the submerged plant life – so that died too. In fact we are told so in Genesis 7.23:



THE 90-minute BBC2 programme *What the World Thinks of God*, first shown at peak-time on Thursday, February 26, had been trailed and hyped as the greatest television documentary ever. So was it worth watching?

A lot of time and money had obviously gone into the making of it. First, as statistical background, a big research company had trawled ten countries (India, Indonesia, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, South Korea, UK and USA) in January, quizzing 10,000 people on their religious beliefs. Then, to camera, a veritable *Who's Who* of multi-faith celebrities were also quizzed – though, like jesting Pilate, the interviewer scarcely stayed for an answer. Or, if he did, the cutting-room reduced most of the answers to the merest sound-bites.

These were, however, embellished on the screen with New Age graphics, especially a sort of swirling mist all around the talking heads. (Wondering about the significance of the mist, I came to the conclusion that it must symbolise the mental fog in the minds of most of the contributors.) The interviewee who showed the most appropriate reaction was Jonathan Miller, who reportedly protested at the shallowness of the whole approach by simply walking out in the middle of his interview – though the part of it already in the can was still used for a few sound-bites. Finally, there was a studio discussion by yet more celebrities, orchestrated by Jeremy Vine.

Of all the contributors to the programme, the

one who best served the secularist cause was, to my mind, Ian Paisley, whose exultation at the prospect of spending eternity gloating over the condign torments of the ungodly damned must surely have de-evangelised many a decent Christian.

However, the interviewee in whom I was most interested was the Nigerian cardinal Francis Arinze, who was named on the pro-

BARBARA SMOKER sits through 90 minutes of the BBC2 programme *What the World Thinks about God*

gramme as a likely contender for the job of pope next time round – as, indeed, I had forecast myself in the *Freethinker* of May 2002, though I had never actually seen him and merely based my prophecy on the political scenario and his booming Vatican career.

Seeing and hearing him on this programme was an eye-opener. I had not expected him to be very bright, but his utter naivety almost made me feel sorry for the Catholic Church. More sorry, though, for a world that can hand colossal power over to the greatest fools of all (another example, of course, being Bush). In the middle of his interview, Arinze launched into a detailed description of an alleged healing miracle, though it bore no relevance to what he had been asked. And for once the editors of the programme gave him his long-

winded head. The cardinal obviously believed literally in the miracle – thus revealing his faith in a most scarily capricious deity.

However, what made the programme worthwhile were the statistics that came out of the underlying poll – though they were not so surprising to us as they apparently were to BBC2. We already knew, for instance, that the proportion of believers in the United States was far higher than in Britain; but there were some statistical quirks – such as the 6 percent of self-styled atheists surveyed who claimed they had “always believed in God”!

Again, no fewer than 30 percent of the atheists across the entire sample said they sometimes prayed. To whom, one wonders? Or did they merely mean the involuntary expletive “Oh my God!” of which most of us are guilty in the face of any minor disaster? If so, that is surely more in the nature of a swear than a prayer.

Over all, more than 80 percent said they believed in a “higher power”. In Nigeria the figure was actually 100 percent; in the US it was 91 percent; and in the UK the lowest of all, 67 percent.

The levels of religious activity in the UK came out lower than in any of the other countries polled except for Russia and South Korea. The highest levels were found among the poorest populations – those of Nigeria, India and Indonesia – but the USA, the richest country of all, was not far behind them.

Would the world be a more peaceful place without God-belief? 29 percent of Britons thought so, but very few people in any of the other countries agreed.

More than 90 percent in Nigeria, Indonesia, and the Lebanon, said their God was the only true God, while the figure fell to 70 percent in Israel and 31 percent in Britain.

Those willing to die for their faith or their God comprised more than 90 percent of those surveyed in Indonesia and Nigeria, and 71 percent in the US and Lebanon. In Israel, the figure was 37 percent, and in Britain a mere 19 percent – even, presumably, including Muslims in the sample.

Spin-offs from the programme, besides the inevitable websites and newspaper comments, included a number of radio slots, in two of which I was interviewed as the token atheist. I was ready with my little quip about the apparent significance of the swirling mists, but that would have been a sound-bite too far.

In a fellow bus-passenger's *Daily Mirror* I caught sight of the headline “Britain Worst for Snubbing God”, and wondered why not “Best”. Though tabloid journalists may not themselves believe in the existence of God, they still feel they have to be counted among his supporters.

A POLL just carried out in the United States reveals that ten percent of Protestants, 21 percent of Roman Catholics, and 52 percent of Jews do NOT believe in God.

That's the surprising finding of a new survey by Harris Interactive of 2,306 adults.

How often do Americans attend a place of worship?

Not as often as we have been led to believe. Most people attend a religious service less than once a month. Still, Americans are far more likely to believe in God and to attend religious services than people in most other developed countries, particularly in Europe.

Who believes in God?

While 79 percent of Americans believe there is a God, only 66 percent are absolutely certain of it. Nine percent do not believe in God and 12 percent aren't sure. Not everyone who calls himself or herself a Christian or a Jew actually believes in God.

Who worships at a religious service?

Just over half (55 percent) attend a religious service a few times a year or more. Thirty-six percent attend once a month or more often, and just 26 percent say they attend every week. Forty-one percent of women and 31 percent of men attend once a month or more. Protestants (47 percent) are more likely to go to church once a month or more often than are Roman Catholics (35 percent). Jews are least likely to go with 16 percent saying they go to synagogue once a month or more.

Of respondents aged 25 to 29, 71 percent believe in God. That number jumps to 80 percent for people over 40, and hits 83 percent for those 65 and over.

Other fascinating facts about who in the US believes in God:

- 84 percent of women believe in God, compared with 73 percent of men.
- 91 percent of African Americans believe in God, compared with 81 percent of Hispanics and 78 percent of whites.
- 87 percent of Republicans believe in God, compared with 78 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of Independents.
- 82 percent of those with no college education believe in God, compared with 73 percent who went to college.

IN *Deconstructing Jesus*, Robert Price concluded, on the basis of what might be termed a preponderance of the evidence, that Jesus of Galilee was not a real person from history. In *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*, he does not withdraw that conclusion, but I get the impression that he now sees it as "too close to call". For example, he concedes that Jesus' immersion by John "was so embarrassing to Christians, both because it seems to subordinate Jesus to John and because it seems to cast Jesus as a repentant sinner, that the early church would never have fabricated it". The point on which both proponents and opponents of a historical Jesus converge is that the virgin-born saviour-god Jesus, whose repeated violations of the laws of reality culminated in his rising from the dead, assuredly did not exist. That conclusion is disputed only by incurable dogmatists who fall somewhere on the evolutionary scale between flat-earthers and Scientologists.

Price's treatment of miracle tales is likewise more consistent with Jesus being a real person than a purely mythical entity. He writes that "Paul never mentions any miracles of Jesus," and suggests that "the writer had no knowledge of any miracles that might have satisfied his disappointed Jewish hearers." He suggests "A historical Jesus would surely have shared the beliefs of his contemporaries ... and exorcists were certainly not uncommon." He continues: "The strongest argument in favour of Jesus actually being a faith healer is that virtually all the ailments he is said to have cured have a place on the list of psychogenic maladies or somatisation disorders in today's diagnostic manuals." In summary, "The principle of analogy allowed us to consider the miracles of exorcism and healing as likely candidates for actual deeds in the life of Jesus, since there are faith healings and exorcisms today, whether one understands them as supernatural manifestations or as instances of abnormal psychology and psychosomatic healing." And (*ibid*) the "earlier New Testament statements that Jesus did no miracles" implies the existence of a real Jesus, no more capable of impossibilities than Oral Roberts.

Price may have simply been allowing for all possibilities, including a historical Jesus. But he seems far from convinced that there was never any such person. Nonetheless, in support of a purely mythical Jesus, he reports "If some New Testament miracle stories find no parallel in contemporary experience, they do have parallels, often striking ones, in other ancient writings that no one takes to be anything other than mythical or legendary." As for theologians who project the bias they see in the mirror onto scholars who do *not* start from predetermined conclusions, he says "Their real

gripe is not that critics *hold* a theoretical bias, that of naturalism, but rather that they *fail* to hold one, namely the belief in the historical infallibility of the Christian Bible."

Price does not waste his time rebutting drivel: "The last thing we as critical historians can do is allow the party line of an institution (ie the creed of a church) to control our reading of the evidence. This is why the vast writings of Christian apologists hold no attraction at all for the critic."

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews
***The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable is the Gospel Tradition?* by Robert M Price,**
Prometheus, 2003, ISBN 1-
59102-121-9, hardback 389
pages

He does not, however, ignore the possibility that biblical literalists might be right. Rather, he cites the fable of Jesus looking at the entire surface of the earth from a mythical high mountain, a myth "presupposing a flat earth". Even if there was no other falsifying evidence, touting a book that in fourteen places endorses a flat earth as nonfiction clearly removes such apologists from serious consideration.

In explaining the Gospel descriptions of Jesus as "the Nazarene" (Mark 1:24 and elsewhere) and "the Nazorean" (Mat 26:71 and elsewhere), Price sees Nazorean (*Nazōraios*) as meaning a member of the Nazorean sect. He acknowledges that, in calling Jesus The Nazarene, "Mark no doubt took this as a geographical reference." But he explains that Jesus was originally known only as The Nazorean. One of the competing schools of Christianity later changed his designation to The Nazarene (*Nazarḗne*) for the purpose of suppressing his status as a member of a pre-existing sect rather than an innovator. Mark wrote at a time when the changed title had become common, and used it exclusively. The other gospels, in addition to using Mark, also utilised older documents containing Jesus' original title.

Price asserts that there were Nazoreans before Jesus, and that the Greek *Nazōraios* and the Hebrew *Nazir* (a person under a vow of self-denial) are not the same word. My position, spelled out in *Mythology's Last Gods*, is that Jesus was originally styled The Nazirite by his detractors as a comment on his un-Nazirite behaviour, and the Jerusalem Essene commune became known as the Nazirites or Nazoreans after it adopted Jesus as its dead messiah in place of its previous dead messiah, the Essene Righteous Rabbi, whose title Jesus' brother, Jacob the Righteous, had inherited as Head Essene. British writer Stuart Campbell (*The Rise and Fall of Jesus*) postulates that the

"Nazarenes" were a sect led by John the Immerser, and that Jesus was his cousin and successor. Price is satisfied (as am I) that there was no connection whatsoever between the Immerser and Jesus, although he cites the testimony of Epiphanius that a sect called Nazoreans had existed since the time of Jeremiah. Even so, I continue to maintain that the Jerusalem Essenes became "the Nazirites" as a result of their adoption of Jesus as their posthumous figurehead.

Price ignores those early Christian apologists who accepted that Jesus was basically a hunchbacked dwarf. He clearly does not believe that such a description originated with Josephus or a comparably early source. If he is right on that point, the case for a Jesus of history is indeed severely diminished. Unfortunately, what if anything Josephus actually wrote about Jesus may never be established beyond dispute. And because Price rejects the "ugly man" hypothesis, he interprets the line in Luke, "Physician, heal yourself", as "Heal your own", meaning "Repeat in your hometown the miracles you allegedly performed elsewhere." My explanation of the line is that there was so much about Jesus that needed healing ("Not even of honest human shape," as Tertullian described him), that the taunt can be accepted as a historical event.

Price writes "Christian scholars have, unfortunately and naively, perpetuated the Christian vilification of Jews as merciless legalists, simply by taking gospel texts as history." My only dispute with that is that the anti-Semites who "[take] gospel texts as history" thereby reveal that, by any valid definition, they are *not* scholars. Scholars can disagree on the extent to which Christian gospels have a factual basis, but they cannot mistake them for nonfiction. The Jews of the Christian gospels are "the horned Jews of the Oberammergau Passion Play, not the Jews of history". Anyone who does not agree is incompetent by definition.

Price shares my view that "the Pharisees have simply been made to look bad as foils for Jesus." He continues, "We have to think there was an opponent lurking off stage, that these barbs *were* actually directed against *someone*. If Pharisees do not fit the picture, who does?" His answer is that the real target of invective retroactively attributed to Jesus was the Jewish Christians (a designation I consider an oxymoron, since Nazirites were not Christians, followers of the religion invented by Paul) who opposed preaching to gentiles. My interpretation is that the passages are historical, and that the gospel authors changed "Sadducees" to "Pharisees" to dissociate the Christians from the anti-Roman Jewish sect that had started the war of 66-73 CE. Mark turned Judas the Sicarius into Jesus' betrayer

for the same reason.

Price interprets *Iskariot*, not as a Hellenising of the Latin *Sicarius*, but as a Hellenising of the Hebrew *Ishqaryya*, meaning “betrayer,” a designation attached to Judas only retroactively. But he agrees that the betrayal story is unmitigated fiction, and points out the absurdity of an insider needing to identify Jesus to the temple police: “Which one of you guys is Elvis?” And while the assertion that “many think” is not exactly a ringing endorsement, he cites the same evidence I raised, that part of Revelation was written during the war of 66-73 CE, and the final redaction during the reign of Domitian.

There is a transfiguration scene in the gospels in which Jesus’ physical appearance changed dramatically. My explanation (*Mythology’s Last Gods*) is, “While subject to other interpretations, those passages can also be viewed as an admission by the writers that a messiah as ugly as Jesus must have had an alternative, beautiful body that he saved for special occasions.” Price’s explanation for the scene, which takes place in the presence of only the most reliable disciples, is “Second, the Transfiguration is probably the clearest scene in meaning, especially in view of the Hellenistic-Buddhist flavour of it. Only the spiritually attuned can behold the *Sambogka* (divine) body of the Buddha beneath the illusion of his *Nirmankya* (earthly) body.” The different interpretations involve only the gospel author’s reason for composing such a myth. More important is the agreement that it was invented for the polemic purpose of rebutting critics, whether inside or outside of the various Jesus factions.

Another difference of interpretation occurs in connection with the scene in Mark in which Jesus’ relatives try to take him into protective custody in the belief that he has gone mad. My view is that the scene is historically accurate. Price offers a very different but by no means implausible explanation. And while he agrees that there was no “virgin birth” myth in the original gospels of Matthew and Luke, he suggests that only a couple of words of the relevant passages are interpolations, and the original annunciation scenes meant nothing of the sort.

Price sees flaws in the theory that the resurrection myth began with the discovery of an empty tomb, because “It is predicated on the women visiting the tomb of Jesus to anoint the body for preservation, despite the fact that the Middle Eastern climate pretty much rules out the viability of such an attempt two days after death.” He accordingly concludes that the “resurrection” element was added to the legend decades later.

But having leaned over backward to allow for a historical Jesus, Price ends by citing “a piece of early Christian tradition [that] presup-

poses a theology of the saviour whereby he received the name Jesus only after his death struggle ... According to such an understanding, there can have been no Galilean adventures of an itinerant teacher and healer named Jesus.” Perhaps. But I remain unconvinced.

So how does *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man* compare with *Mythology’s Last Gods*? The Jesus chapters in *MLG* are sufficiently definitive that no sane, intelligent person who reads them can remain a godworshiper indefinitely (any more than I could, on first confronting the same evidence), but they contain no more information than I deemed necessary for that purpose. And whereas I allotted just over 100 pages to the life of Jesus and the evolution of Christianity, Price devotes almost 400 pages to the same subject – and not a single paragraph is redundant. He spells out much evidence that, in retrospect, I wish I had also included. While many of my earlier comments concern hairsplitting differences in interpretation, there is no significant conclusion in Price’s book with which I disagree. This book should be mandatory reading for all scholars concerned with Christian origins, whether behind or in front of the professorial lectern. Nothing of comparable importance has been written for at least a decade.

THE Dostoyevskian formulation runs thus: If

NORMAN PRIDMORE reviews
***Atheism, Morality and Meaning* by**
Michael Martin, Prometheus
2002, ISBN 1 57392 987 5
paperback 330 pages

there is no God then everything is permitted.

It is a striking thought. Why should I not, if I feel so inclined, behave execrably? Why should I not, for example, torture a child for no other reason than my own gratification? Or even worse perhaps, for no particular reason at all? And who is to say what is execrable, anyway? The atheist philosopher Michael Martin, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Boston University, attempts to give some answers to such questions in his latest book *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*. It is a demanding, well-written, tightly-argued and extraordinarily comprehensive work.

It is important to say that the book is about “meta-ethics” rather than ethics *per se*. It is not, and nor does it contain, any kind of ethical manifesto. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* defines meta-ethics as “the philosophical study of the nature of moral judgments ... Instead of being concerned with questions of what actually is right or wrong (or good or bad), it is concerned with the meaning or significance of calling something right or wrong.” If this suggests that the book may be a dull read and a hell of pure abstractions, be

assured – it is not.

Where do ethics come from? Is it wrong, for example, to commit murder? If it is, is this because God has commanded it to be so? Many, but not all, theistic thinkers hold something like such a position. There is nothing necessarily wrong with murder in itself, they contend – its “wrongness” consists in its being forbidden: murder is wrong because the Big Guy says so. The problem with such an argument is that it is not an argument at all but a naked assertion: and like all assertions it begs too many questions. We might ask how we can reliably know what God has commanded. We might (if we had such vulgar temerity) ask why we should obey his/her/its commands at all. We might, pushing matters perhaps too far, ask whether all the commands of God are of equal status, and if not, go on to ask how we can determine their hierarchy – listening and looking out all the while for the boom and flash of divine thunderbolts.

Such a “command based” ethics, as it is called, turns out to be something of an intellectual morass. The ultimate sanction, the final reason for ethical behaviour, seems to be that if one does not obey one will be punished. It is the ethics of an unsophisticated and hyper-inflated magistrates court – or (replete with awful resonances) the ethics of that catch-all excuse “I was only obeying orders”.

Another theistic argument contends that God only commands what is good, and that what is good is not good because God commands it but because it is good in itself. Presumably God has read G E Moore’s *Principia Ethica* on the subject in order to get some ideas. God, being good, can (and/or will) only command the good. As arguments go this possesses an agreeable symmetry. Unfortunately it is the symmetry of the perfectly circular. We know, it says, what is “Good” because the “Good” is identified as such by God. Does this mean that if God had not kindly identified the Good for us, we would ourselves have no ideas regarding it? Of course, if God were seen to be perfectly consistent in ethical matters this might not be too problematic. Given, however, that God’s primary characteristic seems to be his/her/its utter inconsistency (and this is proudly displayed for all to read in his/her/its own holy words) this is not very helpful. Another problem is that the argument suggests that there is somewhere (perhaps over the rainbow?), in some pure ethical empyrean, a realm beyond God. This smacks of Neo-Platonism gone even madder than usual. It also makes rather a nonsense of those old theological saws regarding the infinite amplitude of God. Poor Spinoza would have fainted in coils at such gibberish.

With great precision Michael Martin demonstrates that “God-based” ethics are at least as

problematic as any secular counterpart. Secularists who still have lingering suspicions that religious ethics are more soundly-based than any secular alternative should, after reading Professor Martin, find themselves thoroughly disabused of such a silly idea. Indeed, as he points out, certain Christian thinkers have reached the same conclusion. Even such professional believers as the philosopher Richard Swinburne and Bishop Richard Holloway, for example, have suggested that, if God did not exist, "it would be possible to settle moral disputes objectively". In other words, even some of those who may be supposed to have the strongest possible grounds for desiring God to be at the heart of things find the atheist position more fundamentally tenable than any product of their own ghostly hypotheses.

Michael Martin makes a strong claim in his introduction. He writes: "This book will challenge the view that atheism leads to a non-objective ethics and the meaninglessness of life. In it I will not only show that objective ethics and a meaningful life are possible without God, I will show that from the dominant religious point of view of our culture there are serious obstacles to developing an objective ethics and having a meaningful life."

Martin's method is fundamentally critical. He takes various arguments, usually in their strongest forms (which is always a mark of honest thought) and deconstructs them, demonstrating very precisely and clearly the flaws in each. Even readers unused to philosophy will find his explanations and demonstrations thoroughly lucid. They are certainly highly invigorating.

Perhaps the most difficult parts of the book are those in which he proposes his own alternative to religious ethics. Martin's theory depends largely upon two notions, those of "wide reflective equilibrium" and the "ideal observer theory". These notions are not Martin's own, but he has certainly refined them and made them more tractable and usable. The crux of his argument seems to depend upon a shift from the primacy of reason to that of feeling – to how a perfectly informed, disinterested, "normal" human would feel when confronted with any particular action that is morally ambiguous.

We yearn for an ethics that is somehow "rational" and can only imagine a "rational" ethics as being sufficient to command respect and universal assent. We yearn, whether we admit it or not, for the confidence of Leibnitz, who seemed certain that it should be possible to rationally calculate all solutions to all problems. We equate rationality with objectivity, often holding this as our one unspoken *a priori*. We habitually distrust and devalue the role and importance of "feeling".

Martin, however, suggests, if I read him rightly, that ultimately ethics are a matter of feeling. For sure, the "feelings" involved are of a very special kind: but they can lead, Martin holds, to the kind of universal assent that rationalists would demand from an objective ethics. Objectivity, Martin suggests, resides in the fact of the similarity of human reactions to ethical dilemmas (reactions which are, remember, ultimately "feeling-based"). The implications of such an argument are immense. Martin succeeds in making his case: but it is made within limits.

Even if there were to be universal agreement based upon consistency of feelings, such assent would still not seem to imply the existence of any kind of absolute ethical imperative. Martin thus succeeds no better than Kant in supplying absolute reasons for behaving "well". Given how high the bar is, it should not perhaps be surprising that Martin has failed quite to clear it. Still, given (as Martin shows) that even religious ethics imply no absolute either, we should perhaps not demand it of any other kind. One seeks the "Absolute" at one's peril seems to be the lesson. Still, this one flaw (and I may well be wrong in seeing it as such) in no way devalues the book.

Despite being very much a coherent unity, sections of Michael Martin's work can be profitably read as "stand alone" chapters. Those curious to know more about just how problematic are Christian ideas concerning "salvation" and "atonement" and about the religious meaning of life in general will find fresh and stimulating perspectives on every page. And for those readers who agree, with Camus, that the central problem of life, having seen clearly into its absurd and frigid heart, is why one should not kill oneself, there is an outstanding chapter entitled "The 'Nothing Matters' Argument".

The question remains – is it true that if there is no God then everything is permitted? Martin's answer is a clear "No". Does he succeed in making a plausible case? Better than most, I think. And even if the final verdict on his efforts has to be that of "Not Proven", his careful and rigorous examination of the twists and turns of the Gordian Knot of ethics demands the widest possible attention.

Human tissue

THERE must be plenty of irrational legislation aimed at calming the public's feelings, and this is likely to be one more.

Apart from the nonsense in the letter of the law, which could require your GP to have your written permission to take blood tests, the law seems to be dealing with what happens to parts removed after death, when they are about to be recycled by natural processes. I suppose it could also make it more difficult to persuade the superstitious public to give organs to living people who need them to stay alive.

There are silly superstitions, reinforced by ridiculous and irrational religious beliefs that dead bodies must be buried as complete as possible. Why? Because the future body might otherwise be an incomplete person in another life. What other life? Such beliefs are so idiotically unscientific. Dead organic matter is all recycled, though at different speeds. Even the odd bits in laboratory jars will eventually change into molecules ready to become plants and animals again. It is the life that has gone, not the body

Points of View

that possessed it. The video of them contains more of the real person than the corpse.

Emotions are not rational of course, but why have laws to protect them? Presumably this is because the surgeon is liable to treat the patient as a mechanism that needs to be corrected. When the mechanism stops functioning entirely, surgeons may be able to learn what went wrong with a specific organ by removing it for further study. The body has no need of it. It is dead. What is more, it never belonged to anyone. Ah! Now we are getting somewhere.

Parents of children who have died feel that the child is their child. Indeed, they caused it. It is said to be of their flesh and blood. It cost them great effort, particularly the mother, but the child is not their possession. There are millions of children being sustained with the help of efforts by people who are not their parents. Some parents remain very possessive of their offspring and continue to feel that this investment belongs to them. The feeling is strong and rightly applies to the living person. After

the death of the child, their feelings, thoughts and memories are of the living child, not the corpse in the coffin.

It is quite likely that this problem would never have arisen had surgeons in particular and hospital management generally been relieved of the task of caring for parents and relatives. It could have been quite sufficient to have a social service to explain that medical science is assisted by the removal of organs for study, though the service might have had to include priests and witch-doctors as well as psychiatrists to deal with particularly fixed superstitions.

The logical law would insist that hospitals should have an automatic right to use a fresh corpse for spare-parts surgery. Delay is of no help except to reinforce the irrational beliefs of relatives. They ought to be delighted that even in death their relative could help another to live.

In the past, laws have helped to change out-of-date mind sets as happened when eventually women were allowed to become part of the electorate. It is a good reason why we may be

disgusted with societies that do not recognise women as of at least equal value. So let us hope that hospital managements and any future legislation will distinguish between the needs of the living and of the dead.

PETER ARNOLD
Alderney, CI

F A Ridley

ROBERT Morrell asserts correctly that I am not the only survivor of the National Secular Society's Executive Committee during F A Ridley's presidency (*Points of View*, March). Not for the first time he claims that my account of an unscrupulous campaign to oust the then secretary from office is inaccurate. Yet again he refers to "others" who confirm his version of events leading to Ridley's resignation. But who are they? Why no names? Mr Morrell has certainly been in contact with at least one of them. But understandably that gentleman prefers to keep his head below the parapet.

Mr Morrell would do well to abide by his sensible decision "not to say anything further on this". I promise not to take advantage of his modesty.

BILL MCILROY
Hove

Death in Mecca

AT the time of the pilgrims being roasted while on their *Hajj*, I worked with two Pakistani Muslims. One was away on that *Hajj* and I asked him about it afterwards.

He says that more than 2,000 died as a result of the fire – many afterwards from the horrible burns they received because there was no medical treatment available for the pilgrims. It's no surprise that Saudi wanted to cover up such a figure. Makes you wonder how many really died in the other tragedies.

I did point out to the Muslim that at the time they had been stoning Satan. If Allah would not stand for being stoned, even in effigy, how could they expect Satan to stand for it? I pointed out that this was his way of warning them not to do it again.

The Muslim not unexpectedly had nothing to say on the matter. The stoning goes on and so does the punishments, as I later pointed out to him.

MICHAEL HILL
Kent

Religious vandalism

READING the *Freethinker* report (March) about the Sheffield Humanist Society display vandalised by Christians reminds me of my own effort at putting on a secular humanist display at Jersey Library.

In order to give it more substance I combined it with a Darwin Day exhibition of evolutionary topics and illustrations. First I had to take on the librarian in charge who turned out to be a Christian fundamentalist, and after a

long and violent battle by e-mail between us, I called a truce (I was winning, but bored by now), and suggested calling off the display on the grounds that "I could not expect that my material would be given the fair and impartial treatment that I had assumed a Public Library would provide".

Anyway it went ahead, but predictably she (the librarian) minimised the secular input by over-emphasising the evolutionary natural history part. The only impact it appeared to have was upon another Christian who left a Gideon Bible pamphlet on my display (which I removed, holding it at arms length). Still, we have to try.

We are now threatened with an invasion of fanatics in early May for a "Christian walk", which involves entering schools and accosting islanders in pubs. I have already composed my opinion of it for publication in the *Jersey Evening Post*, in anticipation!

REG LE SEUER
Jersey

Political correctness

I HAVE been reading articles by Barbara Smoker in the *Freethinker* since the 1960s and was interested to read her views on political correctness in the March issue.

I would like to make a general point about political correctness. I would agree that it is a curtailment of free speech and expression and can be very harmful; however, I would also argue that the words we use do matter: what is crucial is the context in which they are used.

In a world where homosexuals were despised the new self-defining word "gay" was enormously important. As lesbians and gays became more confident and campaigned for social and legal change, what names were used became much less important.

In the 1950s and 1960s it was common for landlord to put up notices saying "No coloureds no Irish". In Ireland, Catholics did not have civil rights, in America black people had to "sit at the back of the bus", and schools were segregated. In this context of oppression the demand to be called blacks rather than coloureds or niggers was crucial both to countering society's view and engendering self-esteem amongst black people.

There is all the world of difference between using "differently abled" to challenge assumptions that disability is just a deficit, and sacking someone for using words like cripple, queer, or paki and so on.

Oppression is about power.

When the government treats asylum seekers as a problem and has the power to deport them back to death or torture, this is a real issue. When an old soldier included a racial reference in a dispute with a black man over a library book, he only had the power to annoy (or at worst hurt the feelings) of the black man, yet he now has a criminal record.

Government ministers don't call asylum seekers pakis or niggers but they have the power to send them back to death or torture.

Likewise the politicians who drafted Section 28 (which banned promotion of homosexuality in schools) didn't use words like lezzies or queers but they had the power to undermine lesbian and gay children. In contrast Harry Hammond the Evangelical Christian eccentric who held up anti-gay placards in a market place was abused and assaulted and then prosecuted successfully.

Sexism, racism and homophobia are dangerous when they are combined with power. Political correctness suppresses debate and is a calculated diversion from the real issues in society.

Feminists against Censorship is a group that campaigns on this sort of issue. We meet at (that bastion of free speech) Conway Hall, Red Lion Square WC1 on the third Wednesday of every month and all women are welcome. Telephone 0208 552 4405 for more information.

NETTIE POLLARD

Feminists Against Censorship
BM FAC London WC1N 3XX

I AM a great admirer of Barbara Smoker, and applaud much of what she says about political correctness, particularly that concerning religion. However, as she acknowledges, there are problems when it comes to the use of language.

Attitudes, and the meanings of words, change over time. Certain words used to describe black, gay or disabled people which may have been acceptable in the 19th and early 20th centuries, are no longer so, and many have long since degenerated into terms of abuse and derision. Barbara Smoker does not advocate reclaiming the n-word as far as black people are concerned, but appears to criticise a theatre company for deciding not to use the term "hunchback". Yet this word is equally offensive to people with scoliosis (the medical term for curvature of the spine).

The American writer Katharine Butler Hathaway contracted spinal tuberculosis in childhood and developed spinal curvature as a result. In her memoirs, published in 1942, long before the term political correctness was coined, she couldn't bring herself to use the h-word, because it was shouted at her by children as a term of abuse whenever she went out. Unfortunately, some able-bodied people still enjoy jokes about people with deformities and find words like "hunchback" screamingly funny. They might care to reflect how they would feel to be physically or verbally abused for being disabled. Sometimes political correctness is simply what used to be termed good manners and consideration for the feelings of others.

Your readers may not be aware that scoliosis is still a fairly common condition, affecting both children and adults. Sometimes the cause



is congenital, or caused by diseases such as polio and osteoporosis, but more often scoliosis is idiopathic (ie has no known cause). In other words, anyone reading this letter, their children or grandchildren, could be affected. Children with the condition are often subjected to bullying at school.

Surgical advances mean that in many cases the curvature can be corrected or improved, but not always. An organisation which aims to support people with the condition and overcome prejudice is the Scoliosis Association (UK). Its address is 2 Iveybury Court, 323 Latimer Road, London W10 6RA, telephone 020 8964 5343.

DINAH FOWERAKER
Westbury-on-Trym

BARBARA Smoker illustrates the gender confusion by the German words *Tafel* (f) and *Stuhl* (m) (for table and chair). Unfortunately, despite the existence of numerous combinations such as *Tafelfreuden* (pleasures of the table) or *Tafelrunde* (Round Table), the equivalent of table (to go with chair) is not *Tafel* but *Tisch*. (The learned etymology by Kluge does not enlighten on the origin of these mysterious combinations; especially in view of the late adoption of German by the elegant classes, one suspects a duplication of terms now forgotten, similar to the persisting British adoption of French culinary terms for meat.)

MRS G WALTON
Winchester

Circumcision

Oh dear, here we have two pro-circumcision activists trying to defend this outdated, religiously mandated, barbaric practice – in the pages of the *Freethinker* no less (*Points of View*, March 2004). Not only that, but they use the tactics of creationists: falsehoods, misrepresentation, selective quotes and research that support their own views, using bad science, flawed logic and attacking the character of the opposition.

There won't be enough space to address all the points in question, so I will pick a few of the more important ones.

Stephen Moreton says that I cannot dismiss all 40+ studies as deeply flawed. Why not? Groups wishing to continue the practice of circumcision sponsor nearly all these studies and they are published with great fanfare. However, when they are later pulled to pieces because of the bad science, there is silence.

He states that the anti-circumcision brigade are desperate to discredit the "proven link between foreskins and AIDS". Pardon me, but the link is far from proven. How does he explain the fact that the circumcising USA has a much higher incidence of HIV than non-circumcising Europe? Even in the unlikely event that a link is indicated, it is not ethical to inflict harmful surgery on all males in order to

add a small amount of extra protection for the few who might contract the virus.

Then he misrepresents me as agreeing with the "studies" that show that men who wish to restore their foreskins are psychologically disturbed. He should have noticed that I put "studies" in quotes to demonstrate their underlying motives, and my following remark that no research has been undertaken on the psychology of child genital mutilators.

He attacks those men who want an end to this practice and who claim recompense for what was done to them as "attention-seeking, sympathy-grabbing moaning minnies": that's it, go ahead and attack the victims.

David Tribe suggests that the issue of male circumcision should not be caught up in that of female circumcision by calling it "mutilation". So we should regard the female version as mutilation but not the male version? Why does he make this distinction? Both remove highly innervated erogenous tissue, are sexually damaging, and are done without the victims' consent.

He then compares these barbaric procedures with vaccinations! At least the jabs have some proven health benefit and don't remove healthy, functioning tissue.

Then he repeats the old myth that the foreskin is not necessary in humans because we wear clothes. One of the more common complaints among circumcised men is that their glans has lost most of its sensitivity through years of rubbing against underwear, and becoming calloused as a result of the glans building up a layer of keratin as nature's way of protecting it.

This is the result of forcing an internal organ to become external. Besides this problem, the foreskin is not just a flap of skin that protects the glans – it is a complex part of the penis with a number of functions: it keeps the glans moist, lubricated and sensitive; it contains specialised nerves triggered during sexual activity; it helps prevent certain kinds of infection; it has a unique gliding action where the foreskin rolls back and forth over the glans during sex, acting as a sheath-within-a-sheath, promoting gentler sex, rather than the rougher kind of hard thrusting performed by circumcised men.

Those who think that they can improve on nature like this are at the very least misguided.

I really feel that the pages of the *Freethinker* should not be carrying such crazy arguments in favour of male genital mutilation.

STEWART WARE
London

Jesus in India

I AM sorry if my use of the phrase "historical fact" has upset Mr Stuart Campbell (*Points of View*, February). But it is a fact that Professor Hassnain's research has brought together information from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and "unofficial" early Christian sources that I, for one, find compelling evidence of Jesus of

Nazareth's 18-year stay in India referred to in my letter in the January *Freethinker*, his survival of botched execution and his return to India where the tomb understood to be his is tended to this day in Srinagar, Kashmir.

Though not the intention of Professor Hassnain (he was a practising Muslim with an interest in reconciling world faiths), his work *A Search for the Historical Jesus* provides useful ammunition for the secularist in shooting down the Christian myth.

As recommended by Mr Campbell, I have obtained a copy of his book *The Rise and Fall of Jesus*. All I can see in it is pure speculation.

For the record, Mr Campbell is incorrect in writing that Professor Hassnain may have claimed that Jesus was a Buddhist. The suggestion in his book is the different one that Jesus was influenced – but no more – by Buddhism.

NICK JENNER
Kent

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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, April 4, 4.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamstead. Tuesday, April 13, 8pm Paul Wailen: *What Are Prisons For?*

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. Website: 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, May 14, 7.30pm. Public Meeting. Subject: *Sexual Orientation and the City*.

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. 177 York Road, Broadstone. Wednesday, May 5, 7pm. Discussion: *Atheism and Agnosticism*.

Humanist Society of Scotland: Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710. Website: www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9

3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

Perth Group: Information: perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley. Tuesday, April 20, 7.30pm for 8pm. AGM and supper.

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Thursday, April 29, 8pm. Terry Liddle: *Deptford Infidels – Secularism in Deptford and Greenwich in the 1870s*.

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 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, April 7, 8pm. Public Meeting.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: Michael Glanville on 0114 230 9754. Monday, May 3, 10.30am –4pm. Literature and Information stall at Chesterfield May Day Festival..

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

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

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

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

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

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

West Kent Secular Humanist Group: Information: Ken Allen . Tel: 01892 863002.. E-mail: ken@kallen14.fsnet.com.

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

E-mail: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.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