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Freethinker

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**In tune but
out of step:**
How atheist
Laura Abbott
struck a sour
note with
Lancashire
County
Council

– full report on p3



The Fashion of the Christ

Controversy over Mel Gibson's snuff movie *The Passion of the Christ* rages on. But Peter Jansen says that there are certain things one should not forget when discussing this film

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Original Sin – Christianity's daftest doctrine? – p12

I HAVE had only two experiences with holy water. The first was disastrous, the second hilarious.

In my late teens, I supplemented my meagre cub reporter's income as a photographer, making fairly good money by shamelessly exploiting human sentimentality. I would lean over garden gates in well-heeled residential areas and take pictures of cute little kiddies. (Try that in this era of rampant paranoia and you risk winding up on the Sexual Offenders' register!) I would then take prints round to the house, tell the parents how their sweet darlings had caught my eye, and ask whether they would like to buy the photos. If no kids were to be found, I would snap pets. I never had a single rejection. Indeed, this technique landed me several bigger jobs, mainly weddings.

One of these weddings was a horribly Catholic affair, which involved my having to attend a convent, which the bride and groom visited prior to the church ceremony in order to receive blessings and bottles of holy water from a clutch of wizened old Mother Teresa look-alikes incarcerated behind iron grilles. I too was given a bottle. Rather than take it home with me after the wedding, I chose to tip the contents into a tropical fish tank at the hotel where the reception was held, and I parked the empty bottle behind a huge potted fern. A day later, I learned that all the fish had died.

I was not directly involved in the second holy water incident, but witnessed the aftermath. I was holidaying in the Spanish resort of Sitges, near Barcelona, just after Franco's death when, well after midnight, a coachload of Irish folk, returning from a pilgrimage to Lourdes, checked into the hotel in which I was staying.

The night porter, a frail, grumpy octogenarian called Jaime, was none too pleased by their late arrival. He was even less pleased when it became clear that the devout party expected him to haul all their belongings, including vast quantities of Lourdes water, up to their rooms – a back-breaking task given that there was no lift in the hotel, the stairs were narrow and steep, and all the guests were accommodated on the top floors.

In tips he received not a single peseta – nor a word of thanks from this godly crew.

Once they had all settled, the guests were shocked to discover that the tap water in their rooms was salinated, and could not be drunk. This put paid to their plans to make tea in their rooms. A delegation approached Jaime to ask for bottled water. "No," he snapped, "if you want to make tea or coffee, use your bloody holy water. You certainly have enough of that bilge."

It was only the following day, when I saw an angry swarm of pilgrims surrounding the hotel owner in the foyer, that I realised there was big trouble in little Sitges. They were in high dudgeon, demanding an apology for the way in which Jaime had insulted them. The owner – who also happened to be a prominent Catalan

artist and left-wing writer – would not be intimidated. He then dropped a bombshell. He told them that, first and foremost, he was an atheist with a deep detestation of the Catholic Church. He had only accepted their one-night booking because he had been begged to do so by their tour operator, as every other hotel in the resort was full.

**Freethinker editor
BARRY DUKE
remembers his
experience of holy
water**



He then pointed out that his hotel catered mainly for a gay clientele who would not take kindly to having a bunch of loud-mouthed crackpots invading their space. On hearing that, they turned pale, reached for their heart pills, grabbed their belongings and scuttled out to their coach. Even the lame and the halt.

I had quite forgotten about these holy water experiences until I received an email from Australian *Freethinker* subscriber Nigel Sinnott. It was an excerpt from a recent article in the *Melbourne Age*, which reported that "in July 2003, a group of 126 Catholic bishops, accompanied by clerics from other denominations, gathered in Norway. Their intent was to bless a river, in part by pouring holy water into it.

"The Norwegian health authorities, however, had other ideas. They feared that the bishops' water, which came from all around the world, contained substances other than the essence of the divine, some of which might kill salmon. The clerics were therefore ordered to boil their offerings for a good ten minutes before sprinkling it [*sic*] into the stream.

"Which, of course, raises another matter about the relationship between science and religion. Given that most bacteria can't survive a long boil, what happens to the presence of God in such a situation? Is distilled water the most godless substance on Earth?

"And, while we're at it, can holy water land you in hot water, legally speaking? The answer is yes, big time.

"The folk at the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service would perhaps sympathise with the position of the Norwegian health boffins. In 2001, the service issued a bulletin, mainly addressed to Australian Muslims. The bulletin warned of the potentially dire and costly consequences for anyone returning from the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage with holy water in their luggage.

"This is because holy water can, despite its blessed status, contain lots of microscopic nasties. On occasion, too, it can contain macroscopic bad news. A report last year revealed that Hindu holy water pumped from about 30 metres beneath the Ganges River was black with oil sludge. One drink of that, one imagines, and

you'll never require another blessing again."

Determined to learn more about holy water, I turned to the internet and came across an American site, www.holywater.biz. At first glance, it appeared far too sophisticated to be a spoof. But spoof it is – one with a unique twist. The people running the site actually *do* sell bottled spa water which, they claim, has been blessed, thereby making it holy.

Their blurb begins thus: "According to the experts, over 200 million men and women in this country are going to Hell ... We spent nearly two years developing this product after consulting with religious leaders of all faiths, including those religions that did not even acknowledge the existence of heaven and hell."

Nothing so far to show that the whole thing is an elaborate joke, and I can see gullible Christians all over the US falling hook, line and sinker for this spiel, reaching for their credit cards and instantly hitting the "place order now" button.

But all is revealed when you delve deeper into the site. Click on the Christianity link, and these words appear: "ARE YOU A SINNER? Don't go to HELL. Wash away your thirst for sin with Holy Spring Water™."

"The devil hates Holy Water because of its power over him. He cannot long abide in a place or near a person that is often sprinkled with blessed water. Holy Water is a sacramental that remits venial sin. Because of the blessing attached to it, Holy Mother Church strongly urges its use upon her children, especially when dangers threaten, such as fire, storms, sickness, discord and other calamities.

"Did we realise now, as we shall after death, the many benefits which may be derived from Holy Water, we would use it far more frequently, and with greater faith and reverence."

This is followed by a holy water joke: A train hits a busload of nuns and they all perish. They find themselves confronted at the pearly gates by St Peter, who asks the first nun "Sister Lorelei, have you ever had any contact with a penis?"

The nun giggles and slyly replies, "Well once I touched the head of one with the tip of my finger."

St Peter says, "OK, dip the tip of your finger in the holy water and pass through the gate."

He then asks the next nun the same question.

The nun is a little reluctant but replies, "Well once I fondled and stroked one."

St Peter says "OK, dip your whole hand in the holy water and pass through the gate."

Suddenly there is a lot of commotion in the line of nuns. One pushes her way up the line. When she reaches St Peter he says, "Sister, Sister what seems to be the rush? There is plenty of holy water; you will all be purified and enter Heaven."

The nun replies, "Maybe so, but if I'm going to have to gargle the stuff, I want to do so before Sister Mary sticks her ass in it!"

Atheist student wins payout in row over school transport

IN A ground-breaking case with potentially national implications, a Lancashire man has been refunded several hundred pounds by his local Country Council after his atheist daughter was forced to pay for transport because she did not want to attend a local church school.

A report in the National Secular Society's on-line magazine, *Newsline*, revealed that NSS member and former policeman Ian Abbott, who lives near Poulton-le-Fylde, had mounted a successful challenge to the policy that says that children who want to attend a religious school can receive subsidies from the council to pay for transport to get them there, but people who don't want their children educated in a religious school have to pay their own transport costs.

Lancashire Country Council has now conceded that Mr Abbott, who has campaigned against the policy for five years, had a case under the Human Rights Act.

The Abbott family first made the claim in 1999, when their daughter, Laura, first decided that she did not want – because of her atheism – to attend her local school, St Aidens C of E School. Instead she wanted to travel eight miles to the nearest non-religious community school, Hodgson High School Technology College in Poulton-le-Fylde. The Council refused to subsidise the travel to Hodgson, even though they were funding other pupils who wanted to travel long distances to religious schools.

Shortly after the County Council backed down, Laura's father said: "I am absolutely

delighted that the County has belatedly seen the injustice and hope they will soon change their official policy to remove the discrimination. The non-religious are just as entitled to travelling assistance to go to a school without a religious ethos as the religious are to a denominational school. My only regret is that the County would not change without a huge amount of media pressure and the threat of legal action."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, which has been consulting leading human rights lawyers to assist Mr Abbott to progress his claim, said: "The NSS has been working with Human Rights lawyers for an elimination of the discrimination against non-believers in the school transport policies practised by many local authorities. This case sets a precedent that other local authorities should take note of – if they don't they will almost certainly be violating the Human Rights Act. It is blatant discrimination to deny non-believing families wishing to avoid their children attending a nearby church school the equivalent transport concession given to, for example, Roman Catholics to attend an RC school.

"The most equitable policy on school transport would be for all children to be granted the same concessions whether they were attending a school on religious/philosophical grounds or simply to attend a specialised school. We do not think that a pupil attending a specialised music or technology school should have to pay any more than a child attending a school on



Ian Abbott

religious or philosophical grounds. We hope that the new School Transport Bill, currently under-going pre-legislative scrutiny, will address these issues.

"It is also manifestly unfair that thousands of children of non-RC

families attending RC schools are denied the denominational transport concession that their RC fellow pupils enjoy. This is blatant religious discrimination."

Mr Abbott's compensation is only backdated to November 2002, when Laura started at Hodgson High School. He has now resubmitted his claim arguing that he should be compensated from the time the Human Rights Act became effective.

Commenting on the case in the London *Evening Standard*, columnist Tim Lott wrote: "I am greatly heartened by the success of Ian Abbott ... That he had to sue reflects a level of prejudice against non-believers in what is, in fact, the most overwhelmingly atheist nation in the world that goes largely unremarked. The Government does not give huge subsidies to humanist schools, or encourage their establishment – indeed, quite the reverse, despite our new worries about terrorism. And unlike us atheists, Christian and Muslim parents do not have to sit through interminable Sunday mornings at the local humanist society, pretending they have no faith in order to get their kids into the local secular school.

"It goes further than that. There is no secular equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury to give us humanists guidance, or receive vast amounts of free publicity. We have no atheist *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4. And we have a Christian prime minister, and atheists are severely under-represented at Cabinet level.

"Never has such an overwhelming majority been so systematically ignored and marginalised. Ian Abbott expressed it perfectly: 'We need to see an end to the idea that having faith makes you superior to those without.' Amen to that."

• Editor's note: Ian Abbott hasn't sued the council – yet. But he is pushing the council, which is said to be "furious" over the case, to refund him more than £2,000 spent on fares for his daughter over a five-year period.

Bangladesh school plan axed

A PLAN by Manchester City Council to establish a school in Bangladesh for British Muslim children on extended holidays in that country was hastily shelved after local parents described it as "political correctness gone mad".

The plan was to spend £100,000 setting up the school in the Sylhet region, because a significant number of Manchester schoolchildren travel there each year, and often spend months away from school. When they return they find they have fallen behind in their education, and struggle to catch up with their studies.

After the plan – that would entail spending around £100,000 maintaining the school – was revealed, a public outcry immediately ensued, with many parents pointing out that it was illegal to remove children from school, and that if such a school could be set up for Bangladeshi

children, there would be an argument to set up "holiday" schools at taxpayers' expense in other parts of the world for the benefit of all pupils.

But in defending the plan, a local educationist said, in an interview broadcast on BBC Radio 4, that Manchester schools were multicultural institutions, and that it was the duty of the authorities to respect individual cultures. It was part of Bangladeshi culture to remove children from school for extended periods. It is our duty to ensure that these children do not fall back in their studies, was the gist of his argument.

The row broke just a week after Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality, called for the scrapping of the concept of multiculturalism.



MY brother is a default Christian. I know that, but he doesn't. I was reluctant to cause any bad feeling when I last saw him some 15 months ago and heard him say, during the course of a conversation about Christianity, "Well I'm a Christian." And so I fought off the urge to ask, "How do you know?"

Of course, his answer to that would be along the lines of, "Well, I just *am*. I live in a Christian country. I was taken to church as a kid."

My irritation with my otherwise likable brother came when my father told me some years ago, "Stephen sends his daughters to Sunday school, you know."

My immediate response – which on reflection I thought perhaps a little harsh – was, "He must be out of his mind." My father's response was that everyone is entitled to his or her beliefs.

Yes, I conceded, this is true. But his beliefs should not automatically become his daughters' beliefs, and forcing religion on young children is nothing short of child abuse. He was trusting his young daughters to people he did not know, to be instructed in unbelievable, unprovable and often dangerous ideas. They would tell them, no doubt, about a virgin birth (without pointing out that virgin births are abundant in other religious belief systems too), miracles (for which there has never been and never can be any scientific proof), Bible stories (which differ from gospel to gospel, most differences occurring between John and the three synoptic gospels) concerning a man who was executed and miraculously rose from the dead (again, no scientific evidence, just the dubious testimony of people who wanted – *needed* – to believe). Even the accounts of Jesus's absence from the cave in which he was allegedly laid differ.

They may also have told the little girls about a man called Moses, who fetched the Ten Commandments etched in stone from a mountain. But they wouldn't have told them that on coming down from the mountain he learned that his people had been up to no good by worshipping a dodgy god, and so Moses had ordered the wholesale slaughter of thousands of them.

They would not have been told about the many inconsistencies in the Bible, which have been discussed in these pages often enough, so don't warrant a tedious reminder. They would not have been told, either, about how one shouldn't wear polycotton shirts or eat prawn cocktail or have bacon for breakfast.

More disturbingly, perhaps, they would not have been told how filthy they were, being female – how, according to Leviticus, after giving birth, a woman must not touch holy things for several weeks if she's given birth to a boy, but several more weeks if she's given birth to a girl. Giving birth to girls, it would seem, leaves a woman more unclean than giving birth to boys.

They would not have been taught of the geno-

cidal tendencies of Yahweh, the god of the Old Testament, of his capricious moods and delight in creating plagues and blighting whole tribes with all manner of horrors, allowing the innocent to suffer along with the "guilty".

What do so-called Christians know about Christianity? Precious little ventures ANDY ARMITAGE

Equally, they would not have been informed that (again, according to Leviticus), if someone fancied a woman, had sex with her, then had his wicked way with her mother, he should be burned alive.

No, they would not have been told any of this at Sunday school, although they may have sung hymns such as "All Things Bright and Beautiful", which these days lists all the bright and beautiful things, but God-botherers no longer sing the verse that speaks of how God made the rich man in his castle and the poor man at the gate. That such a thing was ever accepted among the pious as an acceptable state of affairs would just be an embarrassment to speak of now.

Why, I asked my father, could Brother Stephen not wait till they were aged 15 or 16 and then ask them if they proposed to have a religious life. They would have been exposed to that possibility by school RE and any other subjects that discussed religion (the former of these I abhor; the latter is just a fact of life: religion has played an enormous part in human affairs, and it is thus a legitimate ingredient of several subjects in school, be they history or social sciences).

Given that exposure, they would be able to make a fairly informed decision on whether to acknowledge that they were Christian or to dismiss what they had learned as the mythology it is: interesting reading for those who can stick with it, but no longer of any practical use.

It's hard to get over to people who have never been challenged on these things that there is no such thing as a Christian who has not been forced to think about why. In the case of my brother, he admits he has never read the Bible or anything else concerning the religion he claims to espouse.

So, my dear bro, *why* are you a Christian? How do you know you're a Christian? Who *told* you? What does being a Christian *mean* to you? How different would your life be if you *weren't* a Christian?

Steve is one of the millions in this country and elsewhere who claim to be Christians who are merely *default* Christians: they don't think much about religion; they know little or nothing about it other than that it has hymns and prayers and beliefs concerning a deity and a man who was executed in a particularly horrifying and cruel manner and rose from the dead.

They may go to church some Sundays. Certainly, those who are heterosexual and want to shack up with a partner will get married in church; they will take their children for christening; they'll take their dead loved ones for burying.

But they *still don't know* what Christianity is about. They will never have read a word of theology. They may watch *Songs of Praise* but will never have got to grips with a good philosophical argument during a TV debate or documentary. They will never even have asked themselves – or anyone else – what the arguments are for the existence of God: the ontological argument, the argument from design, whatever.

They will have some vague idea that being Christian – or, they may concede, being of another religion – gives them a moral code, forgetting that there are very good human reasons why we have a moral code, and they are tied up with what makes us human: our need for survival, which is genetically inscribed into our very makeup.

They will conveniently forget that many thousands of years ago humankind would not have an inkling of an idea what caused the bangs in the skies, what caused the water to fall and the winds to blow.

Instance other cultures' names for just one of these phenomena: the wind. The Greeks had gods even for the different *types* of wind under the control of the god Aeolus: Boreas, Euros, Notus, Zephyrus.

As we discovered the causes of the phenomena that used to baffle us, we could tick off mystery after mystery. As science came into its stride in more recent centuries, more things have been ticked off, leaving us with no need for alternative explanations.

So I'm sorry, dear brother, you're not a Christian – unless you've done a lot more reading since last we spoke. You cannot be a Christian just because someone has told you that you are or because some of the people around you are Christians, or because your parents were Christians (or thought they were).

To be a Christian, the mumbo-jumbo must either have been culturally injected into you from birth – much in the way Islam is with Muslims – or, in the absence of that, you must have made a conscious effort to be one. When did you do that?

This makes a nonsense, of course, of the "statistics" that say some huge percentage of Britons are Christians. That is utter nonsense. I don't have statistics, but I would hazard that a huge majority of that percentage are default Christians.

And they're not even well informed enough to give me a good argument on the subject.

Andy Armitage is editor of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist

Dutch mosque supports female circumcision

FOR the first time in the Netherlands, a mosque has come out in support of female circumcision, according to a Dutch newspaper.

The highly controversial statement on circumcision is contained in a leaflet *Fatwas of Muslim Women* provided by the El Tawheed mosque in Amsterdam for a recently-held open day. A *fatwa* is an official statement or order from an Islamic religious leader.

The pamphlet says that women who tell lies deserve 100 blows and the husband's duty of care for his wife is negated if she refuses him sex or leaves the home without his permission, according to a report in the newspaper *Trouw*.

There have been many claims in the Dutch media in recent years about "imported brides" who are forced by their husbands to stay in the family home – unless accompanied outside by a male relative. Some of these women, it is claimed, live in total isolation from Dutch society.

The call for girls to be circumcised – removing part of the female genitalia – is likely to cause the biggest outcry so far. If done right, the mosque's pamphlet claims, circumcision is healthy for both boys and girls.

But unlike male circumcision – in which the mosque claims that for reasons of hygiene, the male's foreskin can be circumcised – there are absolutely no medical grounds for female

circumcision.

Nevertheless, it urges that the foreskin of a girl's clitoris should be removed, but not the clitoris itself – as is often wrongly assumed to be the case. Removing the foreskin would help the woman keep her feelings of lust under control, the pamphlet says.



In recent weeks, politicians have called for the Dutch government to do more to stop the practice among immigrant communities. To date, the Health Ministry has ruled out compulsory checks on girls to make sure they have not been circumcised.

The Pharos health centre for refugees said

that never before has a mosque in the Netherlands come out publicly in support of female circumcision.

Ironically, El Tawheed Mosque organised the open day to counteract negative publicity caused by previous controversial statements made by one of its imams which were condemned as fostering anti-Western and anti-female bias. On one highly-publicised occasion, an imam referred to non-Muslims as "firewood for hell" and he forbade Islamic women to leave the family home without the permission of their husbands.

Fatwas of Muslim Women continues on this theme and states that science has proved men and women differ in "biological nature, physical capabilities and mental capacity". It says it is unjust to give women the same "responsibilities, rights and duties as men".

The pamphlet, written by a "prominent imam" was one of the many booklets available at the open day. *Trouw* noted *Fatwas of Muslim Women* lacks any biographical information about the author, Mufti Ibn Taymyah (or Taymiyya).

He lived in the 14th century and has been described by Arabism scholar Hans Jansen as an "influential ideologue for militant Islamists". Jansen has drawn comparisons between Taymyah and Osama bin Laden.

Porn find proves embarrassing for the French Catholic Church

The recent discovery of a large cache of vintage French pornographic films has uncovered a fascinating aspect of French social history – and has proved somewhat of an embarrassment for the Catholic Church.

The collection of around 300 films was found by "a very respectable family" among their late grandfather's belongings. Fortunately, they did not destroy the films, made between 1905 and 1930, but handed them instead to the National Cinematheque (the government body in charge of France's cinematic patrimony).

French producer Michel Reilhac was given access to the collection, and, fascinated by what he saw, he began delving into their history.



He discovered that they were made exclusively for viewing in brothels – and that the most popular viewing time was Sunday morning after mass, when large numbers of men returning from worship would gather to watch them.

Reilhac then assembled 11 of the best for a full-length feature, *The Good Old Naughty Days* which has just been given an R18 rating by the British censors, and is shortly to be released nationally.

The film has received enthusiastic reviews, but critics say the title is misleading. They say it suggests the movie may be some sort of *Carry On*-type romp. It is anything but. It is full-on, hardcore pornography. One American critic described the standards of production as being "far in advance of comparable films being made elsewhere at the time", as well as being "an inventive and often humorous array of diverse couplings".

Church attendance nose-dives in Finland

THE Evangelic Lutheran Church in Finland is losing members at an alarming rate.

The haemorrhage began in August 2003 when, thanks to an amendment to Finland's freedom of religion law, it became far easier to leave the church.

No longer were people expected to appear personally at a register office and fill out a "resignation" form. A simple letter is all that is now required.

Furthermore, people no longer need to confirm their decision after a month of consideration: it is now simply a case of quit and go.

The result: an epidemic of quitting and going. In the capital, Helsinki, 4,100 people opted out of the Evangelic Lutheran Church in 2003 after the law was changed, compared to 2,700 the previous year.

THE current controversy over Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of The Christ*, threatens to narrow still further a dispute in which the most important arguments have either been forgotten centuries ago or were never advanced in the first place.

Offered the cinematic spectacle of someone being put to death slowly and painfully, viewers and boycotters alike are embroiled in a quarrel over the "guilty" party – "The Romans" or "The Jews" being the only suspects under consideration. Worse than that, in their rush to find somebody to crucify, the contestants have forgotten earlier, more substantial questions. "Christ made a great sacrifice! The Romans are guilty and Mel Gibson is distorting the facts, promoting anti-Semitism!" "No! Christ made a great sacrifice. We refuse to say who is guilty, but Gibson is only showing what happened!" That is what it boils down to. Why, only a few months ago the same parties disagreed on whether Jesus was in fact Christ, whether Jesus even existed and

whether the very idea of a Messiah is a myth! In the following paragraphs, I would like to show that even those questions are insufficient

The Christian account of Jesus relies on an audience accepting several gross contradictions, not in mere details of Jesus' life but in the matter of his supposed sacrifice itself, argues PETER JANSEN

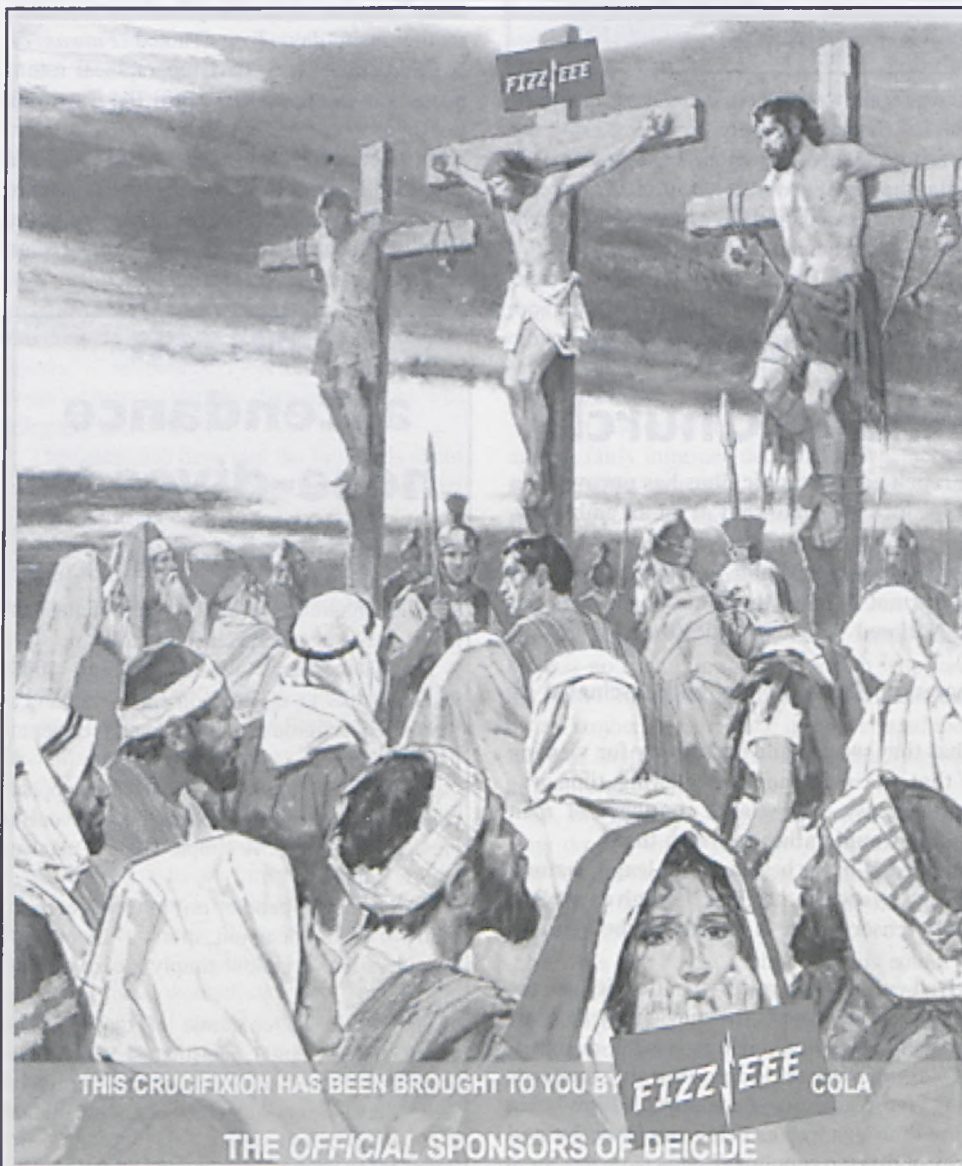
for a proper evaluation of any biography of Jesus, be it historical or otherwise. The most striking (and the most ignored) aspect of the whole wretched controversy is that the Christian account of Jesus relies on an audi-

ence accepting several gross contradictions, not in mere details of Jesus' life but in the matter of his supposed sacrifice itself.

As we shall see, questions of blame resolve themselves automatically, once proper consideration is given to the right issues.

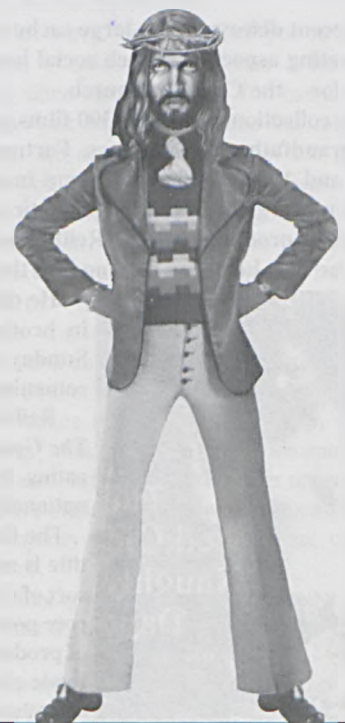
"Jesus died for your sins!" Now, that is a far-reaching claim – as long as I accept death as the ultimate horror. But how does the evangelist's rant go on? He will tell me about the wonders of Paradise, how glorious it is to be in Heaven, in the very presence of God the Father. Is it? So Jesus died for my sins – lucky fellow! He's there already, while I must hang around here and be lectured about vegetarian lions.

One day I will die; one day you will die. There are no guarantees that it won't be worse than crucifixion. We may go blind and deaf and quadraplegic, spending the next 50 years in a wheelchair, perhaps with our skin ceaselessly itching all over. Then we will die. We may go to heaven, if there is one. We may then find that it is the horrid wildlife reserve of



Mel's movie is a gift to the satirists

IT was bound to happen. Those determined NOT to take Gibson's movie seriously have lost no time in sending up the film and its main character. On the left, Jonothan Baker, artist and *Freethinker* reader, brings a touch of sponsorship to the crucifixion (cruci-fiction?) and below, under the title of "The Fashion of the Christ", an unnamed wag on the web wondered whether Jesus would have opted for trendy '70s gear had he returned 30 years ago.



Jehovah's Witnesses' leaflets, so that we get to spend eternity watching bunny rabbits running around in circles and wolves eating our cabbages, which we graciously tolerate.

But Jesus died for your sins, horribly, voluntarily. Ask yourself this: If his position had been advertised, how many applicants would there have been?

WANTED: CHRIST!

Duties: To wander around preaching for a number of years, thereafter to be crucified.

Remuneration: The successful applicant will be feasted far and wide and adored by the multitude. At the time of his crucifixion he will be promoted to joint managing director of the universe, this position to be held in eternity without possibility of removal.

Jesus died for your sins! Please, can I die for them, too?

It was God the Father who planned it all. Almighty that he was, he had to send everybody to hell, even though he didn't want to. He was forced into this because a man and a woman ate something they weren't supposed to. He let this go on for a while. We don't know exactly how long, but the best authority says it was just a little short of 4,004 years. Then he had a brilliant idea: He would bring himself a human sacrifice.

I don't need to believe this, but if I did I wouldn't admire it – I'd be horrified. And here we have the elements of the second major contradiction. On the one hand evangelists depend on the horror of it all, on the other hand they wish us to accept it as the ultimate proof of their god's supreme goodness. They achieve their aim by loading the blame on others, be they Romans or Jews. But if all their talk is true, if Jesus was really crucified (and that innocently), it isn't the Romans' fault and it isn't the Jews' fault, either. It is the fault of God the Father.

Let us consider a different kind of gospel. Suppose, if you will, that following his arrest Jesus had been committed to a maximum secu-

rity prison or a maximum security mental hospital (depending on the way you like your alternative Romans); let his captors be conscientious people who place him on 24-hour suicide watch and wait for him to live out his life! If they believe what they claim to believe, what would Christians have to make of that? Why, it would be the ultimate real horror! The Romans (or the Jews) would have thwarted the will of God the Father and prevented the salvation of mankind.

There could have been two different subsequent courses of history, resulting in two different contemporary controversies. God the Father could have given up. Everybody could have continued to go to hell because some 6,000 years ago two people ate something they weren't supposed to. Mel Gibson could have made a film about Jesus' life-long confinement. Two enraged factions could argue whether he blamed the Jews for letting Jesus live and whether his motives were anti-Semitic or whether he just presented things as they were.

Or perhaps (I don't know how these things work) God the Father could have settled for bringing himself a lesser sacrifice than a man. Perhaps he could have sent a sacred bluebottle, hoping that somebody would oblige by swatting it. Mel Gibson could then have made a film about that, and two enraged factions could argue over whether the character swatting the bluebottle looks Jewish or Roman and whether the casting was prompted by sinister political motives.

These are just my observations. I don't expect to achieve anything with them. I would love people to end this madness. I would love them to see at least some reason, above all that justice requires you and me and Mel Gibson to pay for our own sins. But I suppose that that would require a real miracle and a real Messiah. It seems that people can no more be reasoned out of Christianity than out of dandruff. Please, somebody, anybody out there – find a cure! You will then be the real saviour of mankind.

One American's view of *The Passion*

You wail, you scream, you nearly call an ambulance when you burn your finger on the stove while making popcorn. You know for a fact that no human body, no matter how divinely inspired, could ever withstand so much gleeful ultra-violent comical blood-drenched flesh-rending as poor ol' Jesus does in the *Jerusalem Chainsaw Massacre* and not instantly



pass out and/or immediately demand three quadruple Martinis and a fistful of holy Vicodin. I mean, please!

There were children – small children, most of them under 10 – in the theatre where I endured this spiritual mess, their grim parents apparently believing Mel's R-rated bloodbath would

offer up some sort of constructive lesson, something deep and divine and unforgettable.

And then the whips rended and the blood gushed and the sado-masochism amplified to a fever pitch and the families all sat there, stone-faced and lost, apparently convincing themselves they were seeing something glorious and profound, as the hapless kids stared down a future full of bloody Jesus nightmares and psychotherapy until, many years and many prescription meds later, when they finally realize, damn but that movie messed me up!

... It lasted for more than a full half hour, the central beating scene, wherein a squad of monosyllabic demon Romans chain Jesus to a stone and feverishly flay him to oozing pulp on one side, then casually flip him over like a veal cutlet and thrash the other side until he is nothing but a puddle of dripping stage blood and flappy flesh and cavernous moans. You catch glimpses of this revolting cartoonishness through barely-parted fingers and you wonder how much sex and vodka and Buddhism you will need to recover. And you realize, with a sort of perfect and holy divine clarity, that Mel Gibson is utterly, thoroughly insane.

– an extract from Mark Morford's column in the San Francisco Gate. April 16, 2004

Two die, one injured in separate *Passion* incidents

AT least two people have died watching Gibson's movie. The first, a 56-year-old woman attending a special screening in Wichita, Kansas died of an apparent heart attack while watching the interminable crucifixion scene. The film had to be stopped so that a nurse could give Peggy Scott medical attention.

A month later a Brazilian pastor died watching the scenes of flagellation and crucifixion. Jose Geraldo Soares, a 43-year-old Presbyterian, had booked the entire cinema in Belo Horizonte for his congregation. Soares suffered a heart attack.

In March, according to an Associated Press report, a 34-year-old Georgia woman and a 33-year-old man suffered injuries after a violent row broke out between the two over a theological point. After seeing *The Passion* Melissa Davison and Sean Davison got into an argument about whether "God the Father in the Holy Trinity is human or symbolic". The discussion became so heated that it erupted into violence, and the police were called.

They found that Melissa had sustained injuries to her face and left arm, who had punched a hole in a wall during the altercation, and had suffered a scissors stab to one hand.

AS reported last month in an article by Barbara Smoker, Britain was confirmed to be one of the most sceptical countries in the world in the BBC2 television programme, *What the World Thinks About God*, screened on February 26.

Respondents in ten countries had been asked a series of questions on religious topics. I have obtained each country's scores on the questions most indicative of piety or scepticism. Accumulating them has enabled the construction of a table ranking countries in order of scepticism, shown in the box below.

Scepticism Index		
Ranking		Score
	(most sceptical)	
1	•UK	398
2	•S. Korea	417
3	•Russia	511
4	•Israel	588
5	•Mexico	636
6	•India	670
7	•USA	671
8	•Lebanon	787
9	•Indonesia	800
10	•Nigeria	810
	(least sceptical)	
	Average	629

There is a tendency for countries' scores to be "bunched". UK and South Korea; Mexico, India and USA; and at the least sceptic end (predominantly Muslim states) Lebanon, Indonesia and Nigeria. (Curiously, the least sceptical state, Nigeria, is the one from which the vast majority of email money scams emanate.)

As the survey included only a small proportion of the world's countries, however, no reliable conclusions can be drawn about any country being the least or most sceptical in the world. Having said that, there are a sufficient range of countries in the sample to give a broad indication about where each country in the sample lies on the world spectrum. Most of the countries likely to rival the UK as the most sceptical country would be from northern

THE Nigerian Humanist Movement is staging the Tai Solarin International Conference on June 1 and 2, 2004 at the Mayflower School, Ikenne.

The event is co-organised with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) to mark the 10th anniversary of the death of Nigeria's foremost humanist, Tai Solarin.

The conference offers an opportunity for humanist, atheist, sceptic and freethought leaders, scholars and activists to discuss and celebrate the life, thoughts and legacy of Africa's goddess hero, and deliberate on the challenges facing humanism, scepticism and freethought in Nigeria in the 21st century.

At a time when democracy in Nigeria is coming under severe threat from religious fun-

Europe, but none of these were included in the sample.

UK leads the world

The strength of the UK's scepticism is demonstrated most dramatically by its response to the statement "The world would be a more peaceful place if people didn't believe in God/a higher power." The average population proportion in the survey countries disagreeing with the proposition was 10 percent, but nearly three times as many of the UK sample, 29 percent, dissented. The next most sceptical country was Mexico with 16 percent demurring while, at the other end of the scale, only 1 percent of Lebanese disagreed with the proposition.

Our response to the statement, *I blame people of other religions for much of the trouble in*

I Believe in God/higher power	%
Average	88
•UK	67
•S. Korea	70
•Russia	77
•Israel	85
•USA	91
•Mexico	93
•India	98
•Lebanon	98
•Indonesia	99
•Nigeria	100

the world, also showed up the UK's relative intolerance of religion. The worldwide average that agreed with this proposition was only 22

Regular worshippers	%
Average	46
•Russia	7
•UK	21
•S. Korea	31
•Israel	38
•Lebanon	41
•India	52
•USA	54
•Mexico	58
•Indonesia	68
•Nigeria	91

Nigeria and India to host international atheist gatherings

damentalism, ethnicism and superstition, and is suffering widespread poverty, instability and insecurity, atheists and agnostics from around the world will be meeting to discuss the role of humanism in the socio-political transformation of Africa's most populous nation.

Confirmed conference speakers include:

Sola Adeyeye (Member, House of Representatives, Abuja, Nigeria) Nkeonye Otafor (Dean, Faculty of Arts University of Benin, Nigeria), Roy Brown (IHEU

KEITH PORTEOUS W the National Secular used for What The

percent, but the UK led the field with 37 percent, followed – significantly – by Israel at 33 percent. The latest woes over the Iraq conflict, characterised by many on both sides as a Christian/Islamic struggle, might have been expected to have resulted in both US and Indonesia being enthusiastic supporters of this proposition, but on the contrary they were among the lowest scores at 25 percent and 8 percent respectively.

In sceptical terms, the UK also leads the world in the *I believe in God/higher power* league with 67 percent of respondents agreeing compared with a worldwide average of 88 percent.

The UK is an honourable second in the regular worshipper table (see below left).

Curiously, the UK drops to third place on the question *I have always believed in God*. Here the UK scored 46 percent, behind Russia at 42 percent and S. Korea at 31 percent. This suggests that Russians who had not believed in God always – say, during the USSR days – are now being included as believing in a God or higher power. These figures would be indicative of some "success" in the recent evangelisation of Russia.

The UK's world-leading scepticism was not

Always believed in God	%
Average	73
•S. Korea	31
•Russia	42
•UK	46
•Israel	71
•USA	79
•Mexico	82
•India	92
•Lebanon	92
•Indonesia	97
•Nigeria	98

President), Levi Fragell (Chairman of IHEU's Growth and Development Committee, London), Babu Gogineni (IHEU's Executive Director) and Norm Allen Jr (Executive Director, African Americans for Humanism).

Next year, from January 7-9, the Atheist Centre, in Vijayawada, India, will host the Fifth World Atheist Conference on "Atheism and Social Progress".

In announcing the conference, Dr Vijayam of the Atheist Centre said: "The world is slowly, but steadily, moving towards a post-religious society. Religion has lost its pre-eminent position in human affairs, but there is a lurking danger that this may open the way to fundamentalism and fanaticism. So, this is the time concentrate on strengthening alternatives to religion."

WOOD, Executive Director of ... Society, examines the data ... World Thinks About God

quite so evident in the following negative questions where I have shown the four most sceptical countries' scores:

I never pray – (Average 15 percent) South Korea 34 percent, Russia 30 percent, Israel 29 percent UK 25 percent.

I feel negative towards God/spirituality (Average 7 percent) South Korea 27 percent, UK 16 percent, Israel 10 percent, Russia 8 percent. All the other countries' scores were very low indeed.

Some anomalies

The proposition *Religion is a crutch of the weak-minded* threw up some curious anomalies. The average percentage of respondents disagreeing with this proposition among respondents worldwide was 64 percent. Yet only 31 percent of the normally religio-centric Indonesians disagreed and a whopping 83 percent of our otherwise incredulous Britons disagreed. I am not sure whether this is an indication of our fear of offending our neighbours in our increasingly multicultural society, or whether somehow the two figures have become transposed.

South Korea and Indonesia were at opposite ends of the pole for practically every question

except the proposition *Religion is a cloak for politics*. Against a worldwide average of 64 percent disagreeing, they topped the poll with 78 percent and 80 percent respectively. The context is crucial: in South Korea there hardly is any religion and in Indonesia where it is omnipresent there is a marked reluctance to accept or acknowledge its intertwining with politics. Clearly their similar answers had very different interpretations.

America: home of the litigious religious

A BAPTIST police officer and a convicted Jewish felon hit the headlines simultaneously last month when details of their respective court actions in the United States made the headlines.

A while back, State Trooper Benjamin Endres sued the State of Indiana after he was fired for refusing to do police duty at a casino. When he lost the case, he appealed to the Supreme Court, but on April 20 his appeal was rejected.

The trooper argued that the gambling enforcement assignment would force him to violate his religious beliefs. He was not opposed to general casino crime-fighting, but could not comply when the state designated him a full-time gaming officer, and ordered him to report to a casino in Michigan City, Indiana.

An attorney representing Endres, Jeremy Taylor, told the Supreme Court that "public servants will find their religious freedom in greater peril than those they protect" if Endres did not win his case. But the judges rejected this argument, declaring, in effect, that a victory for Endres would open the way for police officers, firemen and the like to refuse to protect or rescue people they disapproved of for religious reasons – like prostitutes or homosexuals.

On the same day that Endres lost his appeal, a Jewish inmate filed a lawsuit against the state of Virginia for discriminating against female prisoners by limiting special religious diets to its maximum-security prison for women, while providing such meals in all men's prisons.

Mitzi Ann Hamilton, serving five-and-a-half years at the Fluvanna Correctional Centre for Women for fraud and forgery, says that even though she had the lowest security classification, the department assigned her to the maximum-security Fluvanna prison to comply with her dietary needs. As a result, Hamilton "has been housed with violent, aggressive inmates, and she does not have access to the rehabilitative services offered at minimum-security prisons," the lawsuit says.

Hamilton, 36, said she was not demanding too much. "One thing you bring into prison with you is your belief in God," she said. "The Torah stipulates that I observe kosher," which she did before entering prison, she said.

Methodology

The Scepticism Index was compiled from accumulating the percentage of each country's respondents who agreed with the following questions:

- I believe in God or a higher power
- I regularly attend a religious service
- I regularly pray
- I would die for my God / beliefs
- God/A higher power judges my actions and the way I live my life
- I don't believe death is the end
- A belief in God/a higher power makes for a better human being
- God/a higher power created the universe
- God/a higher power could prevent suffering if he wanted to
- I find it hard to believe in God/a higher power when there is so much suffering in the world
- My God/beliefs is/are the only true God/beliefs
- The world would be a more peaceful place if people didn't believe in God/a higher power

The data used in this article has been calculated from data provided for BBC2's *What the World Thinks of God*. It is reproduced with the BBC's kind permission. The survey was carried out by ICM who conducted a thousand interviews during December 2003/January 2004 in each of ten countries. The countries' scores were calculated giving equal weight to each country regardless of size of population.

Further information is available on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/wtwtgod/>

'Bush is a Messianic militarist', says presidential candidate Ralph Nader

INDEPENDENT presidential candidate Ralph Nader last month called George W Bush a "Messianic militarist" for mixing religion and policy in his public statements and interviews about America's role in Iraq.

"He is an unsuitable officeholder", Nader said. "Talk about separation of church and state; it's not separated at all in Bush's brain. We want him to make decisions as a secular president."

White House officials dismissed Nader's claims. "The president talks about the principle of the separation of church and state and how it is a bedrock cornerstone of our democracy," said a White House spokesman. "He does believe that deeply. Having said that, he has a strong personal faith, but he leaves that at the residence before he enters the Oval Office.

"The danger of injecting God into the Iraq war", Nader said, "further angers a Muslim

world that already distrusts US policies and motives. "Anybody with a stable approach to this would keep his mouth shut," Nader said.

Bush recently said: "I have this belief, strong belief, that freedom is not this country's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world. And, as the greatest power on the face of the Earth, we have an obligation to help spread that freedom."

Bush's mix of religion and policy could be harming the US's ability to get more international help in Iraq, according to James Hudnut-Beumler, the dean of Vanderbilt University's Divinity School. "It probably further damages prospects for the internationalisation of the Iraq solution," Hudnut-Beumler said. "Almost nowhere else would a head of government actually speak about the Almighty being the reason for the push of a foreign policy aim.

ANIMALS have found the human species to be their cruellest oppressors – their “devils”, as Schopenhauer put it – devils who have taken at least one divine command seriously: “And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered” (Gen. 9:2).

How, I wonder, did compassionate people cope in earlier times of uninhibited, triumphant cruelty against both humans and animals? During those centuries when crowds of curious onlookers streamed to public executions and spectacles of torture, it was a dangerous transgression to express sympathy for witches and heretics, while the sufferings routinely inflicted on animals must have driven animal-lovers to impotent, silent despair.

Mark Twain, the kindly atheist writer, thought that such people were always more numerous than was generally assumed; but if in the ages of faith they dared to express their feelings of compassion for their fellow creatures they would have been denounced as abnormal – even as misanthropes.

It may be surprising to find the name of Mark Twain among the anti-clerical animal-rightists, in contrast to many other celebrated writers, who mock animal-lovers as sentimental fools. And what a happy surprise it was when, only three decades ago, classic works appeared written by pioneers of the modern animal rights movement – not obscure cat-owners or dog-lovers, but prominent men of science and culture. The same year (1975) saw the publication of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* and Richard Ryder’s *Victims of Science: The Use of Animals in Research*, with its eye-opening chapter “The History of Compassion”. The biologist Richard Dawkins soon followed, with his lucid and incisive polemics.

Such perceptive minds are necessarily anti-clerical minds. Thus Karlheinz Deschner, the great anti-church historian, having taken up the cause of animal rights in this booklet, fits logically into this group of animal supporters who are also enemies of Christian doctrine and organised religion.

THE European Humanist Federation has produced a video examining the development of Freethought in Europe over the past 2,500 years. From the ancient Egyptians and Chinese to the civilisations of Greece and Rome and on to the enlightenment, Freethought has proved a worthy antidote to religious obscurantism. This well-produced and thoughtful documentary can now be obtained from the National Secular Society for £9.95, plus £1 p&p. Send cheque or PO to NSS Video Offer, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ.

Why did it take us, who were young half-a-century ago, so long to become aware of any protest on behalf of animals – and the need for it? Who kept this information from us, and why?

It was always the hard-hearted, the cruel, the indifferent, who had Christianity on their side – God the Father, the Son, the saints, the clerics from top to bottom of the hierarchy, the

Translated by Olof Ribb and abridged by Barbara Smoker, this article by NELLY MOIA (dynamic Luxembourg campaigner for atheism, feminism, and animal rights) was originally published in German as an afterword to a booklet (1998) on Christian speciesism by leading anti-church historian, Karlheinz Deschner – who, at the age of 80, has just brought out the eighth volume of his vast, important, no-holds-barred (yet scholarly) projected ten-volume history, *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*.

law, and the entire bible-infected society of animal tormentors. Rebellion against their cruelty and indifference could arise only among those *not* possessed of the Holy Spirit. That is why they were never mentioned in our school-books – were never part of the curriculum in the educational systems of the West in the middle of the 20th century. We were shamelessly indoctrinated throughout our primary and secondary schooling, including two to three hours of religious instruction per week, totalling more than a thousand hours, but not once did we hear a word about protection of animals or the environment.

At best, nature was mentioned as a means to an end – as evidence, according to the Hymn of Praise of St Francis, of the ever praiseworthy wisdom, omnipotence and benevolence of its supposed creator. Animals were mentioned only for the purpose of pointing out their lack of reason, and therefore their inferior status to that of human beings. Any questions raised

about the suffering of animals were dismissed with an allusion to the more important suffering of human beings.

Animal suffering was one of many unanswered questions we were left to ponder after all that lengthy religious instruction. Human suffering, after all, was apparently justified by the “spiritual cleansing” resulting therefrom and the eternal bliss that awaited us as compensation, whereas animals, devoid of an immortal soul, could derive no such benefit from their torment. Moreover, all earthly tribulation was a consequence of original sin, though it was no dog that bit into that famous apple that started it all. So we were left to wonder how a “beneficent” creator could condemn untold millions of his creatures to a life and death of misery, with no compensation whatsoever.

Nor did we ever hear a single word from the pulpit about any rights to be granted to these non-human creatures. No priest, no pastor, appeared to be moved in the least by animal suffering. But what inspiration, after all, did scripture or theology offer them on this topic? God the Father, the Saviour, and the most compassionate Mother of God, all were utterly silent about any duties owed to animals by dutiful Christians.

Even though I was a friend of animals and an anti-clerical rebel, I am ashamed that it never occurred to me in my youth what a scandal it was that in the Catholic Church the maltreatment of animals was not regarded as a sin. The “examination of conscience” preceding confession included no such transgression, which is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments, and we were never instructed to confess it as a sin. Worst of all, this blatant omission went unnoticed by my generation of well-behaved schoolchildren, whose eyes nobody had opened. And we were too passive to open our own.

Since then, schools have not really changed much. Oh yes, the environment and conservation are now “in” concerns (largely because of the danger to human health and enjoyment), but the responsibility of Christianity for environmental destruction and the exploitation and extermination of animals is mooted, even when supported daily by shocking statistics – eg every 24 hours the world’s population increases by some 250,000 more human beings, not least because of the influence of the Vatican in international politics and on the spot in the Third World.

However, outside the school walls young people in the past two or three decades have been catching on, and the number of young animal-rightists is increasing. They are even taking it upon themselves to question their teachers about the Church’s indifference and to organise petitions on local practices of animal abuse. And all without the bribe of any reward

in the beyond!

When preachers today, with their professional insolence, attempt to stake a claim on animal rights and suddenly discover a divine aspiration (overlooked for two millennia) for kindness towards our fellow creatures, their hypocrisy only makes them ridiculous – though perhaps the average consumer, being poorly informed in historical matters, will once again play the dupe and accept the claim at its face value.

For instance, there is the argument that “the bloodless sacrifice” was instituted to reduce animal cruelty. But its main inducement was doubtless the cost of meat offerings. Passing out roast beef to the congregation would not be cheap! (This is pointed out by the American anthropologist Marvin Harris in *Cannibals and Kings and Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches.*)

Besides, if animal welfare were the real reason behind the bloodless sacrifice, this same concern would have left its mark on other aspects of life, such as going over to vegetarianism.

In reality, for nearly 2,000 years Christians were licensed to torment animals placed at their mercy, without any pangs of conscience. As late as the end of the 19th century, the author of *A Catholic Dictionary* (a Jesuit, quoted by Desmond Morris in *The Animal Contract*) asserted that it was permitted to inflict pain on animals, “for any good or reasonable end ... even for the purpose of recreation”. Some decades earlier, Pope Pius IX (the pope who, in 1870, infallibly proclaimed himself to be infallible) vetoed the establishment of an animal protection society in Rome when such societies were being set up throughout Europe. (The British society, founded in 1824, had led the way.)

Theologians justify this attitude by citing the gospel episode of Jesus sending devils into the bodies of a herd of pigs, which at one moment were grazing peacefully and the next were rampaging madly down a bank to perish miserably in the sea (Mt. 8:32). The Saviour thus gave an example to his followers of contempt for creatures lacking an immortal soul.

It is no wonder that even today animals are tortured in Spanish villages in honour of patron saints throughout the year – not only the goats of which Deschner writes, but also donkeys and fowl, and, of course, bulls and horses in bullfighting. (The Pope’s PR man and close intimate, and a member of Opus Dei, is a Spanish amateur bullfighter by the name of Joaquin Navarro Valls.) In Catholic France, as well, bullfighting enjoys considerable popularity.

Such recent progress in Catholic countries as the prohibition on killing migratory birds has not been due to any pressure from the Church – the self-proclaimed arbiter of morality. It is natural compassion that is gradually effecting a reversal in public sensibility.

BARCELONA City councillors last month voted to ban bullfighting. Although the vote has no practical effect, and bullfights will continue at the Monumental bullring, it will put pressure on the Catalan regional government to ban what many people consider an emblematic but totally barbaric Spanish tradition.

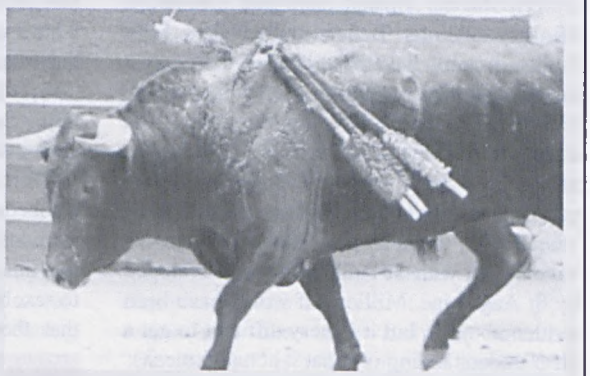
Leah Garcés of the World Society for the Protection of Animals said: “The vote is a giant step forward for animal welfare and will help lead the way to what could be the beginning of the end of bullfighting in Spain.”

The deputy mayor, Jordi Portabella, a member of the separatist Catalan Republican Left party, said in an article in the local paper *La Vanguardia*: “The bull ... has a nervous system similar to that of human beings, capable of dreaming and suffering. It is peaceful, like the cow or ox who flees from aggression and danger.”

Catalan nationalists and separatists are among the keenest to distance themselves from a tradition which some see as Spanish, rather than Catalan.

The vote took place shortly after the outgoing Spanish government announced that a huge charity bullfight would be held in Madrid to raise money for victims of the Islamic terrorist attack in the city which claimed almost 200 lives in March.

Charitable bullfights, according to one animal rights activist, are regularly held to raise money for starving children of third-world countries, and to fund research into serious diseases, etc. “These are blatant attempts to popularise the ‘sport’ and give it a veneer of respectability ... the Catholic Church does not condemn bullfighting. Indeed, it is common to see bullfights in ‘honour’ of saints carried out with the blessings of the clergy.”



Religions founded on the Bible have exploited brutal human egoism – specifically of the stronger male sex – by teaching what men want to hear and providing moral justification for their deeds. Both the Bible and the Koran make it clear that women and animals exist to fulfil the desires of their masters, and countries imbued with this biblical tradition

are characterised by a common contempt for women and animals.

The female is seen as representing the sensual, primitive, and animalistic, whereas the male represents reason. Women therefore share the ignominy and oppression that are the lot of animals, and misogyny generally goes hand-in-hand with indifference to animal suffering.

Christian bigot savaged by senior police

BRIAN Paddick, the UK’s highest-ranking openly gay policeman, has castigated a fundamentalist Christian newsletter that said gay people should not be allowed to join the police. In it, Stephen Green, National Director of the *Christian Voice* website and newspaper, said: “Morality cannot be separated from the jobs people do. I wouldn’t like to be searched by a homosexual police officer.”

Mr Paddick, a deputy assistant commissioner at Scotland Yard, was quoted in the *Guardian* last month as saying: “This paper is full of homophobia, some personally directed against me. If Mr Green was talking about black or Muslim people, there would be uproar and the police could prosecute.”

Green, based in mid-Wales, recently complained in a letter to all chief constables in England and Wales that the police service was “dishonoured” by officers being allowed to wear uniform while taking part in last August’s Gay Pride march in London. But, according to the *Guardian* report, many of the senior officers who replied strongly rejected Mr Green’s views.

Robert Quick, Surrey deputy chief constable, wrote on behalf of the chief constable, Denis O’Connor: “We have a responsibility to police all people in a fair and equitable manner, whatever their ethnicity, religion, sexuality or ability. By allowing officers to parade in uniform, we are sending a clear and reassuring message to our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, that we are continuing to build and improve relations.”

Terence Grange, Dyfed Powys chief constable, said he barred officers from wearing uniform on the march purely because he thought it should only be worn on duty. But he wrote to Mr Green: “As a lifelong practising Catholic, who has seen service in the military and police force all my working life, I must advise you I find your views morally offensive and reprehensible, and I would be grateful if you would cease any further communication with me.”

IF THE Monty Python team had invented a Ministry of Silly Beliefs, rather than Silly Walks, it would have been headed, I feel, by a devout Christian. All religions hold some bizarre ideas, but Christianity has some of the strangest, and one of these is certainly "original sin". As far as I know this doctrine is not part of any other major religion, even those of "the Book", Judaism and Islam. It seems to have begun with St Paul, and been developed by St Augustine. Millions of words have been written about it, but it is very difficult to get a clear understanding of what it actually means.

One might say that looking for meaning in something that is patently absurd is like the proverbial search by a blind man in a pitch-dark cellar for a black cat that isn't there. But in the gloom I think I can discern two lines of thought (using the word loosely), which I might call the legal and the psychological.

The legal line seems to be that Adam (endowed with free will) disobeyed God, and we are consequently all guilty. It seems that a very distant ancestor of ours owed allegiance to an overlord, but disobeyed him, and therefore all his descendants are liable to terrible punishment, for ever. However, the overlord had a son, whom he allowed to be killed, and as a result of this we may escape punishment, provided we admit our guilt and beg for forgiveness. Why we should be guilty for something over which we could not possibly have had any control, and what the death of the son

has got to do with it, I have never understood. I have asked Christians to explain it, but all they can say, usually with a fatuous smile, is "Ah, it is all a great mystery!" The only mystery, of course, is why anyone should believe such twaddle for a moment.

There is also something odd about the actual disobedience, that is Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. The Book of Genesis implies that this referred, not to knowledge as such, nor to sex, but to the couple's awareness of sex, and that they were naked. Hence the fig-leaves.

There are many bizarre aspects to Christianity, but the strangest and most puzzling of all is the doctrine of Original Sin, says JOHN RADFORD, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.

Why should God get so cross about this? Did he intend that they should have sex without human awareness of it? Later it is said that it would make them "like gods". Is God embarrassed by being naked? Most peoples in the world apart from the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic groups have accepted sex and nakedness as natural, as they are. Clothes appear to have originated as decoration, and developed for warmth as humans moved out of central Africa. For some reason the ancient Israelites diverged from this. The Genesis account has the air of being, as myths often are, an attempted explanation when the origin of something has been lost or never known.

The psychological line seems to be that we all inherit the sinful nature that caused Adam to disobey. Presumably, God must have included this trait when he designed Adam. If not, it must have been a genetic mutation, since only genes can carry traits, and acquired characteristics are not transmitted at all. We could not physically inherit an act of disobedience. This line at least has the advantage that it is scientifically testable. We all inherit many features, such as four limbs and a head (barring accidents). The question is, do we all inherit sinfulness, presumably in equal measure, since we are all equally guilty in the sight of God.

I have this from the Reverend Dr Peter Mullen, Rector of St Michael's Cornhill. Writing in the *Times* about *The Book of Common Prayer*, he says it "should be valued not for its aesthetic qualities alone, but for its deadly accurate presentation of human nature and human psychology. The old book knew that we are, all of us, steeped in sin." I wrote to

Dr Mullen, pointing out that this does not accord with the actual facts about human nature and psychology. In reply, he said, among other points, that he believed in the doctrine of Original Sin "which may be paraphrased roughly to say that humankind is deeply flawed". He felt that this was supported by the history of the twentieth century "which surpassed all others in its murderous achievements world-wide".

On this last point, one might argue that it is numbers murdered, rather than tendency to do so, that have increased. And why should a recent increase in evil doing prove that we have been deeply flawed from the start? Dr Mullen suggested that we were "speaking two different technical languages", and added that consensus could only be reached through empirical observation of how human beings actually behave – but that observers "notoriously" observe different phenomena according to their presuppositions. "What do you think?" he finally asked. So I told him, I hope politely.

Of course I agree that we must observe actual human behaviour, but not that objective observation is impossible – a common dodge by those who in reality want to avoid empirical tests. Observers can be biased, but they can also be aware of bias and allow for it. And we can take many different observations and compare them. That is the method of science. When we look at human behaviour in this way, it is clear that, as common sense indicates, the human race runs the gamut from depravity to virtue.

To imply that kindly old Mrs So-and-So, who would not intentionally hurt a fly, is as sinful – or wicked or evil or what you like – as Hitler or Dr Shipman, is ludicrous. As for the human race being "flawed", this only makes sense if you suppose there is some "unflawed" version, presumably as defined by God. Otherwise you might as well say that sparrows are flawed because they can't swim like fish. We are what we are, what evolution has made us. We are born with potentials of all kinds, both to do good and to do harm. And what



Freethinker fund

THE Freethinker Fund received a welcome boost of £919.00 between January 22 and April 22.

Because the low subscription price of the magazine does not cover ever increasing production and postage costs, donations and legacies are vital if the Freethinker is to continue as the robust voice of atheism in the UK.

We would like to thank the following supporters for their generosity:

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those are does not need a supernatural definition. They are values on which there is general agreement, no doubt ultimately because they contribute to the survival and development of the race. I mean such things as love being preferable to hate, honesty to dishonesty, kindness to cruelty and so on.

We possess these potentials in patterns varying widely between individuals, and these patterns become wider as the potentials interact with varying environments. In too many cases, it all goes wrong. But they are a minority. It is difficult to see how the race could have survived at all if it were not so.

Everyday life could not go on unless we could assume that most people are fairly honest, that most parents will care for their children and not kill them, and so on. More systematic studies do indeed show that on balance we are at least moderately virtuous, and certainly not uni-

Humanist morality

FURTHER to recent attempts in the *Freethinker* to construct a system of morality along humanist lines, I would like to point out one component ready made for it: the natural inhibition against killing, as a species-preserving adaptation.

As was excellently expounded in the recent Channel 4 two-part programme, "The Truth about Killing", humans and all other animals have a built-in taboo on killing their fellows through the operation of the amygdala, in the pre-human brain. Such is the emotional barrier to killing, at least face to face, that only 15 percent of infantrymen aimed their guns at the enemy in battles up to the 1960s, and of these only two percent – psychopaths or rare heroes – actually aimed to kill.

Even today, when front-line troops are given Skinnerian conditioning to allow them to kill without thinking, this natural mechanism kicks in afterwards in the form of flashbacks and intense remorse. As many as 200 Falklands veterans may have committed suicide to rid themselves of this intolerable burden.

Since this inhibition also covers serious injury concomitantly, at least half of a morality system has hereby been established, at the simple level at least. (The other half has traditionally been concerned with property, but that is a much less important area, for most people at least.) Of course, with civilisation came complicating factors like alcohol (a notorious disinhibitor), personal ambition and ... religion. For new crimes committed under such influences, new state discipline had to be created, in the form of the law and its punishments. These latter instruments of control have become ever more practical and realistic over the centuries, as knowledge in the human sciences has advanced, and *the state of mind* of a

versally steeped in sin. Nor do the vast majority of people feel permanently guilty, which they surely would if they were as sinful as Christianity pretends. And if we were all *equally* sinful, sin would be totally unlike any other human characteristic whatever. It would take "presuppositions" of a truly pathological order to distort these observations.

As for technical language, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines "sin" as "transgression, against divine law or principles of morality". The first seems technical, having meaning only on the assumption that divine law exists. But the second is everyday and that is how I use it.

It is clear that nearly all people follow some system of morality, based more or less on common principles, though the details vary a good deal. Hard-line Christians who spare not the rod for fear of spoiling the (inherently sinful)

child act, though mistakenly, for the child's good as they conceive it. Even vicious tyrants responsible for the deaths of millions frequently try to justify themselves as somehow acting for a greater good.

There is not a shred of evidence, from anthropology, history, genetics, psychology, to support the notion of original sin. There is no more reason to believe it than that the sun goes round the earth – as the Church insisted for centuries. In the absence of evidence, both *might* have been true. But they are not. "Original sin" is both wrong and harmful, for it leads to personal misery, oppression and cruelty, and impedes the search for the true causes of human behaviour, both good and bad, so that we can foster the first and diminish the second.

Dr Mullen did not respond to my second letter. Perhaps he thought me too steeped in sin.

Points of View

killer or violent offender has been increasingly taken into account – an acknowledgment, effectively, of this natural inhibition.

Religion, on the other hand, has had a negligible and often positive effect on the total amount of killing, maiming and torture carried out through the civilised era.

BRIAN KING
Cornwall

Parting of the Red Sea

BEWARE of scientists (or even mathematicians) trying to explain Bible stories. They never know anything about the Bible and believe that their discipline alone can solve other people's problems. Like the astronomers who believe that they can explain the Star of Bethlehem without knowing that it never existed, the Russian mathematicians ("Law of physics used to part the Red Sea, say experts", *Freethinker*, March 2004) think they can explain the Exodus. But why would they want to? Volzinger gives the game away when he declares that "God rules the Earth". So their exercise is an attempt to support the Biblical accounts and encourage belief.

Even if Moses really existed and Jewish slaves did escape from Egypt, anyone can see from a map that they would hardly head for the Red Sea. They would head for the Bitter Lakes region now occupied by the Suez Canal. The Bible refers not to the "Red Sea" but to the "sea of reeds" (*yam sup*), a term that covered the Bitter Lakes as well as the Red Sea. It is thought that this is where the Israelites crossed, an area that is affected by strong winds, causing changes in the level of water in the shallow reed lakes. There is no "documented spot where the Jews escaped Egypt", certainly not on the Red Sea.

Rather than conclude that every word in the Bible is true (or false), what we should conclude is that much of it consists of exaggerated tales based on a grain of truth. But everyone should beware of taking accounts too literally, as the Russian mathematicians appear to have done.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Human rights

I WAS pleased to read that, with NSS backing, Ian Abbot won the right to "non-religious school busing" to be on an equal footing with the religious.

But I find it frightening that we do not have access to Human Rights without going to law. I have tried to find whether or not I am being discriminated against on religious grounds. Surrey Education Authority, the Department of Education and Skills, my MP, and the Prime Minister, cannot or will not answer my questions. As I cannot afford to go to law and am not poor enough to be given assistance, does this mean I do not have any Human Rights?

I thought I would ask the question openly through your magazine in the hope that someone can answer.

If the Government taxes me without prejudice and then will not give me equal provision in education (ie secular rights), is it providing services according to religious beliefs? Would this be lawful? And if they can provide services according to religious beliefs, does this put me at the bottom of the waiting list for operations too? Could we see taxes poured into "religious" hospitals?

The Treasury assured me that "Public services are delivered on a fair, consistent and *non-discriminatory* basis" (letter from Sam Jones, Tax Policy team, March 11, 2003 – my italics). But clearly they are not – atheists suffer extreme discrimination on the grounds of beliefs.

Where are our rights? Or are some tax payers more equal than others?

DORRY LEWIS
Surrey

Ridiculous religious rules

I WAS amused by Derek Wilkes' letter (Points of View, March) about people entitled to be counted in a minyan or quorum at a Jewish funeral. On a recent visit to South East Asia I came across several equally ridiculous religious rules. In Thailand, for example, no-one in a temple may sit with their feet facing Buddha.

I am gathering a collection of ridiculous religious rules. Will anyone who has any please send them to me at Boddington East, Hale Lane, Wendover HP22 6NQ or chap@halevalley.freereserve.co.uk

ANTONY CHAPMAN
Wendover

Secular policies

IT is welcome to finally see a mainstream political party adopt some secular policies. At their recent spring conference, the Liberal Democrats voted for the abolition of the blasphemy laws (which was recommended by the Law Commission as long ago as 1985) and rejected the extension of the Public Order Act 1986 to cover threats, abuse or insults to religion. They even had the courage to vote for the implementation of assisted dying, despite strong objections from some members on religious grounds.

This all makes a welcome change from the increasingly desperate attempts by Labour and the Conservatives to appease the religious lobby.

RALPH LOVESY
London

Horn-shaped universe

IN a recent copy of the *New Scientist*, it is said that new data now indicate that the Universe is rolled up into the shape of a horn, a so-called Picard Topology. As the Horn is a brass musical instrument, I am concerned to know if the Christians are right after all, and this is the Last Trump?

REG LE SUEUR
Jersey

Circumcision

HOW ironic that Stewart Ware's anti-circumcision letter, cavalierly dismissing over 40 studies demonstrating the protective effect of circumcision against HIV, should be printed just weeks after yet another study is published (in *The Lancet*) confirming the previous 40+. Significantly, this new one was in India, culturally very different from Africa, and presents evidence that the effect is a real, biological one and not down to the various confounding factors the anti-circumcision fanatics raise as objections. It

follows a separate study published in the *Journal of Clinical Pathology* in January which found that foreskins contain cells bearing a protein that facilitates attack by HIV. Several controlled studies are currently underway in Africa to specifically address the issues raised by the foreskin protection racket. Doubtless their findings will also be dismissed if they do not fit the prejudices of the smegma brigade.

In true creationist fashion, Ware accuses his critics of his own faults – misrepresentation, selectivity, character attacking, etc. He accuses me of misrepresenting him "as agreeing with the 'studies' that men who wish to restore their foreskins are psychologically disturbed". Well, pardon me, but he does agree with these studies, and his claim that he'd put the word "studies" in quotes is a falsehood. Check the original letter and you'll see that the time he puts the word "studies" in quotes is several paragraphs earlier and in a different context. He is so desperate to accuse me of misrepresentation he has to misrepresent himself to do it!

With regard to AIDS in the USA he is not telling the whole truth. American AIDS is almost all spread by needles or anal sex. No one suggests circumcision helps in these cases. When it is spread heterosexually, it is disproportionately so amongst blacks and Hispanics – precisely the groups amongst whom circumcision is least common. Now who is being selective?

If calling those who support a simple, harmless (if done properly) and potentially life-saving procedure "child genital mutilators" is not attacking their character, then perhaps Mr Ware can explain what is. His whole letter is an almost hysterical attack on his critics. He deliberately conflates female genital mutilation with male circumcision, even though the closest male comparison would probably be something akin to amputation of the entire glans in terms of the devastating effect it would have on sexual pleasure. He also sprinkles his letter with emotive words like "mutilation", "damaging" and "barbaric".

If this catalogue of distortions and hysteria is not enough, he reaches his climax towards the end of his effort as he endows foreskins with magical specialised nerves and fantasises about foreskins gliding back and forth. Unfortunately for him it is all nonsense, as anyone cut as an adult knows. I never noticed any of these special nerves in the 30 years I had a foreskin, nor any callousing of my glans in the 11 years it has been bare. In fact, when Horizon looked at the topic a few years back it was demonstrated that the glans was no more keratinised in the cut than in the uncut.

As for loss of sensitivity and rough sex, my boyfriend, circumcised as an infant as a result of being Muslim (yes, I consort with the enemy!), has found a simple solution to his tendency towards premature ejaculation – he simply car-

ries on gently and does it again! This would be difficult if he was as desensitised and calloused as Ware imagines. In fact, premature ejaculation is the most common sexual dysfunction amongst American men. Odd if they've lost all those vital nerves, and strange gliding abilities. Perhaps they thrust too hard.

Fortunately for Ware I have lost my reference to a recent study that followed up a group of men cut as adults and found that they reported no loss of pleasure.

Finally, if foreskins are so important, why are some males born with very little, and a great many have foreskins that retract and all but disappear upon erection, leaving them with nothing to roll "back and forth"?

DR STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

Tony Smythe

I WAS saddened to learn of the recent death of Tony Smythe at the comparatively early age of 65. As NSS representative on the executive of the National Council for Civil Liberties (Liberty) from 1961 to 1972, I worked happily with him while he was its general secretary (1966-71).

During this time of great intellectual and political ferment, we were able to expand "civil liberties" beyond the traditional freedoms of speech, assembly, worship and publication, with attendant surveillance of the police, law courts, prisons, mental hospitals and refugee detention. This expansion involved, *inter alia*, secularist issues like blasphemy law reform; the rights of children and adults to sex education and contraceptive advice; removing injustices confronting non-religious people in areas like the composition of the House of Lords, religious instruction in schools, prison chaplains, religious broadcasting, adoption and affirmation.

A *Guardian* obituary of Tony described the NCCL as a body with 5,400 individual members. Its real influence, however, stemmed from an affiliated membership of four million, including some religious organisations. Championing non-religion without attacking religion *per se*, and possibly "offending" religious people without curbing their legitimate rights, became a delicate balancing act for the Council. More broadly, it had to enter the political arena without a political banner of its own.

With great tact and personal charm Tony managed to reconcile these conflicting elements. On the Left himself, he recommended me to George Allen & Unwin to write a book on censorship (which became *Questions of Censorship*, 1973), though he must have known that I would record impartially when Left or Right tried to suppress the views of opponents.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia



Political correctness

IN her April letter, Dinah Foweraker takes me to task for including with my article of the previous month, as an example of OTT PC, the news item about a theatre company which put on a production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* but changed the title of the play so as to avoid giving offence to disabled people.

Since neither Victor Hugo's story nor the play of the same name based on it was the property of that theatre, changing the title was a predation of authorship as well as falsification of social and linguistic history.

If classical works of literature are to be tampered with whenever a new PC wind blows, we will eventually lose both our literary heritage and source material for studying the evolution of society. It is comparable with the Soviet Union's practice of air-brushing out of historical group photographs any politician who had since lost favour with Stalin.

Of course school-bullying must never be tolerated, but eliminating it cannot be achieved by censoring particular words, especially in historical reference. The only way is through playground vigilance and the inculcation of empathy by sensitive role reversal.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Jesus the humanist

IN his article "Jesus the humanist" (*Freethinker*, April), Patrick Toland suggests that we "scratch away the spirituality surrounding the man and see his message for what it is – a call to humanism, perhaps?". "Perhaps" is the operative word here – assuming for the sake of argument that Jesus existed, how do we know what the real Jesus actually said, thought or did?

Toland asserts as fact that "Jesus lived as a man and spoke of the kinship of all people". But perhaps the words at Matthew 10:34-7 are the those of the real Jesus: "I did not come to bring peace but a sword ... anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me".

The most admirable teaching of the biblical Jesus is the Golden Rule, but there's little point in trying to second-guess the view of the "real Jesus" on this issue. At worst Jesus never uttered the Golden Rule, and at best he was merely restating a view articulated by earlier thinkers such as Plato and Confucius. I'm quite ready to appropriate the humanistic teachings of the biblical Jesus (or any other figure), and as a result there is some common ground that I'm happy to share with religious people. However, in his attempt to build up Jesus' humanistic credentials, Mr Toland has strayed too far into religious territory for my liking – he went beyond the evidence and indulged in wishful thinking.

ROBERT STOVOLD
Brighton

Puzzled

AS usual, I enjoyed Barry Duke's *Freethinking Allowed* (March) with its usual demonstration of the activities of the god-botherers. But I confess to being a little puzzled at his apparent acceptance of the existence of the Jesus portrayed by Gibson.

Surely no-one who has read and understood Professor G A Wells's books on the Jesus of the gospels and Acts can remain under the delusion that there was an individual who was named Jesus Christ and who acted as he was said to act in those writings?

To answer your query why Christians would want to expose children to scenes of violence in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, I would say that scenes of extreme violence and torture can be very valuable in imprinting on the minds of susceptible children (and adults) the belief that this film is merely a portrayal of all the things already taught in RE lessons and bible classes. By concentrating on how the "Saviour" was ill-treated the fact of his being mythical is suppressed.

DEREK ROBERT
Surrey

Defining humanism

I HAVE just noticed Zelda Bailey's howl of protest (*Points of View*, March) against one paragraph from my article "The Faith of an Atheist" (October 2003) in which I state that "I hesitate to call myself a humanist because I think it unlikely that Homo Sapiens will turn out to be nature's last and best effort ... or that all other terrestrial species exist only to be exploited by man."

Ms Bailey assures me that she and humanists of her acquaintance "respect the rights of other animals" and understand that "evolutionary change will continue as long as life exists."

I am delighted to learn that the atheists of Queensland are so enlightened. However I must point out that, whatever they believe, the term *humanist* inevitably implies that man is the measure of all things and that Homo Sapiens is the crowning glory of the work of nature. It is precisely because, like Ms Bailey and her friends, I reject this perspective that I prefer to avoid that label.

Perhaps, when she has finished howling, Ms Bailey would consider finding a differently worded banner to march under.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

Defining Jewishness

IN HER article "What the World Thinks About God", Barbara Smoker uncritically accepts the (surprising) statistical data in regard of Jews. Such data are misleading because they typically result from grouping together as alike Christians, Jews and Muslims. Unfortunately, the problem of defining Jewishness is a hot potato; my tenta-

tive objection is offered with trepidation.

While certainly, some Jews adhere to the Judaic faith, the vast majority, not least for historical reasons – the Holocaust, pre-Holocaust anti-Semitism, Israel – base their membership on secular grounds (and rarely, one might add, on the notion of Jews as a nation or race). It makes therefore little sense to apply, in regard of religious belief, to Jews the same criteria as to Christians and Muslims (or members of other faiths).

In addition, in states that are not fanatically secular, for instance in "Christian Europe", membership of a (religious) Jewish community guarantees access to important civic and cultural functions untainted by unacceptable ethical and philosophical preconceptions; in such conditions, one might therefore expect the beliefs of religious Jews to differ somewhat from the beliefs of members of dominant faiths.

GERTRUD WALTON
Winchester

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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, May 2, 4.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, May 11. 8pm. Faith Patience: *The Samaritans*.

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, June 11, 7.30pm. Mansell Simpson, film critic: *The Secret Life of Alec Guinness*.

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.

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428502. Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, Bournemouth. Saturday, June 5, 2pm. Liliane Apers: *Belgian Humanism*.

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, Spiershill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. Email: humanist@spiershill.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. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, May 11, 7.30pm. Chris Pilkington: *Humanism and Religion in Northern Ireland*.

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, May 27, 8pm. David Leak: *The Creation of Science by Society*.

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, May 5, 8pm. Dan Bye: *In Defence of Atheism*.

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 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: brianmclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freecservers.com

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

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