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Freethinker

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Steve Altes,
aerospace
engineer, former
presidential aide,
actor, writer and
life-long atheist,
puts an end to
boring Sundays
by becoming an
ordained
minister of the
Universal Life
Church. The
results are
nothing short of
hilarious

- see page 6

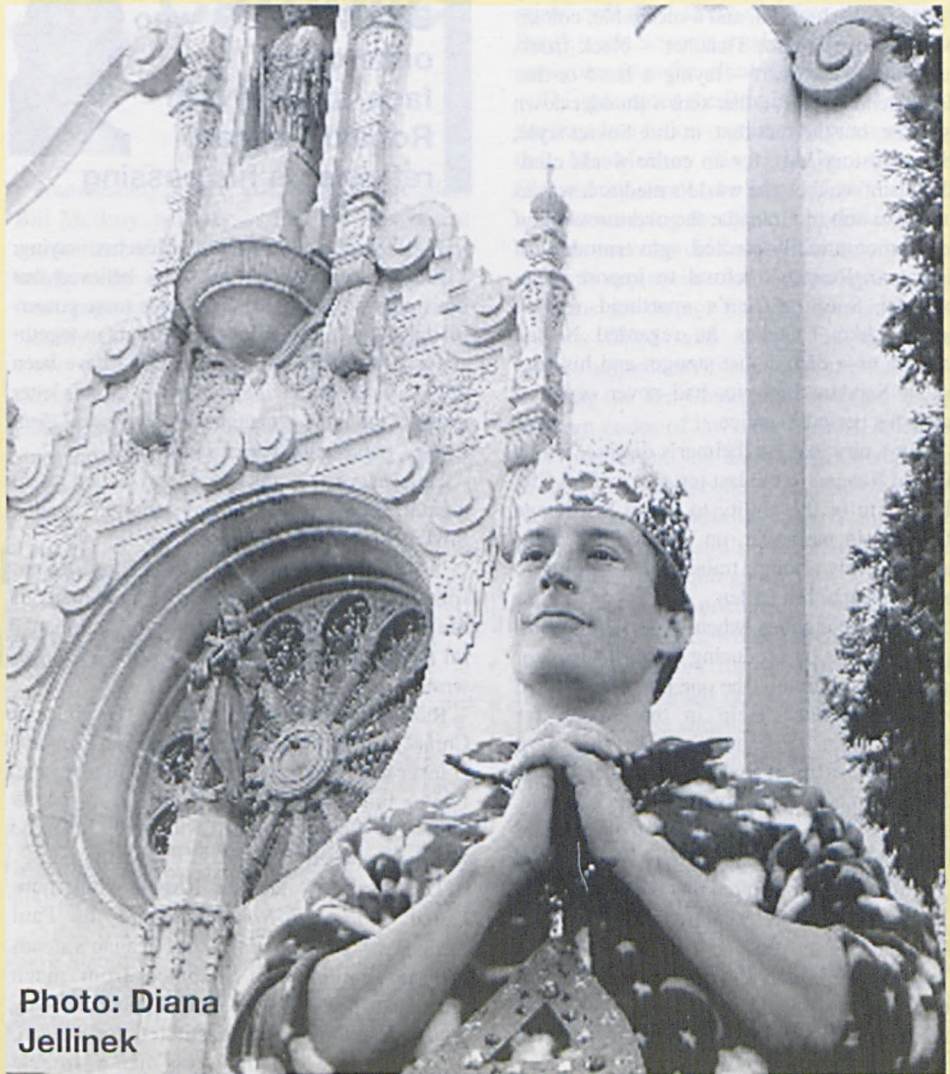


Photo: Diana
Jellinek



**Amnesia sets in with the death
of 'The Great Communicator'**

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WAS IT just me, or did others get a sense of old-style Soviet ritual in the run-up to the planting last month of Ronald Reagan? All that was missing, it seemed to me, was having the dead ex-president embalmed, and laid in a glass coffin for the benefit of the ghouls who queued in their thousands in oppressive heat to bid farewell to what the hagiographers and sycophants would have us believe was "a truly great American".

It was not so much the sight of Reagan lying in state in Washington, and a miserable, colour-coordinated Margaret Thatcher – black frock, black hat, black heart – laying a hand on her "dear friend's" coffin, that sent a shudder down my spine, but the fact that, in true Soviet style, Reagan history was, for an entire week, clinically disinfected by the world's media. It was as if the invasion of Granada: the overthrowing of the democratically-elected government of Nicaragua; Reagan's refusal to impose sanctions on South Africa's apartheid regime because, like Thatcher, he regarded Nelson Mandela as a communist stooge; and his support of Saddam Hussein, had never occurred during his period in office.

What a pity that Alzheimer's disease, which afflicted Reagan in the last ten years of his life, robbed him of the ability to spend his dotage reflecting, in particular, on the terrible consequences of his arming, training and helping to finance Osama bin Laden.

Back in the eighties, when I was supplementing my income by producing button badges for various radical groups, the one that proved most popular declared: "Help in the Search for Reagan's Brain." It came about because most people – in Britain, at any rate – regarded him as a 24-carat imbecile. His insistence, for example, that "trees cause more pollution than automobiles" suggests he was little else.

The Reagan that inspired that badge was pretty much as described by Jenny Bristow, writing last month in the on-line magazine *Spiked!*: "The character sketches of the former president, certainly in the UK, read like a complete inversion of the way that liberal opinion depicted him when he was in power.

"The Reagan of the 1980s was widely ridiculed as an incoherent baboon of the Dubya Bush school. He was seen as a trigger-happy militarist of the most dangerous kind, best buddies with the despised UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and poised to push the world into an earth-ending catastrophic conflict with the Soviet Union, through deliberately inflaming tensions in a Second Cold War. Not that you'd know that now.

"Upon his death, Reagan has been reinvented as a cuddly peacemaker, who brought about lasting friendship with Russia; an older, wiser man of conviction and principle, in contrast to the spin-obsessed upstarts that now govern the USA and UK; a symbol of more stable times, when the West had a clear self-identity and role in the world."

But it was Reagan's religiosity – granted,

mild in comparison to that of the perpetually prayerful George W Bush, but ghastly nonetheless – that really set my teeth on edge.

Like Bush today, Reagan believed he had been chosen by God for a mission – in his case to rid the world of communism. And the fact that he had Thatcher as a "soulmate" reinforced his conviction that Divine Intervention had brought about their union.

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE, who once came face-to-face with Ronald Reagan, reflects on his passing



In 1994, Reagan wrote to Thatcher, saying: "Throughout my life, I've always believed that life's path is determined by a Force more powerful than fate. I feel the Lord has brought us together for a profound purpose, and that I have been richly blessed for having known you". (This letter is one of thousands contained in *Reagan: a Life in Letters*, published last year in the US.)

He was certain that God had called them together, to wage a sacred struggle against Soviet communism, and other "evils".

"I am proud to call you one of my dearest friends, Margaret; proud to have shared many of life's significant moments with you, and thankful that God brought you into my life." Reagan wrote.

Raised by a mother linked to the "Disciples of Christ", a strict Protestant sect, Reagan, in another letter to a friend, confessed "Even in marriage, I had a little guilty feeling about sex, as though the whole thing was tinged with evil." Later, he said, he managed to shake off this feeling.

This year saw another Reagan book published: *God and Ronald Reagan* by Paul Kengor, who demonstrates that Reagan's steadfast anti-communism stemmed from much more than just his convictions about the way governments should be constituted: for Reagan, the Cold War was nothing less than a struggle for the souls of men.

God was involved in every aspect of his daily life, and the Almighty even chose him to become President – precisely in order to help America bring down the scourge of Soviet Communism, Kengor reveals.

Reagan cultivated evangelicals, and he shared their views on many social issues including abortion and homosexuality, which he vigorously opposed. Given the twisted mindset, and the mendacity of many evangelical Christians, it's not surprising that some of it rubbed off on him.

He once famously brought a tear to the eye of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir by recounting how, at the end of World War II, he had been present at the liberation of the Nazi death camps. The truth was that Reagan had never been anywhere near Europe at

that time, having spent the entire war in Hollywood narrating training films for the armed forces.

After an attempt on his life, Reagan returned to the White House and confided in his diary, "Whatever happens now I owe my life to God and will serve him every way I can."

I shall remember Reagan for the terrible blunder he made one sunny afternoon in Los Angeles, when he was running for his first Presidential term in the early 1980s. I was happily sunbathing by a pool at the aptly-named Duke's Motel in Santa Monica Boulevard, lower Hollywood, when, to my amazement, a grinning Reagan looked over the motel's low perimeter wall, and attempted to engage in friendly banter and handshakes with the lads around the pool – none of whom seemed particularly charmed by his attempts at trawling for votes.

His friendliness suddenly evaporated, and his smile froze when two men in black – clearly his minders – rushed over to him and said something which sounded remarkable like "faggots!". "The Great Communicator", as he later became known, turned tail, jumped into a long, black limousine, and disappeared – derisive laughter ringing in his ears.

Someone should have warned him that this part of Hollywood, known as "boys' town", was the gay district – enemy territory – and that Duke's was about as gay as it gets!

ALAS, we hear very little these days of the Monster Raving Loony Party since the death of its leader Screaming Lord Sutch in 1999. But an even dottier party has stepped in to fill the void.

Operation Christian Vote is Britain's newest political party. Its driving purpose "is to give Christians the opportunity to turn their vote into a voice for the Lord Jesus Christ". According to its Statement of Faith, "We believe all government to be under the authority of God and that the purpose of government is the maintenance of freedom and justice solely in accordance with biblical principles".

So it's down with abortion, stem-cell research (dubbed by the party as "cannibalism"), same-sex unions and all the other barking baggage attached to fulminating fundies.

I sorely miss the antics of the MRLP, whose policies were designed, if nothing else, to bring a little laughter into our lives.

With its rallying call "Vote insanity, you know it makes sense", the Party, with a membership of 17,000, had policies that included breeding fish in a European wine lake so they could be caught ready-pickled; giving pensioners heated toilet seats; and extending the Channel Tunnel to Switzerland to give Britain tax haven status.

In contrast, OCV's pursed-lipped, swivel-eyed aim is to "awaken the sleeping giant" that is the Christian vote in Britain, and turn the country into a Taleban-style theocracy. If they ever succeed, stand by for an extravaganza of witch-burnings on *TV's Ready, Steady, Cook*.



A war of words has erupted in Brighton following the banning by a Catholic school of a one-man show based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Tim Crouch's play, *I Peasebottom*, was booked by St Mary's Roman Catholic School in Portslade for an audience of nine-year-olds, but immediately after the performance furious head teacher Joyce Jones called the organisers of the annual Brighton festival, who recommended the play, claiming that it was filthy, blasphemous and "totally inappropriate". And she contacted another school which had booked the play and urged its head teacher to cancel it, which he did.

Ms Jones revealed that Tim Crouch, who has produced children's plays for the National Theatre, had asked pupils to play characters who, in the original romp, have sex in the woods, joked about "making love" and "coupling", and performed mock blessings in the devoutly religious school with a blue teddy bear.

Mr Crouch hit back, saying the children really enjoyed it. "They melted into giggles and loved the gorgeous anarchy of it. I find it very sad that one of the schools cancelled, and we could not perform it for the children."

Bard's work banned as unsuitable for Catholic kids

Immediately afterwards, Brighton resident Bill McLroy, who serves on the management committee of the National Secular Society, wrote to the *Argus*, which ran the story as a front page lead, saying that to label the show "totally inappropriate" was "rather ironic in view of the legal compulsion to teach Christianity in the nation's schools. How can Christianity be instilled in the young without studying the Bible? This holy book is the sacrosanct word of God who decreed the mass

slaughter of infants, condoned slavery, inflicted plagues on whole populations, and demanded animal sacrifices.

"He also commanded the killing of witches, thus inspiring witch-hunts that claimed thousands of victims.

"Suppression always causes controversy. Prudish censors have never learnt that their actions invariably backfire. Declaring Tim Crouch's performance 'unsuitable' and 'inappropriate' will most likely stimulate interest in the Bard's work. So some good, even if it unintended, may come from the silliness at Portslade."

This prompted the Rev John Webster to join the fray. In a follow-up letter he acknowledged that Mr McLroy "is right in saying that Christianity cannot be instilled in the young without studying the Bible, but this is done in schools and church Sunday Schools in a way which is appropriate for their age group.

"Thus we do not find religious instruction lessons filled with stories of infanticide, slaves, animal sacrifices, etc, but emphasis on teaching the Ten Commandments (the basis of Western codes of law); the Psalms, The Book of Proverbs and the teaching on social issues of the great eighth-century prophets ... and the New Testament teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer, including the revolutionary teachings of both Jesus and St Paul to 'love your enemies.'

"Are these truths, which have influenced our culture and history for good over many centuries, to be denied our children, while their minds are filled with sex and violence?"

"We have many problems today because children are brought up in a society where sex has become a subject for smutty jokes and frivolous banter instead of being regarded as the wonderful God-given gift it is to mankind."

Mr McLroy hit back at once: "The Rev Webster ventured into dangerous territory when associating the ethos of Roman Catholic educational establishments with the 'wonderful God-given gift' of sex. The Church has paid a heavy price for the abuse of young children in its schools and institutions. This scandal and the celibacy of priests and members of some teaching orders may not be unconnected.

"Mr Webster is following in the footsteps of the censorious Dr Bowdler, from whose prudery no writer was safe. Shakespeare's works were his first 'clean-up' job. Nearer our own time, theatre censorship prevented adults seeing plays by Ibsen, Shaw and Miller. It seems the blight of Bowdlerism is still with us.

"Mr Webster's pick 'n' mix approach to biblical texts will not do. If the Bible is the infallible word of God, it is divinely inspired truth. If not, it is just another book compiled by unknown persons at uncertain dates.

"Yet it is used as a kind of fetish for swearing in our courts of law and Parliament. Worse, it is used in schools as a source of moral teaching."

Leading Australian bishop resigns over abuse scandal

AUSTRALIA'S second-highest Anglican, Adelaide Archbishop Ian George, has resigned over a child-sex-abuse scandal. His position became untenable after his own diocesan council demanded that he step down. This followed calls to resign from acting South Australian Premier Kevin Foley and Melbourne barrister Stephen Howells, a national Anglican synod member.

Dr George denied that his resignation was in response to public pressure, saying it was "because of my love for the body of Christ and desire for its unity".

"Archbishops do not resign from office in response to public outcry, media pressure or internal church deliberations," he said in a statement. "I wish to repeat how distressed I am at the pain and suffering experienced by those who have been abused. Where I have been at fault ... I deeply apologise. I accept my responsibility as archbishop."

Dr George, deputy primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, was due to retire in August. But pressure began building up after an independent report on the church's handling of sex-abuse cases was tabled in the South Australian Parliament last month.

The report claimed a paedophile network was at work within the Church, and said the Church's first priority when faced with abuse

claims was self-protection.

Former Supreme Court judge Trevor Olsson and lecturer Donna Chung said the church was "uncaring towards victims" and "more concerned with its legal and insurance responsibilities than the healing of those who have been abused".

Since May last year, South Australian police have identified 143 victims of child-sex abuse and up to 58 possible offenders, dating back decades.

Dr George is the second high-profile Anglican cut down by abuse scandals in a year. Governor-General Peter Hollingworth resigned last May over criticism of his handling of sex abuse when he was archbishop of Brisbane.

The Anglican Primate of Australia, Perth Archbishop Peter Carnley, expressed regret at the resignation of "a friend and valued colleague".

A senior Anglican said that Dr George was the first Australian bishop forced to resign apart from issues of personal morality.

"It is unprecedented for a diocesan council to make a public ultimatum," he said. "They don't do it lightly."

Mr Howells said Dr George had to resign after "presiding over a diocese where these appalling sets of events have occurred".

THE Government's preoccupation – some would call it an obsession – with “faith communities” shows little sign of abating. Indeed, a new report from the Home Office, *Religion in England and Wales: Findings from the 2001 Citizenship Survey*, signals an even greater determination by New Labour to empower religious groups, and give them greater access to decision-making – this at a time when survey after survey, including its own research in the 2001 Citizenship report, indicates that Britain is one of the least religious nations in the world.

In the introduction to the Home Office report, Godfrey Stadlen, Head of the Faith Communities Unit, referred to “the importance which the government attaches to effective engagement with and understanding of faith communities. These communities together represent over three-quarters of the population of England and Wales. Most people derive their values and ethical and charitable motivation from faith. And faith communities constitute a very significant part of the voluntary and community sector.

“The government recognises that faith raises distinct issues in a range of areas of public policy, and that faith communities oversee substantial community resources.

“It follows from this that policies for build-

ing community cohesion, promoting civil renewal and building active citizenship cannot be fully effective unless they take account of the particular needs and perspectives of faith communities.

“That is why the government has recently established the Faith Communities Unit in the Home Office, with a remit to help government to understand and engage with faith communities. And it is also why the Home Office Minister Fiona Mactaggart chaired a review, with the assistance of a Steering Group of Ministers and faith representatives, of the government's interface with the faith communities.

“The publication of this survey of religion in England and Wales is doubly important and valuable – both as the first such report of its kind and as a source of key information to inform policy on government-faith relations. The report is based on the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey and provides for the first time insights into identity and religion, experiences of religious discrimination and religion as a driver of social and civic participation and attitudes. The study will remain a key source of information and insights, and will inform policy, for many years to come.”

Using data from over 15,000 interviews with people in England and Wales in the 2001

Home Office Citizenship Survey, this report shows that almost four out of every five people in England and Wales expressed a religious affiliation. The largest number (74 percent) described themselves as Christians. Muslims (2 percent) and Hindus (2 percent) were the largest of the remaining faith communities.

The figure of 74 per cent is, of course, wholly misleading, reflecting only a phenomenon known as cultural Christianity – ie the tendency of respondents to claim affiliation to, say, the C of E, when such affiliation is purely nominal.

A much more significant finding was that, overall, a mere *one-fifth* of the respondents considered religion to be an important part of their self-identity after family, work, age/life stage and their interests. More respondents from minority faith communities and minority ethnic groups felt religion was important.

Another telling statistic was that, despite claims that “faith communities” were necessary to engender responsible citizenship and boost voluntary activity, the Home Office report shows that there was very little difference between the levels of civic participation of respondents with (39 percent) and without (40 percent) a religious affiliation in the 12 months prior to the survey.

So how faith czar Godfrey Stadlen can claim

Religious hatred law in Australia descends into high farce

LEGISLATION against religious vilification in Victoria, Australia, has already run into serious trouble – indeed, it has descended into high farce as a result of a case brought against the Christian Fundamentalist Catch the Fire Ministry by the Islamic Council of Victoria, which claims that Islam was vilified at a 2002 CFM seminar. (The Council is suing CFM under Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001.)

Victoria's first religious hatred case was brought before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, and is still ongoing.

One man – a Muslim who originally supported the introduction of anti-vilification laws – now sees them as a grave mistake. Amir Butler, Executive director of the Australian Muslim Public Affairs Committee, writing in the *Melbourne Age* last month, said: “As someone who once supported their introduction and is a member of one of the minority groups they purport to protect, I can say with some confidence that these laws have served only to undermine the very religious freedoms they intended to protect.

“At every major Islamic lecture I have attended since litigation began against Catch the Fire Ministries, there have been small groups of evangelical Christians – armed with notepads and pens – jotting down any comment that might later be used as evidence in

the present case or presumably future cases.

“The organisations being targeted by these evangelical Christians are neither involved in nor supported the legal action by the Islamic Council, and yet must now suffer the consequences of having their publications and public utterances subjected to a ridiculous level of scrutiny and analysis – the hope being, I assume, that some elements of the Christian community might exact revenge on the Muslim community by way of their own vexatious legal actions.

“The problem is that as long as religions articulate a sense of what is right, they cannot avoid also defining – whether explicitly or implicitly – what is wrong.

“If we love God, then it requires us to hate idolatry. If we believe there is such a thing as goodness, then we must also recognise the presence of evil. If we believe our religion is the only way to Heaven, then we must also affirm that all other paths lead to Hell. If we believe our religion is true, then it requires us to believe others are false.

“Yet, this is exactly what this law serves to outlaw and curtail: the right of believers of one faith to passionately argue against or warn against the beliefs of another.

“It is obvious that criticism of one's religion is likely to offend, but just as Muslims should

be entitled to aggressively criticise other faiths, likewise those same faiths should be afforded the right to voice their concerns about Islam.

“The idea that such speech — regardless of how wrong-headed or offensive it might appear — must be banned to protect these religious communities is a furphy: discrimination on the basis of religion was already outlawed; incitement to commit violence was already illegal; and slander was already covered by existing legal instruments.

“All these anti-vilification laws have achieved is to provide a legalistic weapon by which religious groups can silence their ideological opponents, rather than engaging in debate and discussion.

“In doing so, people who otherwise might have been ignored as on the fringes of reality will be made martyrs, and their ideas given an airing far beyond anything they might have hoped for.

“And at the same time as extremist ideas are strengthened and given legitimacy by attempts to silence them, the position in our society of the religions themselves is weakened and undermined.

“Who, after all, would give credence to a religion that appears so fragile it can only exist if protected by a bodyguard of lawyers?”

that "most people derive their values and ethical and charitable motivation from faith" is beyond comprehension. Furthermore, the Home Office's own report says that people who have higher incomes, live in more affluent areas, and possess better qualifications, are more likely to engage in civic affairs and join voluntary organisations than those less well-off or educated. And it is this group that's the least religious. "More respondents with no religious affiliation (33 percent) had attained the highest levels of recognised qualifications than their counterparts belonging to a faith community," according to the report.

'In any post-enlightenment democratic society there must be an impenetrable wall keeping church (mosque or synagogue) and state apart. The choice for government is not between good superstition and bad superstition, it is between delusion and reason'

Secularists would argue that whatever statistics were produced in the survey, the issue of faith should be of *no concern whatsoever* to government. What it should do is promote integration, and combat social deprivation, low educational standards, and unemployment – particularly among the Muslim population, a shocking 20 percent of whom, according to the report, had never worked (outside the home). This was the highest percentage of any of the groups polled.

From this, one must conclude that religion – with its tendency to instil a fatalistic paralysis among devotees – has served disadvantaged groups – Muslims in particular – very badly. What they need is *less*, not more, religion.

That governments should steer well clear of religion was best expressed in an article published last month in *The Age*, Melbourne, in which columnist Terry Lane asserted "Governments have only two obligations with religion – to protect the freedom of individuals to be silly in their own chosen ways, and to guarantee that delusion will not be a basis for discrimination. Governments owe no other due."

Australia, like Britain, has – in the name of political correctness, and in deference to the pernicious, muddle-headed concept of "multiculturalism" – enacted anti-discrimination laws, designed to give equal respect to all

religions. Lane thinks this is wrong, and says we should look to France for a more sensible approach: "The French policy is a much better one – treat all religions with the same haughty indifference, and control or prohibit their intrusion into the public sphere.

"In any post-enlightenment democratic society there must be an impenetrable wall keeping church (mosque or synagogue) and state apart. The choice for government is not between good superstition and bad superstition, it is between delusion and reason."

As an example of the sort of difficulties governments can land themselves in when entering the realm of religion, Lane cited a *Sunday Times* (London) report about a leaked British government document detailing a strategy for splitting moderate Muslims from the more radical and dangerous devotees of Allah. Reuters' website headlined the story "Charm offensive against Muslim extremists".

"Under the scheme – for which harebrained is a scarcely adequate adjective – the British Government will give state funding to moderate imams and mosques while forcing would-be immigrant imams to swear undying loyalty to 'the British way of life'. Failure to say the words will result in exclusion or expulsion. Good grief!

"The first part sounds like good old mafia protection. Paying people merely to be peaceful, law-abiding citizens is exactly what happens when shop owners pay Tony Soprano not to smash their windows," wrote Lane.

"And what self-respecting Muslim would-be martyr is going to have any difficulty reciting whatever form of words might be put in front of him to gain entry to the country that the radicals have pledged to turn into an Islamic theocracy under sharia?"

"However, to give the British Government its due, it is in a desperate bind. There are an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 al-Qaeda supporters among the Muslims of Britain, many of them unemployed and disaffected youth. It is an explosion waiting to happen.

"The Madrid bombing focused the minds of the British cabinet on the need to minimise the influence of the more dangerously deluded leaders of the Islamic community. The Government project to fund moderates and exclude radicals is called Project Contes and its aim is 'to prevent terrorism by tackling its underlying causes . . . to diminish support for terrorists by influencing relevant social and economic issues'.

"The 'underlying cause' is exclusivist religion. The French Government's attitude is preferable to London's. Governments must be secular in their philosophies and policies. Religion is a private matter on which governments should have no opinion and in the affairs of which no government should meddle.

"Last year, the Australian Government was proposing to put money into moderate Islamic schools in Indonesia, which is an idea even more preposterous than the British protection racket.

"Not only was it based on the assumption that there are good Muslims and bad Muslims and we should give the good ones a leg-up, it was also the most outrageous proposal for interfering in the affairs of another nation. Imagine the outrage if we found that the Saudi Government was pumping money into 'good' Christian schools in Australia.

When government seeks to engage with faith communities, it must, of necessity, be even-handed across the spectrum, and herein lies another serious problem, identified by *Guardian* columnist and National Secular Society honorary associate Polly Toynbee, on June 11.

Referring to a report from Muslim academics and educationalists who found the present system "institutionally racist", and who demanded more Muslim schools and equal treatment, Toynbee pointed out that one-third of British state schools are faith schools, and almost 7,000 of them are Christian. Only five are Islamic.

"The report calls for Islamic schools to be fast-tracked into the state system and the government has trouble thinking of any non-racist reasons why not. If so much Jesus, why not more Mohammed?"

"The small Muslim population – under 3 percent nationwide – now has more regular mosque attenders than there are C of E churchgoers. With 26 C of E Bishops passing laws in the House of Lords, and so many Christian state schools, the injustice of it is no longer sustainable. We expect Muslims to integrate, and yet offer them a model of society that deliberately excludes them.

"The answer, as secularists always said, is for the state to abolish all faith schools. It would take no more than an Act of Parliament."

David Aaronovitch, writing in the *Observer*, addressed the "problem" of Islamophobia thus: "One of my *Guardian* colleagues argued that Islamophobia was the new weapon for attacking faith schools. I would argue the opposite: that an abuse of the term 'Islamophobic' is becoming a new weapon for attacking those who want to see a non-denominational, equal education system.

"The truth is that denominational schools are beginning to crowd out secular parents, or those whose first allegiance is not to religion. They increasingly find that their choices are circumscribed by religious-based schooling they do not want. And it is making hypocrites of the others."

– Lynette van Dam

The Porteous Wood column

KEITH Porteous Wood, whose regular column normally appears on these two pages, has kindly stepped down this month to allow us to accommodate contributions from other writers. He will be back in August

AS A life-long atheist, it occurred to me recently that maybe I was missing out on something. Everyone else had something to do Sunday mornings. All I had was sleeping late, hot sex, smooth jazz, and the Sunday paper. Maybe I needed more, I don't know - divinity? - in my life. So, two minutes and a couple of mouse clicks later, I became an ordained minister of the Universal Life Church (www.ulc.org) of Modesto, California.

Their website warns, "Silly submissions such as animals, plants, and cars are not recorded into the Church's database." So I immediately ordain my cat, ficus, and Buick Skylark.

My first order of business is to ensure that joining the clergy does not incite in me a desire to sodomize young boys. I scan myself for paedophilic urges. Nope, I still detest the little punks. My second task is to decide whether to order the ULC's "Ministry in a Box" for \$129. This puppy is crammed with all sorts of religious doodads: Holy Land incense, a Doctor of Divinity degree, a sainthood canonization document, minister's ID card, ULC badge, church literature, bylaws and regulations.

Although it is tempting to be canonized Saint Stephen, I remember pop artist Billy Joel's wise counsel about laughing sinners and crying saints and decide to screw the paperwork. My ministry will be light on documentation.

Before you ask what good deeds I have done to merit this spiritual elevation, consider some of the things I have not done: unlike Pope Gregory IX, I never started a Spanish Inquisition; unlike Pope Urban VIII, I never imprisoned Galileo for saying the earth revolves around the Sun. I never burned anyone at the stake or started a Crusade. Seems to me these popes set the bar for holiness pretty low.

Eager to put my theological credentials to use, I read my ordination message. It says, "Every rite is granted to you by the ULC to officiate and perform except circumcision." I love that they feel it necessary to advise people that clicking a mouse does not qualify them to perform genital surgery on newborns. I can only assume this warning stems from a past incident. Foreskin, off-limits. I can live with that. But surely somebody around here must need a marriage officiated, a sermon, a baptism, or, if I'm lucky, an exorcism.

But before I start a-preachin' I need the proper vestments. So I shoo Chaplain Tigger off my lap, water the Reverend Ficus, hop in the Minister Skylark and head off shopping.

I need an outfit that says "This is a person you can trust with your innermost secrets and look to for sage guidance," while at the same time saying "This person believes there is an invisible, omnipotent, supernatural being in the sky, who, with the proper supplications,

can be persuaded to affect the outcome of high school football games, while simultaneously maintaining a strictly hands-off policy with regard to epidemics, terrorism, and genocide."

Basically, my look must strike a balance between caring and crazy.

At a thrift store I hit pay dirt. I snag a sun-and-moon fleece robe and dress it up with some gold drapery roping around the waist. One crucifix later and I'm done. I'm dressed, blessed, and ready to impress.

Time to tend to my flock. But first, I must gather a flock. I place an ad on Craigslist.org, the electronic bulletin board, offering marriage officiating for \$99.

I want people to look at me in awe and think, "Wow, there goes a man with power vested in him", says STEVE ALTES, a Californian atheist who has become hooked on the delights of ordination

Two days later I get an e-mail from David. He and his fiancée, Denise, "aren't too religious, but want someone spiritual." Ain't that always the way? He asks for details about my services.

I tell him "my philosophy is that wedding services are too damn serious. My vows will draw inspiration from the ones Homer Simpson wrote, which began, 'Do you Marge, take Homer, in richness and in poorness? Poorness is underlined. In impotence and potence? In quiet solitude, or blasting across the alkali flats in a jet-powered, monkey-navigated hovercraft.' That's my kind of ceremony!"

As a bonus, I throw in my "ever-lasting love guarantee: If I wed you and your marriage doesn't last five years, I'll refund your money!" What other minister can make that claim?

Amazingly, David e-mails me back and says, "that sounds like fun." Luckily he doesn't ask to see my credentials. He even pays up front.

Their ceremony is three months away, those procrastinators. The night before the wedding I start writing their eternal vows, drawing inspiration from many sources: The Bible, TheOnion.com, a book of love poetry, the Farmer's Almanac, fortune cookie slips I have amassed over the years, Tony Robbins' *Awaken the Giant Within*, and some Hallmark greeting cards. Mine is an eclectic religion. I scrupulously avoid any quotations from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. Is that guy overdone at weddings or what?

When I finally write the line, "By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife," I get goose bumps. It has been my lifelong dream to stand before a group and say those words.

I want people to look at me in awe and think, "Wow, there goes a man with power vested in him."

At the ceremony I decide I need some catch-phrases, to toss at people as they pass by. I settle on "Shazam," "God digs ya," "Bless your guts out," and the whispered "You're God's favorite."

The ceremony goes surprisingly well. The guests laugh at the right places. I deliver the line, "If anyone objects to the union of these two people, let him speak now or forever hold his peace" and pause a good long time for dramatic effect while I scan the room, hoping a wild-eyed fellow will burst in screaming, "I object to this unholy union! The bride is still engaged to my brother, who is in a coma." No such luck.

After the service I dole out handfuls of dried frijole beans to the kids and tell them to pelt the happy couple while shouting, "Holy Frijole!" My pious little disciples can't wait to perform this religious rite and immediately bombard the mother of the bride. I brandish my crucifix in defence against her evil eye.

Later, one woman says my vows were the most interesting she's ever heard, though she says "interesting" in the same euphemistic way we use to describe someone's ghastly new haircut.

David and Denise make a cute couple and I wish them well as they depart for Antigua. I hope they stay married forever. Or at least five years.

Next on my agenda is to deliver a sermon. I enter a cinder-block strip mall church and intro-



Piety personified: Steve Altes in full spiritual mode

duce myself to the minister as an Archcardinal Deacon Missionary of the Universal Life Church. I ask him if I could be a special guest preacher one Sunday. He says he has never heard of the Universal Life Church. Where has this guy been? The ULC's website claims 18.3 million ordained ministers worldwide, meaning one out of every 345 people on the planet is a ULC minister. That suggests that there are at least 289 ULC ministers in my hometown of Burbank, California. I doubt his congregation has that many members. I bring him up to speed on how the Internet (you know, the thing that brings you kiddie porn, Reverend) lets anyone be a minister. He scoffs at this notion but invites me to join his church. I bless his guts out and leave. Speaking in tongues.

I go home and rethink my strategy. I need an audience less critical, more captive. An hour later I arrive at a local nursing home. I pop in the TV room and find seven drooling geezers watching a test pattern. I kill the tube and work the room, making crosses, touching people's foreheads, softly saying, "The power of Christ compels you. The power of Christ compels you." Who says I can't sneak in a little exorcism?

Next I feed them Ritz crackers faux-communion style. "Body of Christ?" I say. "Would you like some delicious body of Christ today? He tastes best with peanut butter."

Then I begin my sermon. Unfortunately, my knowledge of scripture is right up there with my knowledge of Etruscan history. But I figure I've inadvertently heard a whole bunch of preaching on the radio.

I've seen *Elmer Gantry* and *The Apostle* three times. Maybe I learned something by osmosis. Besides, preachers don't make a whole lot of sense anyway. I think the key is to speak in a soothing, monotone voice with random bursts of emphasis.

What tumbles out of my mouth for the next five minutes sounds something like: "And Moses said unto Noah, 'go ye verily unto the seas and take the filthy beasts with ye.' And God said that it was good. And Eve said that it was good. ALL HAIL THE MIGHTY NOAH! Hear ye, hear ye. I sayeth unto you, thou art smaller than a pygmy shrew's belly button lint compared to God's humongous excellence. For God is neither a slob like one of us, nor a stranger on the bus. Hallelujah, Jesus Christ, ye superstar!"

If I got some of the details wrong, no one seems to notice. Some smile; a few clap. I take a bow, feed them more Christ and leave with a flourish, my robe billowing in my wake like a cape. *Shazam!*

Having come this far, I think if only I could perform a baptism, my ecclesiastical life would be complete. The ULC's ordination message says that how I choose to practice my

newfound religion is up to me. I convene my Council of Elders (friends Ralph and Mark) for advice. Soon a schism develops. One faction wants to baptize people using holy water balloons flung from the roof of my apartment building. Another faction wants to baptize people by dumping buckets of holy water on them as they ride the log flume under a walkway at a local theme park.

While both these rituals have their appeal, I think the Elders are excessively fixated on the kinetic possibilities of holy water.

No, I need more face-to-face interaction with my parishioners.

I decide to anoint an entire public swimming pool, perform a mass baptism of unsuspecting swimmers, then hand out certificates.

The next day I put my plan in motion. Wearing my robe and a ceremonial crown (graciously provided by Burger King), I stand at the lip of a city pool. I blow a whistle and issue the terse command, "Abracadabra, water be holy."

When swimmers climb out I congratulate them on being baptized into the Universal Life Church and hand them their commemorative certificates. One convert is so dazed by the purifying effects of my baptismal effort that

he cannot even muster the strength to hold the paper in his hand. It flutters to the cement after a few steps. Besides littering, other popular responses to baptism are "Is this a hidden camera show?" and "Fuck you."

One non-believer tells me pool water can't be used for a baptism. I silence her with: "Well, the earth is mostly a closed system, like a terrarium. The same water that existed eons ago is still here. So the water I baptized you with today may have been stegosaurus piss millions of years ago. If the water tasted funny that might be why."

I must say, since my ordination, Sundays have become a lot busier and heaps of fun. There's no telling what might happen.

And my matrimonial services are in such high demand I had to double my price.

Undoubtedly some people will find my venture sacrilegious. To them I say, "Have you seen the churches that call themselves the 'Church of Jesus Christ, Scientist?'"

Now Jesus may have been many things, but to call him a scientist is to seriously pad his resume. In a world where Christ can be a scientist, why can't an atheist be a minister?"

Then while they ponder that, I run away before they burn me at the stake.

Jehovah's Witnesses accused of creating a 'paedophile paradise'

A GROUP has been set up in Nashville, Tennessee, to combat the sexual abuse policies of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

William Bowen, founder of an organisation called Silentlambs says he established the Nashville branch to educate the public and "give a voice to survivors of child sexual abuse that had been silenced by the institution of Jehovah's Witnesses."

The group claims rules of the Witnesses protect child molesters. The Witnesses, however, insist that they are committed to doing everything their faith allows to prevent abuse.

The establishment of this newest branch serves to highlight the fact that, while the clergy sex-abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church has dominated headlines during the past two years, smaller American religious bodies are having to deal with variations on the same problem.

The Hare Krishnas, with 100,000 devotees in the United States and Canada, are working on a settlement with 540 students who claim they were abused in boarding schools while their parents were practicing

the faith by chanting and begging. A \$400 million suit by 91 of them drove the Hindu group into bankruptcy.

In a trial that began in April, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America agencies, including an Ohio seminary, were charged with negligence in ordaining a pastor who molested 14 boys.

And the Presbyterian Church (USA) assembly is discussing rules to tighten handling of abuse allegations after a case in which a missionary molested 19 girls.

The Jehovah's Witnesses dispute involves a highly insular community of one million US followers of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, whose unique doctrines include a belief that the end times are imminent. Adherents are famed for door-to-door distribution of *Awake!* and *Watchtower* magazines.

Bowen founded Silentlambs after he quit as an elder in Draffenville, Kentucky, saying Watchtower took no action against an alleged molester. He charged that the group's rules created a "paedophile paradise."

Frustration is the constant companion of those freethinkers who try to separate the religiously-minded from their treasured beliefs. While this may be exasperating we must acknowledge that the task of purging supernatural belief from the mind is a difficult if not an impossible one, since, as I hope to show, its roots lie deeply within consciousness itself. If religion had not possessed some natural affinity with human nature it would not have enjoyed the longevity and durability that have characterised it.

Why, for example, do stories about religion and the supernatural, when inculcated into young minds, retain their credibility into adulthood while those about Santa Claus are seen for what they are by late childhood? Perhaps this is because the former chimes with the human psyche in a way that the latter does not. While the idea of an affinity between man and religion will find approval amongst believers I would hope to offer reasons for this that do not depend on the supernatural.

It seems clear that the persistence of supernatural belief whether expressed through religion or otherwise requires an explanation that goes much deeper than indoctrination and religious conditioning. Even atheists, if they are honest, must admit that at certain times of inattention they find themselves reverting to a paradigm of belief that they thought they had long since transcended. Indeed, my main objective is to suggest some rational reasons for this phenomenon, which, due to their subjective nature, may have been overlooked.

While atheists are likely to attribute such lapses to the religious conditioning of their formative years, I fear that believers may be disposed to regard them as a kind of subjective proof of the existence of God and the supernatural. The logjam of supernatural belief can only be fully cleared from the minds of believers and non-believers alike when they discover the fundamental reasons for its appeal.

In the following paragraphs I hope to convince non-believers that the apparent effectiveness of religious conditioning is due more to the resonance it enjoys with human consciousness than the systematic nature of its promulgation. At the same time I would wish to persuade believers that the inner promptings that masquerade as certainties are not always what they seem, and far from being "spiritual" in origin may be a necessary characteristic of consciousness itself.

Several authors have suggested that the human mind is "hard-wired" for supernatural belief. One such author is Matthew Alper, who, in his book *The God Part of the Brain*, claims that the emergence of self-awareness in protohumans triggered an evolutionary process that led to otherworldly belief. Self-awareness, he suggests, exposed protohumans to knowledge of their own mortality. While

some individuals were able to withstand the impact of this frightening realisation, many were not. Those who found the stark prospect of death unbearable fell into decline while the survivors went on to become more and more accepting of the situation through the process of natural selection. Since the changes up to this point are merely a matter of degree as opposed to substance they are quite credible.

However, Alper proceeds to suggest a further step of a different order to the straightforward improvement in courage and fortitude of the foregoing. Here he postulates the apparently spontaneous appearance of "spiritually aware" individuals, who, for reasons of their belief, were even less vulnerable to anxiety than their forebears.

JAMES MCKENNA
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that
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marking the
childhood of the
species



Unfortunately, Alper's thesis is not altogether convincing since he fails to describe the mechanism accounting for the sudden appearance of the spiritually aware individuals in the race. Nor does he explain why natural selection in this one instance should be based on concepts that relate to a non-material world. In the absence of a supporting rationale, the appearance of the new spiritual concept almost requires belief in the involvement of a god-like agency.

The following quotation illustrates the lack of antecedents to support the proposed cognitive function:

The process continued until a cognitive function emerged that altered the way protohumans perceived reality by adding a "spiritual" component to their perspectives. Just as the human brain had evolved musical, linguistic and mathematical intelligence, we apparently evolved "spiritual" intelligence as well. (Alper, 2001).

While Alper's ideas are a genuine attempt to place the growth of supernatural belief in an evolutionary context, they fall short of being unequivocally materialistic. In order to explain the spiritual component in human personality, Alper's thesis requires additional evolutionary

Consciousness misunderstood

development following the appearance of "ordinary" human consciousness.

This led to an increase in individuals with a spiritual component that protected them psychologically from the crippling fear of death. However, this theory loses credibility when we consider that it requires the process of physical evolution to produce a cognitive function capable of apprehending a non-physical dimension. Given this apparent incongruity, we may be justified in seeking an alternative solution that does not make such special demands on evolution.

To begin with, I would suggest that evolution completed its task with respect to supernatural belief when it delivered humanity to the point of full self-conscious awareness. From this point on, psychological processes alone were all that were necessary to bring us to our present state of supernatural susceptibility. In the following paragraphs I hope to show that supernatural and religious belief, far from representing a higher development in human personality, are in fact due to man's continued failure to understand consciousness itself.

There can be little doubt that supernatural belief could not have arisen before the dawn of self-awareness. However, I do not believe that the cited fear of death was necessary to trigger its development. Before casting the fear of death in this role perhaps we should consider self-awareness itself as a possible candidate. An inseparable part of self-awareness is the sense of apparent duality, which is the constant experience of all humanity. If a causal connection could be found between our shared sense of duality and the existence of supernatural belief, we would need neither the fear of death nor Alper's unsupported cognitive function to account for it.

Duality is the defining feature of the mind. If the mind is not directed to the external world it is reflecting on its own inner world of thoughts and feelings. Whatever is under consideration the subject/object relationship remains constant.

While modern man has the choice of understanding his apparent duality in terms of time, memory and levels of consciousness, primitive man would have been limited to the simpler model of body and soul. He would, of necessity, have regarded himself as consisting of a material body and a mysterious internal entity that motivated and controlled his body and behaviour. In addition, the successive phases of thought, action and reflection that comprise

Business misunderstood

man's conscious experience would have reinforced the sense of duality that pervaded his mind. Furthermore, he would have had the constant experience of seeing this model reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of all the other individuals around him.

Primitive man's developing intellect would have given him the power to ask deeper questions about death. In observing a deceased colleague, he would have realised that, while he was still recognisable, one part of his duality had apparently gone – the animating, thinking, monitoring part. Put simply, the death state would have been perceived by primitive man as the absence of the inner part of the duality rather than its mere dysfunction. Given this understanding of death a name – spirit, for example – would have been required for the

Religion, far from being a holy revelation from God, is merely the outcome of a racial error arising from man's collective failure to comprehend the nature of consciousness itself

"departed" entity while its new location could have been referred to as the spirit world. It seems reasonable to assume that this simple construct has provided much of the basis for all subsequent supernatural speculation ranging from God to the devil.

The dawn of man's self-awareness and his inevitable misperception of himself as a duality, therefore, began a process of supernatural speculation that has culminated in the plethora of religious beliefs that we know today.

When we consider how few of us understand the inner workings of our own computers, it is not surprising that we have traditionally perceived the infinitely more complex human mind in terms of duality. Nevertheless, it must be regretted that this error has led us into the bloody religious conflicts that have so stained our history.

While I believe that the assumption of duality was the primary cause of supernatural

belief, it may have been facilitated by other mental shortcomings. One such shortcoming is that consciousness constitutes our entire experience and so determines the limits of imagination.

Given this limitation, it is hardly surprising that we are unable to comprehend the reality of personal extinction. Whenever the thought of our own death arises, we automatically perceive it in terms of continuing awareness. Since consciousness and death are mutually exclusive, imagination can only perceive its own extinction in the role of a witness to the event. Typically we might imagine ourselves looking over someone's shoulder at our own funeral. For a brief moment imagination has contrived to circumvent death and somehow survive it. The absence of an alternative has compelled us to imagine our own post-mortem state in the familiar terms of being and becoming.

We have been deceived by the shackles that bind us to conscious existence. The habit of life, it seems, is too ingrained to be erased by the mere "theory" of death. The lifelong impression of a non-physical aspect to our being whose extinction is inaccessible to our imaginations guides us inexorably towards a belief in the supernatural and our own immortality. While such experiences may be regarded as trivial, they serve to illustrate the complete inability of imagination to deal with its own death. Far from being insignificant, this common experience has important implications for the ubiquitous belief in survival.

Regrettably, belief in personal survival will remain intuitive and compelling so long as there are those who fail totally to comprehend extinction. Our inability to contemplate the unknowable leaves our imagination no alternative but to assume the reality of its own survival, even if it is only on the far side of death. While the death state can be accepted by the intellect, it remains beyond the limits of imagination.

This dichotomy finds its resolution in the belief in life after death. For primitive man and many who have succeeded him the misunderstood sense of duality facilitated by an imagination limited to being and becoming has led to a model of reality that includes a supernatural component. By appreciating the limitations of imagination believers may recognise an alternative source for their spiritual predisposition while non-believers may understand why they occasionally lapse into belief when their critical faculties are off guard.

If these propositions are correct, a consciousness that has evolved exclusively for the purpose of terrestrial existence is all that would be necessary to engender supernatural speculation and provide a "rationale" for its own continuity. The mind's intuitive sense of duality, together with its restriction to being

and becoming, limits it to projecting its future in terms of continued conscious existence. Since the death state is beyond our grasp, we are left only with what is capable of being imagined – the continuation of consciousness into an indefinite future.

While the death state is undeniable to the intellect, imagination is limited to life and consciousness. For this reason life and consciousness are projected into an imagined future, while we are encouraged to regard the death event as a brief interruption. It is perhaps understandable that a race whose collective psyche is imbued with a belief in its own duality, and trammelled within the confines of being and becoming, should produce a theory of immortality that reflects and endorses the errors of its own intuitions. Nor is it surprising that these erroneous intuitions have given rise to the religions that facilitate their expression.

It may not be too extravagant to speculate that supernatural belief, arising from the illusion of duality and the restriction to being and becoming, may comprise a universal process that unfolds wherever consciousness develops to the human level. Nor is it unthinkable that the final shedding of supernatural belief may provide the cosmic marker of maturity for humanity, and all other possible races in the universe.

Clearly these concepts will not by themselves shatter the illusion of the supernatural world. On the other hand they may go some way towards neutralising its attraction by exposing the twin deceivers of apparent duality and trammelled imagination. By so doing they may provide the religiously vulnerable with further defences against those purveyors of the irrational who would seek to influence them.

What I have sought to show in the preceding paragraphs is that religion, far from being a holy revelation from God, is merely the outcome of a racial error arising from man's collective failure to comprehend the nature of consciousness itself. Whether or not these ideas have any validity is for others to say, but either way it would be naïve to expect them to result in a mass defection from belief to reason. A lifetime of emotional investment in a belief system that promises eternal bliss is difficult to discard. Reason, by comparison, promises few rewards other than the satisfaction of intellectual integrity. Nevertheless, I would venture to suggest that religion, in which so many are enmeshed, is merely a phase marking the childhood of the race. Ultimately, it must succumb to the advance of self-knowledge as a result of which man will emerge from racial immaturity, unencumbered by this primitive response to conscious existence.

• **James McKenna is a retired engineer "with a passion for debunking religious belief". He believes it is incumbent upon non-believers to provide those enmeshed in religion with a roadmap to their own release.**

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, speaking to an audience in America recently, implored Christians to study atheism. This follows the Institute of Public Policy Research report, which advocated that atheism should be given more prominence in the school curriculum as part of religious education. This is good news.

Unfortunately atheists have always had an image problem. This is not helped by the negative connotations implicit in the name. Humanism, a word originally applied to the revival of classical learning in philosophy and the arts during the Renaissance (1300-1550), was adopted in the 20th century to counter this problem. Humanist became a word used to describe an atheist with moral values.

This has had a positive public relations effect; however, many people, even today, have no idea what the word humanist actually means. I had personal experience of this when I answered the religion question with the word humanist, when I was admitted to hospital recently, and the nurse was confused by the term.

A more recent attempt at improving the image of morally responsible atheists was the rebranding under the name of "brights". This was the idea of Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert, and has been supported by a number of eminent humanists including Richard Dawkins and Daniel C. Dennett. This too has had some positive effects; although even fewer people are currently aware of its meaning than that of humanist, and so it is too early to say whether this term will endure.

One way I think atheists could improve their standing in the public eye is to remind people of the great and the good, throughout history, who have taken a non-theistic view of life.

By "good" I mean prominent people who have shown others, by commendable example, how to live their lives, and who have been highly regarded both during their lifetimes and since, or people who have made a difference to the wellbeing and happiness of others, both during their lives and long after their deaths.

By "great" I mean people who have excelled in their chosen field, or people who have made an outstanding contribution to human knowledge, giving greater understanding of ourselves or of the world in which we live.

I should like to start with David Hume (1711-1776), the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, who was regarded as a good man by almost all who knew him. He was known as "le bon David" in France, where he lived for several years, and "Saint David" in Edinburgh, where he was born and spent most of his life. The street in



David Hume

Edinburgh where he lived is now known as St David's Street in his memory.

He was only 28 when *A Treatise on Human Nature* was first published. It is now regarded as his masterpiece, but at the time it was not well received. His later work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, was much more widely read.

He went on to write a six-volume *History of England*, which for a hundred years became the standard work on the subject, but now he is better remembered for his philosophical works.

He could be described as a philosopher's philosopher, since many professors regard his writings on philosophy as the finest in the English language.

His atheistic views are expressed in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, but this was not published until after his death.

Adam Smith, a contemporary of his, said of him, "as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) is most famous for being author of *The Declaration of Independence* of 1776.



Thomas Jefferson

He also served two terms as President of the United States, and was a prolific writer. He will seem to some an odd choice to be amongst the good because of the fact that he was a slave owner, but it should be said that he did advocate the abolition of slavery. It should also be remembered that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and others of that ilk, all came from Ancient Greece, a civilisation built upon slavery; but this does not discredit or diminish their philosophies.

Interestingly, Martin Luther King Jr., the leading figure of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s who campaigned against racial segregation, frequently quoted Jefferson's words.

The portion of *The Declaration of Independence* most often quoted is:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

We note that reference is made to the creator, ie God. This begs the question why Jefferson is included in this catalogue of sceptics. He described himself as a Deist, meaning that he believed in a creator, which he associated with Nature, but he had no time for the revealed religion of Christianity.

Two quotes from his book *Notes on Virginia* give us a better idea of his critical view of Christianity specifically and his wide religious

tolerance in general.

"Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined and imprisoned: yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity."

"But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither

One way atheists might improve their standing in the public eye is to remind people of the great and the good, throughout history, who have taken a non-theistic view of life, says PETER RICHARDS



picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

He rejected the mysticism of Christianity; and therefore did not describe himself as a Christian. In this sense then he was not religious. The reason for his inclusion is that his writings have provided the foundation for a democracy based on human rights, which has allowed millions of people to live in relative freedom until the present day.

Jefferson was much influenced by the Englishman Thomas Paine, whose widely read work, *Rights of Man*, is regarded as one of the great classics on democracy. Paine had little time for religion, as this quote from his book *The Age of Reason* reveals:

"The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race, have their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion."

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the celebrated philosopher and atheist, worked with William Wilberforce and a sect of evangelical Christians known as "The Saints" to achieve the abolition of the slave trade. When questioned about this, he once said, "If to be a 'Saint' is to be against slavery, then 'Sainthood' for me!"

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is most famous for being the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, in which she makes a sustained argument for female emancipation.



Mary Wollstonecraft

She married the atheist and scholar, William Godwin, who shared many of her views on life. During her lifetime she was accused of blasphemy. She championed the cause of women's right to economic independence, and thus played a key role in the story of women's liberation.

The British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) is the celebrated author of *On Liberty*, which defends the freedom of the individual and provides a philosophical justification of political, social and civil rights. His own words make his position clear:

“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

A quote from Mill’s *Three Essays on Religion* reflects his non-religious view of the world:

“However offensive the proposition may appear to many religious persons, they should be willing to look in the face the undeniable fact, that the order of Nature, in so far as unmodified by man, is such as no being, whose attributes are justice and benevolence, would have made, with the intention that his rational creatures should follow it as example.”

The Prime Minister, William Gladstone, once called him “The Saint of Rationalism.”

When Annie Besant (1847-1933) first met Charles Bradlaugh, he was already the founder

and president of the National Secular Society. She joined the society in 1874. In 1877 Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were both charged with “obscene libel” for jointly publishing a pamphlet that advocated family planning by means of contraception. They



Annie Besant

were both found guilty; however, the verdict was quashed at the Court of Appeal. Their stand must have taken considerable courage at the time, especially because the issue was so controversial. The outcome was that more information became available about contraception, which in turn made it less likely for women to become the victims of uncontrolled childbearing.

In an essay entitled *Why I do not believe in God* Annie declared her atheism.

“I do not believe in God. My mind finds no grounds on which to build up a reasonable faith. My heart revolts against the spectre of an Almighty Indifference to the pain of sentient beings. My conscience rebels against the injustice, the cruelty, the inequality, which surround me on every side. But I believe in Man. In man’s redeeming power; in man’s remoulding energy; in man’s approaching triumph, through knowledge, love, and work.”

Dora Russell, nee Black (1894 – 1986), campaigned for women’s rights, including access to contraception and abortion. Amongst other things she helped form the National Council for Civil Liberties (now known as Liberty). She married the renowned philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell with whom she shared humanist principles. Her

influence helped bring about the Abortion Law Reform Bill of 1967, which has improved the lives of millions of women.

I would like to move on now from saints to greats; starting with the great historian Edward Gibbon (1737 – 1794) who, in his monumental work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, comments on how the great minds of the period reacted to the teachings of Christianity:

“The names of Seneca, of the elder and the younger Pliny, of Tacitus, of Plutarch, of Galen, of the slave Epictetus, and of the emperor Marcus Antoninus, adorn the age in which they flourished, and exalt the dignity of human nature. They filled with glory their respective stations, either in active or contemplative life; their excellent understandings were improved by study; philosophy had purified their minds from the prejudices of the popular superstition; and their days were spent in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue. Yet all these sages (it is no less an object of surprise than of concern) overlooked or rejected the perfection of the Christian system. Their language or their silence equally discover their contempt for the growing sect, which in their time had diffused itself over the Roman Empire. Those among them who condescend to mention the Christians consider them only as obstinate and perverse enthusiasts, who exacted an implicit submission to their mysterious doctrines without being able to produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning.”

Mark Twain (1835-1910), whose real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens, was an outstanding post-American Civil War writer and humorist. *Imocents Abroad* was the book that established him as an important writer. His most famous work of fiction is *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which is regarded as a classic of popular literature. It appealed, and still does, to adults and children alike. The sequel *Huckleberry Finn* also became a very popular book.

Mark Twain did express irreligious views, as this extract from *Thoughts of God* reveals:

“The pulpit assures us that wherever we see suffering and sorrow which we can relieve and do not do it, we sin, heavily. There was never yet a case of suffering or sorrow which God could not relieve. Does He sin, then? If He is the Source of Morals He does – certainly nothing can be plainer than that, you will admit. Surely the Source of Law cannot violate law and stand unsmirched; surely the judge upon the bench cannot forbid crime and then revel in it himself unrebuked. Nevertheless we have this curious spectacle: daily the trained parrot in the pulpit gravely delivers himself of these ironies, which he has acquired at second hand and adopted without examination, to a trained congregation which accepts them without

examination, and neither the speaker nor the hearer laughs at himself.”

Marie Curie (1867 – 1934) made a significant contribution to science. Radiotherapy, which is commonplace today, owes much to her discoveries.



Marie Curie

She lost her mother and sister to tuberculosis when she was 11, and by the time she was 15 she declared that she was an agnostic.

She married Pierre Curie in 1895 in a non-religious civil ceremony. In 1903 she won a Nobel Prize for physics jointly with her husband, and after he died in 1906 she continued her work on radioactivity. She gained a second Nobel Prize, the first person ever to do so, this time in Chemistry, in 1911, in recognition for her discovery some years earlier, with her husband, of two new elements, polonium and radium. By the time of the First World War she was instructing technicians how to use X-ray equipment.

Marie Curie was one of many people of note of French nationality to hold non-religious views. Valuable contributions to the archive of humanist writings have come from the following Gallic greats – Montaigne (1533-1592) the essayist, Voltaire (1694-1778) the writer, and Diderot (1713-1784) the encyclopaedist.

We have seen that in history, literature and science, we have some remarkable people in the history of humanism, but I want to look at the real giants of human thought; starting with the Ancient Greeks, who invented philosophy, and one in particular, Epicurus.

Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was inspired by the ideas of Democritus, “the prince of philosophers”, who put forward the theory that the physical world was made up of atoms. Epicurus’s ideas were remarkably similar to those of modern-day humanists.

His view of life was widely accepted during the period of Greek and Roman civilisations of the ancient world. His followers included the Roman emperor, Hadrian, the builder of the famous wall.

The Roman poet, Lucretius, wrote a long poem celebrating Epicurus’s ideas entitled *De Rerum Natura*, which translated means ‘On the Nature of the Universe’.

A few samples of his sayings give an understanding of his philosophy:

“Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.”

“The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom.”

“The just man enjoys the greatest peace of mind, while the unjust is full of utmost

(Continued on p12)

disquietude.”

“Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.”

Many gravestones that have survived from the days of the Roman Empire are engraved with a Latin inscription, which is the Epicurean epitaph that translates as, “I was not; I have been; I am not; I do not mind.”

One person who cannot be excluded from our list of greats is Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the author of *On the Origin of Species*; a book that sold out on its first day of publication in 1859. In it he describes the mechanism by which evolution occurs and what is involved; namely variation, struggle for existence and natural selection. It has been described as “the most fundamental of all intellectual revolutions in the history of mankind”. His theory is backed up by a vast amount of evidence accumulated during his 5-year voyage around the world aboard HMS Beagle as the ship’s naturalist. During this time he visited many far-flung places, including South America, the Galapagos islands, Tahiti, New Zealand and Australia. His discoveries changed his own views on religion.

He wrote “Disbelief crept over me...I have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct. I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all of my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.”

His wife remained a Christian, and his own

The Freethinker Fund

THE *Freethinker* Fund is better off by £502.00 as a result of the generous donations received from readers between April 23 and June 22.

The of the largest donations received in this period was from the Humanist Society of Scotland-Edinburgh Group (£50.00), M Morley (£50.00) and J Pickard (£40.00)

We are also grateful to the following people for their contributions: P H Albrecht, D Baxter, A Beeson, P T Beeton, A W Briglin, D Broughton, D Clamp, R Clay, A Clunas, G Connor, D Flint, L Geogiades, D K Gorringe, C Govan, N Haemmerle, L R Hanson, R Kitching, P L Lancaster, J E Lewis, R Lewis, D G Mactavish, H McDougall, H L Millard, G F Miller, C Pinel, J Radford, J Radford, A Rankin, A A Rattansi, R Risk, J M Ross, D Seymour, M W Smith, D Stockdale, G Taylor, B A Thompson, C Ward, J Ward, D Watkins, A J Wood.

non-religious views were not published until after his death.

On reading *On the Origin of Species* for the first time, Thomas Henry Huxley (1826-1895), a famous scientist and staunch friend of Darwin’s, exclaimed, “How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!”

Huxley became a forthright advocate of Darwin’s theory of evolution. He was the originator of the terms agnostic and agnosticism, which he used to describe his own position on religion. He famously and triumphantly countered a put-down by the bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, and is chiefly remembered as the man who first championed Darwin’s ideas.

Darwin was not the first person to think of the idea of natural selection. It was, for example, that great classical liberal and individualist Herbert Spencer who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest”. Darwin’s own grandfather Erasmus Darwin had also written on the subject of evolution, but it was Charles who produced the most convincing deductive argument supported by substantial evidence for the transmutation of species by means of natural selection.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) ranks amongst the greats because he revolutionised our way of looking at ourselves, and because he was the first to make the unconscious mind real to us. People’s attitudes towards the mentally ill improved, showing greater sympathy and understanding of their condition, as a result of Freud’s work.

Freud, using the ideas of Darwin, Atkinson and Robertson Smith to develop his own theory, suggested in this passage from his book *The Origins of Religion* how religion might have evolved:

“From Darwin I borrowed the hypothesis that human beings originally lived in small hordes, each of which was under the despotic rule of an older male who appropriated all the females and castigated or disposed of the younger males, including his sons. From Atkinson I took, in continuation of this account, the idea that this patriarchal system ended in a rebellion by the sons, who banded together against their father, overcame him and devoured him in common. Basing myself on Robertson Smith’s totem theory, I assumed that subsequently the father-horde gave place to the totemic brother-clan. In order to be able to live in peace with one another, the victorious brothers renounced the women on whose account they had, after all, killed their father, and instituted exogamy. The power of fathers



Sigmund Freud

was broken and families were organised as a matriarchy. The ambivalent emotional attitude of the sons to their father remained in force during the whole later development. A particular animal was set up in the father’s place as a totem. It was regarded as ancestor and protective spirit and might not be injured or killed. But once a year the whole male community came together to a ceremonial meal at which the totem animal (worshipped at all other times) was torn to pieces and devoured in common. No one might absent himself from this meal: it was the ceremonial repetition of the killing of the father, with which social order, moral values and religion had taken their start. The conformity between Robertson Smith’s totem meal and the Christian Lord’s Supper had struck a number of writers before me.”

This suggests to me that the Crucifixion of Christ is the son’s atonement, on behalf of all the sons, for that unmentionable crime – the murder of the primordial father – euphemistically called “our sins”. This perhaps explains why a film like Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* is so successful, because it taps into mankind’s collective subconscious guilt.

Now I come to Albert Einstein (1879-1955): one of the cleverest people of all time. Although Einstein was deeply religious in the sense that he was fascinated with the mysteries of the universe, he was not religious in the strictly traditional Christian sense of the word. He once stated: “I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves. An individual who should survive his physical death is also beyond my comprehension, nor do I wish it otherwise; such notions are for the fears or absurd egoism of feeble souls.”

No-one would deny that Einstein deserves the epithet great, but as Bertrand Russell commented, “Everybody knows that Einstein did something astonishing but very few people know exactly what it was that he did.”

It was Einstein who introduced the concept of “space-time” in which time is no longer independent of the three dimensions of space, but a fourth dimension required to determine the position of an event.

Although much of his work is shrouded in mathematical complexities, not easily accessible to ordinary people, it is true to say that Einstein’s Theory of Relativity revolutionised humanity’s view of the fundamental structure of the physical world.

What all this tells me I think is that whether non-believers call themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists or brights, they (and I include myself amongst them) can proudly proclaim that some of the wisest and best human beings who have ever lived have shared their non-religious views.

A Piece of Blue Sky is not the latest exposé of Scientology. More recent dissections of brainwashing cults have touched on it, but there has not been a later book sufficiently focused to justify including the word Scientology in the title, perhaps because Atack does such a thorough job of exposing this money-making scam posing as a religion that there is little more to say.

Human beings are not descended from any terrestrial lifeforms. The first humans were brought to earth by benevolent aliens millennia ago from a galaxy far, far away. If you believe that, you are not necessarily a Scientologist. But if you are a Scientologist, you are required to believe it, since the alternative is to recognize that you have been hoaxed by a cult that originated in the imagination of L Ron Hubbard, a science-fiction writer with such total contempt for anyone who could take his fantasy seriously that he gloated to an associate, "Let's sell these people a piece of blue sky." When the associate expressed skepticism, Hubbard bet him that he could invent a new religion and have it showing a profit within a year. He won the bet. While no other evidence survives that Hubbard had a sense of humor, his naming the Thetans' (aliens) residence *Arslycus* cannot have been a random choice.

But while it was L Ron Hubbard who first organised the conspiracy to pass off science fiction as a religion, the cult leaders' true role model was Benito Mussolini. When *A Piece of Blue Sky* was first published, the Scientology bosses were able to intimidate the dirty little cowards at Amazon into removing it from their catalogue, out of fear of the kind of vicious reprisals that got eleven members of the cult, including Hubbard's wife, convicted and jailed in 1979. In 1978 Hubbard was himself convicted of fraud in a French court, *in absentia*, and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. Amazon only re-listed the book when public outrage threatened them with more serious consequences than even Hubbard's heavies could inflict.

It was Hubbard himself who initiated the cult's ongoing policy of filing frivolous lawsuits to intimidate opponents. As he explained to his deputies, "The purpose of the suit is to harass and discourage rather than to win. The law can be used very easily to harass, and enough harassment on somebody who is simply on the thin edge anyway ... will generally be sufficient to cause his professional decease. If possible, of course, ruin him utterly... We should be very alert to sue for slander at the slightest chance so as to discourage the public press from mentioning Scientology."

Probably as a pre-emptive measure against an investigation of himself, Hubbard wrote several letters to the FBI claiming that communists and psychiatrists were targeting him. The FBI eventually stopped replying, and on one of Hubbard's letters an agent wrote "Appears mental."

Because even pretend-religions are such sacred cows in the US, practitioners of

American religions, afraid that allowing Scientology to be treated as a criminal conspiracy would lead to their own cults being similarly categorized, pressured much of the world into accepting Hubbard's swindle as a legitimate religion. While three Australian states for several years categorized Scientology as a criminal conspiracy to defraud, they eventually backed down under American pressure.

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews *A Piece of Blue Sky: Scientology, Dianetics and L. Ron Hubbard Exposed*, by Jon Atack, Carol Publishing Group. ISBN 0-8184-0499-X, 440 pp, hardback, \$21.95

Only Germany continues to recognize Scientology as a moneymaking scam posing as a religion, and refuses entry permits to cult members. And it was lobbying by other fringe sects that won Scientology tax-exempt status as a religion, in the hope that if Scientology was categorized as a religion, their own cults could then claim the same status.

But Scientology is not merely a fruitcake cult like the Southern Baptists, which peddles mind pablum to the brain-dead because its pushers are themselves brain-dead. Like America's first and second ranking brainwashing cults, Catholicism and Mormonism, Scientology has been exposed as a fraud so many times and in so many ways that anyone who thinks the pushers of any of those Big Lies are unaware that they are peddling falsehoods is being unrealistic. (Notable exception: Pope Wojtyla is far too feeble-minded to comprehend that a Bible that states in fourteen places that the earth is flat must be fiction.) Scientology is a conscious, money-grubbing swindle, perpetrated by persons who know full well that their pretend-religion has as much resemblance to reality as the fairy-tales of the Brothers Grimm. In recent years the cult succeeded in convincing a jury that an anti-cult website was legally culpable for an attempted deprogramming. The brainwashers not only forced them out of business. They also took over the website and, in the pretence of being the same anti-cult site, have since been peddling their propaganda to persons looking for information on how to combat such cults.

Much of Atack's book is a biography of Hubbard, or more precisely an analysis of Hubbard's own published accounts of his life, which are so impossible to harmonize into a single biographical chronology, that the only reasonable conclusion is that they are a pack of lies from start to finish. One detail, however, seems to be accurate. Hubbard's medical scam that preceded Scientology, Dianetics, only took off when it was actively promoted in the 150,000 circulation *Astounding Science Fiction* by the magazine's unbelievably gullible editor, John Campbell. Even Isaac Asimov, who got his start

with Campbell, was embarrassed by the man's superstitious ignorance. It was in Campbell's presence in 1949 that Hubbard casually mentioned he would like to start a religion, because that was where the money was.

That several prominent Hollywood actors are Scientologists raises a chicken-and-egg question: are they Scientologists because they are stupid, or are they stupid because they are Scientologists? No one has ever mistaken *Foundation* or *Dune* for non-fiction, and no one with a functioning brain has ever mistaken Ron Hubbard's imaginative fantasising for non-fiction.

There are two kinds of Scientologists: the conscienceless operatives who run the cult the same way Mussolini ran Italy, and the mindless marks whom the operatives believe were put on earth to line their pockets. In the words of Justice Latey, ruling in the High Court in London in 1984: "Scientology is both immoral and socially obnoxious ... it is corrupt, sinister and dangerous. It is corrupt because it is based upon lies and deceit and has as its real objective money and power for Mr Hubbard, his wife and those close to him at the top. It is sinister because it indulges in infamous practices both to its adherents who do not toe the line unquestioningly and to those who criticize or oppose it. It is dangerous because it is out to capture people, especially children and impressionable young people, and indoctrinate and brainwash them so that they become the unquestioning captives and tools of the cult, withdrawn from ordinary thought, living and relationships with others.

"Deprived of property, injury by any means, trickery, suing, lying or destruction have been pursued throughout and to this day with the fullest vigour... Mr. Hubbard is a charlatan and worse as are his wife Mary Sue Hubbard ... and the clique at the top privy to the Cult's activities."

In America, Judge Breckenridge ruled, "In addition to violating and abusing its own members' civil rights, the organization over the years ... has harassed and abused those persons not within the Church, whom it perceives as enemies. The organization clearly is schizophrenic and paranoid, and this bizarre combination seems to be a reflection of its founder LRH [L Ron Hubbard]. The evidence portrays a man who has been virtually a pathological liar when it comes to his history, background and achievements. The writings and documents in evidence additionally reflect his egoism, greed, avarice, lust for power, and vindictiveness and aggressiveness against persons perceived by him as disloyal or hostile."

Scientology is a criminally felonious swindle. That verdict is offered not as the personal conclusion of either the book's author or its reviewer. It is the recorded judgment of law courts in America, England and France, and governments in Australia, New Zealand, Rhodesia and Germany. That we both agree with it is beside the point.

Lib-Dem mavericks

I LOVED the idea that the Lib-Dems are not, like sneaky New Labour and Conservatives, resorting to “attempts to appease the religious lobby” (Ralph Lovesy, *Points of View*, June). I have to assume they have mavericks, for Ms Julia Gash, LibDem Euro candidate in South Yorkshire recently appealed via the *Sheffield Star* for Muslims to give her their support in redeeming the “naïve” French. What, according to Ms Gash, made the French “naïve”? Simply, their reaction to young ladies wearing the hijab in class, contrary to the main thrust of the French constitution. The *Star* printed my letter where I suggested that the LibDems would raffle off their grannies to get the Muslim vote. No LibDem has reacted to the accusation. Maybe the LibDems have recognised that Islam is not a religion? Now, that would be a plus.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Historicity of Jesus

IN the June issue you carry three letters from people making statements or drawing conclusions about the person of Jesus.

In the foreword to G A Wells' *The Jesus Legend* (Open Court-Carus, 1996), R Joseph Hoffman of Westminster College Oxford writes: “In the past generation, the ‘real’ Jesus has been variously a magician, Galilean rabbi, marginal Jew, a bastard, a cipher, a Qumran dissident, a Gnosticising Jew, ... a happily married man and a father of sons, a bandit, an enthusiastic ... opponent of the temple cult ...

“It is clear to most readers of modern Jesus biographies that Jesus cannot have been all of the things he is said to have been in the same (reportedly) short lifetime. Nor, it is safe to say, would a sober reading of Mark’s gospel, still reckoned to be the earliest, offer the reader a Jesus who is self-evidently any of these things ...

“We will not wait much longer for a Jesus who left Nazareth aged 18, the victim of child-abuse in a dysfunctional one-parent family, to find his real identity among other Jewish boys forced to live a lie in the homophobic backwater of Empire, and who died a patsy of his cousin-lover Judas, who himself had felt threatened by Jesus’ growing affection for the Roman procurator – one who perhaps reminded him of his gentile father Panthera.”

Hoffman goes on to ask: “What is it about the character of NT literature that makes so many contradictory theories available?”

As Wells and others such as Earl Doherty, drawing on the research of theologians many of whom are by no means unbelievers, have shown:

(a) The gospels are not, even by a generous definition, historical documents but pious

propaganda.

(b) The anonymous author of each gospel drew his material from a variety of sources and edited it for his own theological purposes.

(c) The material has been identified as often fragmentary, and if any of it just happens to contain a real historical fact, there is no way of knowing. Mark’s gospel, for instance, consists largely of unrelated episodes or even parts of episodes strung together with a few conjunctions, while some have seen it as a ritual midrash on Moses.

For these reasons, assessments of Jesus’ life based on the assumption that the gospels represent some kind of historical record are completely futile.

BARRY THORPE
Heald Green

Political Correctness

THE June letter from Dinah Foweraker shows that my defence of retaining the title *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was misplaced. In my ignorance of the facts, I had assumed it was a direct translation from the original French. I now realise that my castigation should have been directed at the English translator of Hugo’s novel, not the theatre company. But that does not invalidate the point I was trying to make: that historical writings, reflecting social mores of the time, should not be altered to comply with present-day political correctness.

Though Ms Foweraker is clearly more knowledgeable than I about Victor Hugo, I (as secretary of the Shaw Society for 45 years) would claim to know more about Bernard Shaw than she does. She writes: “G B Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (itself an updating of a Greek legend) later became a musical and was renamed *My Fair Lady*. Is she really prepared to uphold this literary theft?”

It could not have been perpetrated until the author was safely dead, as he had turned down many lucrative offers during his lifetime for the rights to such a musical. Though his will instructed his executor (the Public Trustee) and literary executor (the Society of Authors) not to sacrifice artistic integrity to financial considerations, this apparently carried no weight with them. Indeed, they insisted that the law required them to maximise income for the sake of the Estate Duty Office and the institutional legatees. Shaw’s phonetic alphabet bequest was then referred to the Chancery Court and invalidated.

The Society of Authors, supervised by the Public Trustee, not only gave permission to the highest bidder for a *Pygmalion* musical but, for a further substantial percentage, acceded to the outrageous demand that, in order to fend off Shaw as a rival to Lerner and Loewe, no production of the original play should be authorised anywhere in the world for ten years. In the event, the ten years’ ban was

extended to almost twenty years – despite the Shaw Society’s campaign against it.

As early as 1956, when *My Fair Lady* opened in New York, an application to put on Shaw’s *Pygmalion* at the drama festival in Pitlochry, Scotland, was turned down – presumably in case anyone chose to go there for it instead of travelling to New York for the musical adaptation. It did not seem to occur to Moss Hart that some people might even like to see both versions in the same week, to compare them. But no doubt they felt vindicated by the fact that, in its first six-and-a-half years, *My Fair Lady* earned no less than \$65-million (worth about ten times as much today).

Its adaptors, no doubt with the blessing of the investors, deliberately distorted the play’s main message. Subverting Shaw’s feminist ending, in which Eliza asserts her independence from her mentor, they pandered to the popular preference for romance – which GBS had always forbidden in productions of his own play.

Unlike his legitimate allusion to the Greek legend, the musical plagiarised most of the actual words of Shaw’s play for the dialogue, and even for some of the lyrics. But the same title could not be used – not only because that would have compounded the predation and added to the confusion, but also because, it was said, the average American pronounced the first syllable as “pie” and waited for a character of the name to appear on the stage!

As for Ms Foweraker’s mention of the PC amendment of the 19th-century subtraction rhyme *Ten Little Nigger-Boys* (not just the title of Agatha Christie’s book) to *Ten Little Indians*, I would point out that the meddlers failed to predict the consequent indignation recently expressed by “Native Americans” (if that name is not already out of date). So, besides obliterating contemporary chronicles of the vocabulary and social attitudes of past centuries, these retrospective emendations can be never-ending.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

The last on circumcision

IT IS Dorry Lewis (*Points of View*, June) who misses the point on circumcision. Protection against AIDS is an excellent reason to circumcise, especially if one lives in a society where 20 percent or more carry the infection and being circumcised halves the risk of joining them. Her objections could equally well be applied to vaccinations, at least one of which (BCG) is mutilating as it leaves a scar.

As most other reasons for circumcising/not circumcising (parental preference, religion, etc) do not withstand scrutiny, it really boils down to a simple cost/benefit analysis. Most accept that the pros of infant vaccination outweigh the cons, so we do it; the kids don’t like it but will be grateful when older. Putting the



jabs off until they are older negates many of their benefits. Furthermore, by then some will be too scared of needles to submit (regrettably I never had my BCG for that reason).

So it is with circumcision. There is some evidence that the prophylactic benefits are better with infant snips than adult ones. This may be due to the fact that infant ones usually heal with no scar tissue, adult ones always do. Scar tissue may be vulnerable to attack by pathogens. It is also a trivial procedure for an infant, daunting for an adult. I have met several blokes (not all gay) who expressed a desire to be cut but were too afraid to take the plunge. It took me years to pluck up courage (even though I'd long got over my needle-phobia). Not circumcising is also imposing a "preference".

Finally, Ms Lewis may find it a turn-off but most are indifferent, and many rather like it – which makes it hard to see why it should be called a "mutilation".

DR STEPHEN MORETON
Cheshire

LEAVING aside personal attacks between Stephen Moreton and me in the continuing non-consensual circumcision debate, I wish to raise some further points.

The study carried out in India that he mentions that supposedly confirms previous studies has been criticised by peer groups for, among other things, the small sample size and the failure to control for differences in behaviour between the two groups – Muslim (circumcised) and Hindu (intact). The study also ignored a Cochrane Systematic Review from 2003 that found insufficient evidence to recommend circumcision as a preventive intervention against HIV. The safest HIV protection is a condom.

If an adult still believes it will provide a protective effect despite the lack of firm evidence, he can choose to have the procedure, just as he can choose to have body piercings and tattoos. No parent or doctor should have the right to modify the body of a non-consenting minor except in the case of urgent medical necessity. We do not perform routine infant appendectomies to prevent possible appendicitis in later life. No medical organisation in the world recommends circumcision as a prophylactic procedure. In recent months the British Medical Association has issued strongly worded guidance on the law and ethics for handling circumcision requests from mainly Muslim parents.

Remember that the foreskin has evolved in all mammals over many millions of years and that it serves a valuable purpose, just as the eyelid does for the eye. Don't believe that we know better than nature.

Again, this illustrates my point in an earlier letter that compulsory circumcision promoters will always recommend it as a protection against the "disease *du jour*", as in the past the

quacks recommended it for a range of conditions from spinal deformity to epilepsy. Circumcision among its promoters has taken on some of the aspects of religion – praised and worshipped as the saviour of all men despite the lack of any firm evidence.

Circumcision has taken root in sexually repressed and religious societies. We really ought not to support it in this publication. Circumcision of minors should go the way of routine tonsillectomies and foot-binding.

STEWART WARE
London

MALE circumcision may or may not provide some protection against sexually transmitted diseases. But one could hardly cut off every organ that might become diseased: there would be literally nothing left. It may or may not affect sexual sensation, of either partner. The real issue surely is, can it be right to effect permanent bodily changes, except when really medically essential, without the genuinely free and informed consent of the individual?

Children and young people cannot give such consent. It may be emotive to call such changes, whether foot-binding, scarifying, teeth-filing or cutting off parts of the genitals, "mutilation", but that is what they are (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Of course some acts are more drastic than others, but in my view all are morally wrong, and not to be justified on grounds of religion or social custom.

PROF JOHN RADFORD
London

I AGREE with Stewart Ware that circumcision is "outdated, religiously mandated, barbaric". It needs to be emphasised that the practice reflects Hebraistic hostility to the body, a hostility which is evident throughout both Old and New Testaments, beginning in the Book of Genesis.

An excursus in my book, *A Freethinker's Primer of Male Love*, is entitled "Circumcision of the Spirit". I begin by quoting the Alexandrian philosopher, Philo Judaeus (c. 20BC to c. 50AD), who considered the purposes of circumcision to be two-fold: to excise pleasure and to humble males by docking their organs ("banish from the soul the grievous malady of conceit").

Skip ahead a millennium-and-a-half to the Book of Common Prayer. The physical act of circumcision was no longer done in 16th-century England, but the faithful nevertheless prayed for their deity to mutilate their spirits and deaden their "members" so they could be more "obedient": "Almighty God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit: that our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will;

through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." (The collect for January 1).

A reader who dissented from my circumcision excursus, wrote: "I'm not convinced – but of course will never know with certainty – that any more pleasure than I already experience can really be had." Perhaps not. However, those of us who are intact do know and experience sensations that would be lost; we can imagine what it would be like for these sensations to be gone, and the glans numb. The circumcised, on the other hand, can no more imagine these sensations than someone deaf from birth could imagine the Brahms clarinet quintet.

In addition, a friend (also intact) and I have independently observed psychological differences between intact and mutilated males; the latter seem to be numbed, and not just in a narrowly sexual sense – less aware, less responsive. Who knows what effect the trauma of intense infant pain has on later sensibility?

JOHN LAURITSEN
USA

Editor's note: This correspondence is now ended.

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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, July 4, 4.30pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

Cornwall Humanists: Information: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleevelands 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.

Essex Humanists. Meetings on the third Sunday of each month. Information: 01268 785295.

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, July 9, 7.30pm. Fire and Brimstone Productions present *Martyr to the Cause*.

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

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, August 5, 8pm. Joyce Hall: *Social History and the Upminster Tithe Barn*.

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506. Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, Bournemouth. Saturday, July 10, 2pm. Public meeting. Subject: *Ceremonies for the Non-religious*.

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. Summer social at 15 Victoria Crescent, Horsforth, Tuesday, July 6, 4pm-8pm.

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. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, SE6. Thursday July 29, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

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: Literature and Information stall at The Green Fair, St Mary's Community Centre, Bramall Lane, Sheffield, Saturday, July 10, 11am - 5pm. Sharrow Festival, Mount Pleasant Park. Sitwell Road/London Road, Sheffield, Saturday, July 17, 11am-5pm.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday July 7, 8pm. Public meeting.

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

South Place Ethical Society: Weekly talks/meetings Sundays 11am and 3pm in the library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programme on request.

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

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

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282.

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

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

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

E-mail: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com
website: www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.com

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

Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding
publication