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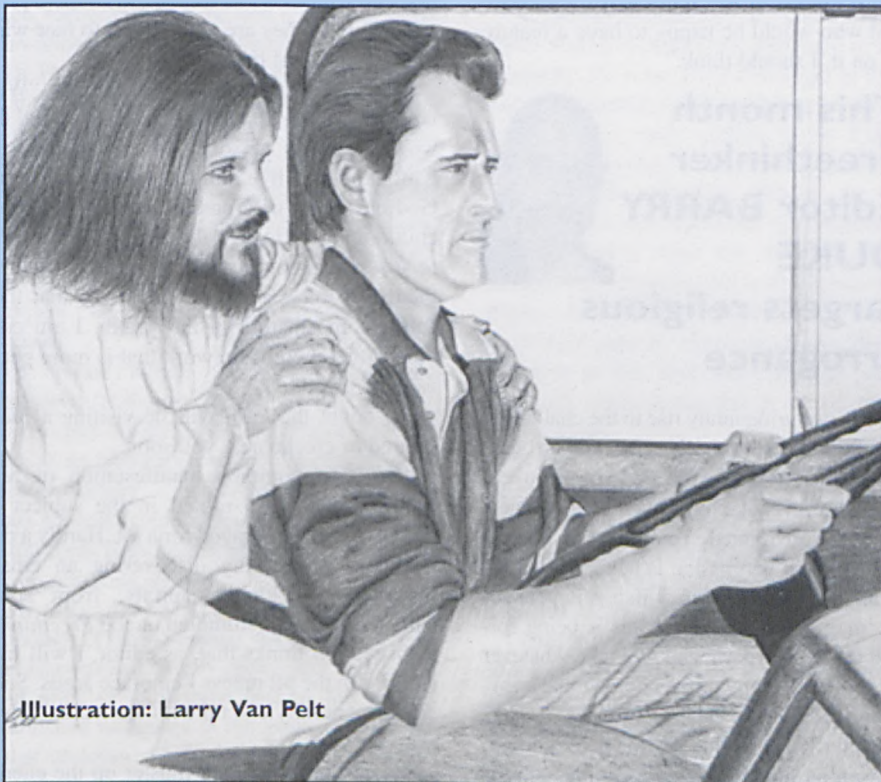


Illustration: Larry Van Pelt

World
exclusive!

Hitch-hiking
Jesus has a
word in the ear
of our man in
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OF THE many human traits that annoy me – sloth, greed, yobbishness, stupidity and an obsession to drive around in unnecessarily large and aggressive vehicles, for instance – the one that riles me most is arrogance. And nowhere does arrogance flourish more successfully than in the rich ordure of irrationality we call religion.

Here is a prime example: Last month, during a casual trawl of the internet for items of interest for the *Freethinker*, I came across an article entitled *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. No, it was not about the September 11 attack on New York's twin towers, but a far greater atrocity – the issuing of the first gay marriage certificates in the United States.

Published on the website of the American Family Association, the US equivalent of Britain's Christian Institute, this hysterical little rant was so full of crap that, far from being annoyed, I actually creased up laughing. After wiping away the tears of mirth, I forwarded the article to the editor of the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist*, Andy Armitage, who promptly emailed a note to the article's author, Stephen Bennett – a grinning, over-groomed "ex" – (yeah, right!) homosexual with big hair and improbable teeth, who wrote of his horror at seeing on TV the first legal gay marriages in Massachusetts.

"D' Day is what many are calling it – 'Destruction of Marriage Day'. Yet it's so much more. America has arrogantly declared war against the God of all creation and I'm sure it will draw a quick and appropriate heavenly response (sic). And, as for America, we better be prepared for the consequences of our actions. Our military forces may be the best in the world, but we have no idea just *WHO* we have declared war against."

Armitage wrote: "I thoroughly enjoyed your piece, which I read with hearty laughter and not a little pity. I will probably be using some of your sentiments in the magazine I edit, so interesting did I find your views on homosexuality and your great knowledge of what is in the mind of the supposedly ineffable deity you worship. You probably won't see the magazine, because it's mainly a UK thing, with a few copies going to the US and Europe, but I'm sure there will be plenty in what I write to

amuse readers.

"If ever you would like a proper debate, based on reason and not myth, on how religion got into the human brain, how there is no proof, even with the aid of the 'argument from design', for the existence of a creator, and plenty of evidence for his not being the omniscient and omnipotent and all-loving being his believers say he is, just say the word. It could be a most interesting email exchange – for publication, of course, both here and in humanist outlets in the States that I am aware of, and who would be happy to have a feature based on it, I should think."

This month Freethinker Editor BARRY DUKE targets religious arrogance



Did this posturing ninny rise to the challenge? Did he heck! Instead, back came this arrogant blast from the AFA: "We are glad you 'enjoyed' the piece, however, hating to burst your bubble – the piece is copyrighted. You are *NOT* allowed to publish it and permission is being denied for use in any way, shape, form or in part in your so-called 'magazine'. A copy of this is being forwarded to our attorneys who will take whatever action necessary if any of the international copyright laws are broken. Have a great day!"

Dead chuffed at having set this hare running, I then went in search of other examples of religious arrogance. I did not have far to look. A newspaper in Los Angeles reported in July on the concerns of several families whose children were accosted in a public park by a group of about 100 teenage girls. One mum, Lu Lu Brooks said: "They all looked the same. Slender. Long hair. No make-up. Long skirts. Creepy." Said another mum: "It just seemed wrong that there were teenagers approaching four-year-olds."

Alarm bells really began jangling when the interlopers began taking photos of the kids without their parents' permission, and attempted to lure them to other parts of the playground.

Demanding to know just what the hell was going on, the parents were assured that all was well – all that these girls wanted was to "talk to the toddlers about Jesus".

Because they were motivated by "a love for the Lord", these imbeciles, bloated with arrogance and self-righteousness, could see nothing wrong in soliciting tots for Christ. After all, they were members of the Child Evangelism Fellowship and would, of course, do nothing to harm a child.

Except, of course, to fill its little head with garbage.

So what exactly is the CEF?

According to its website: "For almost 70 years God has been using the Child Evangelism Fellowship to bring the love of Jesus Christ to children around the world. The Word of God puts a high priority on children. They are near to God's heart and we believe that He is uniquely concerned about their spiritual welfare. Without the foundation of a relationship with God and training in Biblical principles for life they are unequipped to face what life will throw at them.

Says CEF President Reese Kauffman: "With workers in more than 150 countries around the world CEF has personal, individual ministry with more than five million children each year. God has given us a passion to not only bring children into a right relationship with God, but to disciple them in His Word and establish them in Bible-teaching churches so that they can become mature in their faith. I am convinced that there is no work that is more pertinent or effective...."

No doubt the CEF will be visiting a playground or creche near you soon.

The most common manifestation of religious arrogance is rooted in the subject of prayer. Now I get prayed for a lot. Hardly a day goes by without my discovering an email, invariably in block capitals, from some Christian who has stumbled on the *Freethinker* website, and thinks that, as editor, I will face eternity in the pit unless I embrace Jesus. Such emails generally end up with the words "I will pray for you."

My response, if I can muster up the energy to respond, is a stock one: "You pray for me and I'll think for you."

A while back, in the Salvation Army's *War Cry*, columnist Cliff Kent told of having "got friendly with an atheist" at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park in London. The atheist insisted that Kent should not pray for him.

From this, Kent makes the astonishing and arrogant deduction that "It seems, although he's an unbeliever, our friend believes in the power of prayer. He senses that the prayers of other people might have an effect upon him."

Kent then takes off into cuckoo-land by adding: "But [my friend] also seems confused, because God could speak to him directly (and he to God) without anyone saying a prayer for him. Our Heavenly Father already knows all about us. He knows my friend's name, address and telephone number – and a whole lot more besides.

"What's more, God often goes after hard cases. Being an unbeliever is no guarantee that God can't or won't make himself known."

To my ear, this makes Kent's God sound like a member of the Mafia ... or a TV licence inspector.

Abusive priest convicted

A MEMBER of the Salesians of Don Bosco religious order in Milwaukee, Rev Simon Palathingal, 62, has been convicted on four counts of first-degree sexual assault of a 9-year-old boy in 1990-91. The victim was the nephew of Rev Dennis Percore, a Salvatorian priest with whom Palathingal lived at the time. Percore was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment in 1994 for abusing the same boy. In 1887 Percore was found guilty of second-degree sexual assault of another boy.

LibDem MP calls for an end to religious schools

"WE must either stop religious schools from existing, or – a lesser step – stop them from segregating and discriminating on religious grounds," LibDem MP Dr Evan Harris said when, earlier this year, he won a ballot to move a ten-minute rule bill on a subject of his choice.

Dr Harris has many interests in the House, such as stem-cell research, but chose "School Admissions (Prohibition of Religious Discrimination)" – something that is considerably more radical than LibDem education policy. Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, provided copious research to assist him.

Below are the relevant extracts from Hansard:

Dr Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (Liberal Democrat): "I am very keen to put on the record my interest in this issue as an honorary associate of the National Secular Society ... we must either stop religious schools from existing, or – a lesser step – stop them from segregating and discriminating on religious grounds."

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North) (Labour): "I rise to oppose the Bill ... I feel it necessary to express my opposition to this Bill as it aims to undermine one of the longest established traditions in our education system – that children should be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, as far as is compatible with the effective and efficient use of resources. I believe that the attack on faith schools, which have gained a reputation for high educational standards, should be disregarded. The hon Member for Oxford, West

and Abingdon is seeking to disown the view that respect and tolerance of different religious beliefs are essential for positive community cohesion.

"In introducing this Bill, the hon. Gentleman shows that he is clearly not interested in school standards. He is not even interested in the fact that many parents want the choice to send their children to a faith school, be it Catholic, Church of England, other Christian denomination, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. However, his true intentions are uncovered in his association with the National Secular Society. His ultimate goal is to impose secular dogma on all children, regardless of the wishes of their parents. He camouflages his main objective in this Bill, knowing full well the profound implications that it would have on faith schools. ...

"I find it surprising that a Liberal should wish to take away such rights. It is often stated that faith schools are exclusive – a view also held by the Liberal Democrat spokesman on education, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) ...

"The introduction of the Bill is purely opportunistic. It is not difficult to establish the hon. Gentleman's true motive for introducing it. Indeed, he admitted it himself. It has nothing to do with improving educational standards – it is an attack on the rights of those who wish to lead their lives in accordance with a particular religious belief. It is a case based on a list of inaccuracies. It is an attempt to deny parents the right to decide what is best for their children."

Ron Reagan wants Bush ousted

OUTSPOKEN atheist Ron Reagan, son of former President Ronald Reagan who died earlier this year, is urging Americans to oust President Bush in the forthcoming presidential elections.

Ron Reagan has always been a vocal opponent of his late father's party, but never as much as he is now.

One reason he gives for wanting to see Bush ousted is because the President has blocked stem-cell research for diseases like Alzheimer's, which afflicted Ronald Reagan for the last ten years of his life.

Reagan, on CNN's Larry King Live programme earlier this year, was asked whether he considered running for public office.

He replied: "I am an atheist ... I can't be elected to anything because the polls all say that people won't elect an atheist."

After his TV appearance, Reagan was contacted by the Freedom From Religion Foundation which offered him its Emperor Has No Clothes Award, a golden statuette reserved for public figures "who are plain-spoken on their dissent from religion".

He gladly accepted it.

The Award was introduced in 1999, at the behest of a FFrF benefactor, Mildred Perpigna, now 90, who conceived it and pays for its manufacture by the same company which produces the Oscar awards.

The first recipient was Professor Steven Weinberg, the Nobel Laureate physicist and outspoken atheist. Professor Richard Dawkins has also been singled out for the award.

Muslim website maligns Nigerian atheists

THE Nigerian Humanist Movement – a national organisation of atheists and agnostics – has vehemently denied a report which has appeared on IslamOnline under the heading "Nigerian Atheists Stand Trial For Attacking Mosque".

The report claimed that some "Nigerian atheists will stand trial for attacking a mosque". The attack was said to have taken place on July 18. According to the IslamOnline correspondent, nine atheists taken into custody "will appear in Osun state supreme court on charges of public disorder, damaging public property, breaching freedom of religion and sparking

a sectarian sedition."

The report further stated that atheist cults backed by "an American-Christian-atheist coalition" had orchestrated several attacks and killings of Muslims in Nigeria.

A statement issued by Leo Igwe, NHM Executive Secretary, said:

"We are outraged by this misguided report, which is a calculated attempt to portray Nigerian atheists as violent. We are shocked by the high level of misrepresentation of history, facts and figures about religion and atheism in Nigeria by IslamOnline.

"We want to state categorically that there are no atheist cults in Nigeria, and there has

never been any incident of clashes or killings by atheists in the history of Nigeria. Instead Nigeria has a bloody history of clashes between Muslims and Muslims, Muslims and Christians, Muslims and Animists, Christians and Christians, Christians and Muslims, and Christians and Animists.

"And in all cases of religious blood-letting in the country, atheists have been victims.

"We are therefore urging the IslamOnline correspondent in Abuja to desist from this campaign of calumny, misinformation and misrepresentation."



FORMER Marist priest Alan Woodcock has been jailed for seven years in New Zealand for child sex offences.

Woodcock, 56, formerly of Upper Hutt, was extradited from Britain earlier this year. He pleaded guilty in Wellington District Court to 21 charges relating to the abuse of 11 boys between 1978 and 1987 when he was teaching at St John's College, Hastings; St Patrick's College Silverstream; Highden, a school for young priests in Palmerston North; and Futuna, a Catholic retreat in Wellington.

He had lived in Britain since the late 1980s until ordered to return to New Zealand by a High Court ruling.

In sentencing Woodcock, Judge Bridget Mackintosh said that his offending was an "appalling" breach of trust given that not only was he a priest, he was also a teacher and a counsellor.

According to a report in the *New Zealand Herald*, aggravating factors included the number of victims involved, their ages, the fact that Woodcock groomed his victims for abuse, the repetitive nature of the offending and the long period involved.

Extradited ex-priest jailed for seven years

The effect of the offending had "serious and tragic" results on his victims.

The judge noted the emotional trauma they had suffered and described how one boy became sexually promiscuous, to try to prove to himself that he was not homosexual after the offending and as a result now suffers from a venereal disease.

Some of the victims had had suicidal tendencies and sexual and other problems.

Judge Mackintosh accepted that Woodcock deserved some credit for his early guilty plea. However, this was minimised by the fact he fought extradition to New Zealand.

She took into account the more than four months he spent in the Brixton prison, London, where he was assaulted.

She also noted that Woodcock had also been the victim of sexual abuse as a youngster.

Woodcock's lawyer Greg King told the court that Woodcock was very sorry for what he had done and had not re-offended for many years. In Britain he had become a crack cocaine addict, which he said was related to his guilt over his abusive behaviour.

Exorcist convicted

THE death last year of an 8-year-old autistic boy as the result of suffocation suffered during an exorcism has resulted in the conviction of a 45-year-old American pastor.

Rev Ray A Hemphill, 45, of the Independent Faith Temple of the Apostolic Faith Church, was convicted in Milwaukee in July of recklessly carrying out "great bodily harm" to Torrance Cantrell.

During the course of the trial, Hemphill's brother David told the court that "God ordained Ray to be an evangelist and he has the gift to cast out devils. God," he said, "took the child, not my brother."

Torrance died after Hemphill sat on his chest and prayed and sang. All the while the boy was restrained by his mother and other church members

Jesus reveals he has no plans for high office

SINCE President George W Bush is a born-again Christian and Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry a lifelong Catholic, each presumably deems his political views reconcilable with the teachings of Jesus enunciated in the Gospels. Whether the men are warranted in the assumption, readers may judge for themselves.

Recently, I scored a journalistic coup when Jesus hitched a ride with me on Interstate 20 near Shreveport, Louisiana. After persistent entreaty, the elusive Galilean consented to an interview on political issues. Despite his soiled garb, matted beard, and weary mien, he was refreshingly forthright.

"Should", I asked, "the rich be heavily taxed?"

"Yes - for their own spiritual welfare. Don't lay up treasures here below. One can't serve God and mammon."

"Won't stringent taxation of the wealthy weaken the economy?"

"Possibly. But man doesn't live by bread alone."

"What can the wealthy do to avoid exorbitant taxes?"

"Sell all they have and distribute the proceeds to the poor."

"Should entitlement programs be expanded?"

Jesus tugged at his beard. "Exponentially. Give to everyone who begs from you, and of him who takes away your goods do not ask for

them again."

"Should the Pentagon budget be increased?"

"Decreased. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other."

"Should the US have invaded Iraq?"

GARY SLOAN finds Jesus in Louisiana, and asks him some searching questions

"Heavens, no. Blessed are the peacemakers, the meek, the merciful."

"Should politicians get tough on criminals?"

"They are too tough already. Let those without sin cast the first stone."

"What about convicted terrorists? How should they be treated?"

"Compassionately. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

"How important are family values?"

Jesus scratched his neck. "Not very. I left my own family early on. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, sister, and mother."

"Should Social Security be a concern for the present generation of US citizens?"

Jesus gazed out the passenger window at a field of lilies. "Not at all. Do not be anxious about tomorrow. For tomorrow will be anxious for itself."

"I see. What do you think about abortions and stem-cell research?"

"I don't. Perhaps now I will."

"Do you have an opinion on same-sex marriages?"

"Not really. Although I sometimes travel with twelve guys, I'm basically asexual."

"Do you favor separation of church and state?"

"Certainly. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's."

"Do you think US presidents should attend prayer breakfasts?"

Jesus yawned and then vigorously shook his head. "Bad idea. Beware of practising your piety before men in order to be seen by them."

"Is military experience an asset to a US president?"

"Usually a debit. As I said, blessed are the meek."

"In presidential elections, should character be an issue?"

"Yes. Woe to him of whom all men speak well."

"What do you think of partisan politics?"

The pale figure rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "I try not to. A politician sees the speck in his opponent's eye, but does not notice the log in his own. A kingdom divided against itself is laid waste."

"Hmm. I take it you would never run for high office?"

Jesus closed his eyes. "Not even if I had supporters."

THE authorities in France claim to have identified a new problem with Islam: a tendency among converts to the religion to veer towards extremism.

"Converts will be used more and more by jihadist circles," Jean-Luc Marret, a terrorism expert at the Strategic Research Foundation in Paris was quoted as saying in a recent report in the *New York Times*. "Converts have been used in the past for proselytism, logistics or support, and they are operationally useful now."

The *NYT* report, by Craig S Smith, says that Islam is Europe's fastest-growing religion, "and while there are no reliable statistics, many experts say they believe that the number of converts has grown since September 11, in many ways because of the campaign against terrorism."

Antoine Sfeir, a French scholar who is writing a book on the trend, said a small number of converts, many of them disaffected and often troubled young people, saw the current wave of Islamic terrorism as "a kind of combat against the rich, powerful, by the poor men of the planet".

A few dozen militant converts have been identified so far. A report by France's domestic intelligence agency, published by *Le Figaro*, estimated last year that there were 30,000 to 50,000 converts in France.

"However small the number of them drawn to terrorism, the police are focusing on this subset as a serious and growing threat.

"The conversion to Islam of fragile individuals undoubtedly leads to the risk of diversion to terrorism," the intelligence agency's report said, adding that radical groups have recruited converts because they can prove useful.

"The trend is not only happening in Europe. Jack Roche, a British-born Australian taxi driver, converted to Islam, trained in Afghanistan and returned to Australia, where he was recently sentenced to nine years in prison for trying to blow up the Israeli Embassy in Canberra.

In the United States, Jose Padilla, held by the government on suspicion of plotting terrorist attacks, converted to Islam in 1992 while in a Florida jail.

In an interview, one French anti-terrorism official said many recent converts were women, further complicating the standard profile.

Militant converts come to Islam in several ways, most notably through contact with Muslim extremists while serving time in Europe's prisons, where the Islamic population has skyrocketed. Richard Reid, the so-called shoe bomber from Britain, converted to Islam in prison.

France's prison population is more than 50 percent Muslim.

Another door to Islam is the Tablighi Jamaat, a missionary group that started in India 75 years ago to promote Islam in the face of Hindu domination. It is the world's largest net-

Converts to Islam 'are more likely to become extremists'

work of Islamic proselytisers.

The Tablighi Jamaat send converts to study in countries like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, where they often meet militant radicals. Several well-known Western converts are Tablighi Jamaat alumni, including John Walker Lindh, the American caught fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002.

Other people convert because of family influence – particularly in France, where inter-marriage between Christians and Muslims is increasingly common – or simple peer pressure in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods.

Al Qaeda's recruitment efforts have redoubled since the US invasion of Afghanistan, the authorities say. Seasoned Al Qaeda members have begun recruiting a new generation of militants through European mosques and from among local militant Islamic groups, the police say.

Jérôme Courtailler was among that group. He was arrested in 2001 in connection with a plot to blow up the US Embassy in Paris, a plot begun before the September 11 attacks but scheduled to be carried out after it.

Courtailler converted to Islam in Leicester, England, under the influence of Djamel Beghal, an Algerian-born Frenchman and confessed Al Qaeda member, in 1999. Beghal is believed to have been the ringleader of the US Embassy bombing plan.

A short road

The road from convert to jihadist can be remarkably short, terrorism experts say, because someone new to Islam does not have the cultural bearings or religious grounding to resist radical interpretations of Islam, and many come with a romanticised notion of an Islamic conflict with the West.

David Courtailler, Jérôme's brother, went to Brighton in England in 1996 to break free of his drug habit and found support among conservative Muslims.

US investigators said he was soon keeping company with Muslim radicals and stayed for a time at an apartment used by Zacarias

Moussaoui, who is now being prosecuted in Alexandria, Virginia, in connection with the September 11 attacks.

In court testimony, David Courtailler said friends had offered him a trip to Afghanistan to study the Koran. He accepted and was given nearly \$2,000 in cash, a phone number in Islamabad, Pakistan, and a plane ticket to Pakistan. Within days of his arrival he was taken by car over the Khyber Pass to Al Qaeda's notorious Khalden training camp near the Afghan city of Khost.

Courtailler has testified that he asked for training in bomb-making but that his request was denied because his Arabic was not good enough. His sojourn in Camp Khalden coincided with that of many other Al Qaeda militants, including Reid and Moussaoui.

Investigators now believe that while in Britain in 2000, David Courtailler provided help to a terrorist cell planning a huge bomb attack. His name was on a French driver's fake licence found later along with a large quantity of explosives in a Birmingham apartment.

Jérôme Courtailler moved to Rotterdam, where Dutch intelligence agents intercepted his phone calls with various terrorism suspects, including a Tunisian soccer player named Nizar Trabelsi, who was to be the suicide bomber in the US Embassy plot, according to court documents.

Jérôme Courtailler was arrested days after the September 11 attacks in connection with the Paris plot. Dozens of fake passports were found in his Dutch apartment, together with videos of Chechnya, the attack on the US Embassy in Kenya, and Osama bin Laden, and instructions on how to make a bomb.

Investigators say they believe that he was the source of the fake Belgian passports used by the suicide bombers who killed the Northern Alliance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud, in Afghanistan on September 9, 2001.

In 2002, a Dutch judge dismissed the charges against Jérôme Courtailler, who was accused of belonging to an international criminal organisation, because the evidence consisted mostly of information from illegally obtained wiretaps. For the next two years he lived near St.-Pierre-en-Faucigny under the watchful eye of France's intelligence services.

The Dutch prosecutor in the case appealed the dismissal, and Jérôme Courtailler was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison. He gave himself up in Rotterdam on June 24.

David Courtailler, meanwhile, was also recently convicted of consorting with terrorists with an intent to carry out violent acts.

He is now serving what remains of his four-year sentence, having already served more than a year awaiting trial and having had two years of the sentence suspended. Barring new charges, he will be free in about six months.

IT SEEMS to me unfortunate that the general tenor of the *Freethinker* has sometimes been the ridiculing of religion when the victims seem to me to need our sympathy.

In the July issue, for example, there were excellent items that would have been all the better but for the inclusion of the silly piece written by Steve Altes of California, whose antics will have reinforced the view of believers that people who wish to ridicule religion are insane or just exhibitionist.

Religion does things to people in much the same way that ideologies brainwash their victims. Ordinary decent working men and women in Germany found themselves persuaded to some extent by Nazi propaganda, but mostly by terror.

So what is the technique they use? Never mind for the moment whether it is morally or ethically acceptable. The usual technique is to make use of common anxieties and prejudices, to encourage any smouldering feelings of injustice or fear, and then to make promises to any people willing to support the political or religious organisation that the organisation can deliver them from fear and give them justice.

Do the organisations fulfil their promises? How can their victims tell? You are told that your unhappiness is almost anyone's fault but that of the protecting organisation. Priests keep saying that they too and the believers are guilty sinners, but that the church saves sinners. Political organisations tell us that cheats and wreckers are responsible for depressing the economy and making us poor or putting us out of work, not their ideology or its consequences. Religions tell us that it is jam tomorrow but never jam today. So what is in it for the organisations? Money, mostly, and influence, I expect, so Church and State are there to save us from ourselves?

Britain has the preposterous political policy of having Anglican bishops in the second chamber of their parliament, and instead of removing them, reformers plead for representatives from all the other "major" religious organisations. They say that their objective is to have a second chamber consisting of people who have earned the respect of the electorate and who can inspire a degree of objectivity in the debating chamber that results from years of experience in a wide variety of occupations. In which case, why clergy? Even superannuated party politicians have a better claim to be the choice of the electorate.

I would like believers to dare to ask serious questions about their faith. Does it matter if it is irrational? What does it give you? Is your participation more than social grooming? Does your conscience depend on your religious convictions? Does a person without religion have no conscience? Is your awareness of right and

wrong the result of religious teaching? Does it depend on circumstances whether you can kill or tell lies or steal? If you rejected your religion, would you necessarily reject your sense of right and wrong, or is this independent of faith?

One of the more brutal and manipulative characters in the Bible is the hero King David. In ancient Britain, if there was such a person as King Arthur, we choose to perceive him as a hero struggling to defend the land of the Romanised and Christian Britons from the heathen Saxon invaders, and there could be a greater probability that this was an historical fact than that King David was anything more than a successful terrorist.

Religious believers are victims who need our sympathy and they should not be ridiculed, argues PETER ARNOLD

To Christians, even today, King David must have been a good person because Jesus was descended from him! I set up this straw man knowing that "thinking" Christians ask the same questions. What puzzles me is why some of them go to such trouble to find moral justification for every biblical horror story. The pitiful Elijah hiding in the widow's wilderness home later becomes the hero in the sacrificial contest and demands the murder of his opponents, followed by the chilling command "Let not one of them escape", and in old age, as if to confirm his moral rectitude, he is taken up into heaven in a flaming chariot. Well, no. It is far more likely that he will have died and been buried, just like anyone else. He inspired his own tribe with sufficient moral courage to overcome the religious humbug of neighbouring tribe's priests.

A century or so later, the writers felt it necessary to test their public's gullibility by suggesting that a great prophet is different. Is that why Jesus had to rise into a cloud? To support the claim that he was supernatural, he could not decompose and be recycled like the rest of us. For me, the New Testament accounts do not enhance the story of Jesus, they just make it into a fantasy. Good people do help physically and mentally sick people to get better, but they do not walk on water or turn it into wine. They inspire ordinary people to have confidence in themselves, maybe enough confidence that for a moment they might almost believe that they could walk on water, and other people might have such faith in them that they could believe it too.

A generation or two later, and the Gospel writers might guess that such a story, confirmed in writing, would so impress readers

that they would join the religious organisation in a dangerous but exciting secret sect that had a good chance of achieving the moral overthrow of the Roman dictatorship, and it may have helped. The thrill, the challenge, the fear and loathing of the Roman political system were sufficient to inspire a rebellion that failed lamentably, but it was not the only rebellion. Germans and Picts and Goths and Visigoths and Vandals abound, and political and moral corruption within caused the chaos around the perimeter of which small Christian communities were able to survive, and the surviving farmers and craftsmen wished for nothing more than some peace of mind and security. I can see the attraction of a primitive Christianity in this situation. It stood for creativity in the face of destructive chaos.

The very survival of the organised Church depended, for a time, on very small numerate, literate and intellectually disciplined communities. As order began to be established, government needed them to help control the masses. The Church became so wealthy and successful that it too was corrupted and needed reformation. A ruthless and corrupt English monarch plundered the wealthy and corrupt monastic system, but could only offer the people the Anglican Church as a substitute. The next monarchy attempted to reverse the process. The next more or less turned it back to reformation and the last of the Tudors seems to have confirmed the preference of the majority for an English Church that used the English language. Gradually the majority of the population could understand enough Christian ethics and morality to be able to question the conduct of its lords and masters, but it was not until the evolution of a reasonably democratic system, votes for women and relative freedom of the press and subsequently of broadcasting that the ordinary citizen could make a serious attempt to put the question to the mass of their fellow British, and maybe even the whole English-speaking, public: Why must you continue to believe in political and religious fairy stories that have very little evidence to support them?

The twin system of British Church-and-State seems to me to be in almost as much need of reform as was the mediaeval Christian Church or the existing religious and military dictatorships around the world. Their moral torture could be as futile and destructive of a good society as is the physical torture that is used by most of them.

Very probably the states that rid themselves of fantastic religion and irrational belief systems will be one vital step ahead of those that do not. Democracy is heavily dependent on freedom of speech, but political or religious indoctrination prevents it being heard. What do other readers think?

'Miracle babies' produced by celestial insemination

BLACK childless couples in the UK are being told that their desire for a child can be fulfilled by means of celestial insemination. The first step of the process is conducted by Kenyan-born "Archbishop" Gilbert Deya, founder of the Gilbert Deya Ministries, who prays over childless women, then pronounces them "pregnant by Jesus".

The second step involves the women travelling to Kenya, where they are delivered of their "miracle babies" in backstreet clinics in Nairobi.

But doctors and Church of England officials are worried that the babies aren't miracles at all, but either a shortcut adoption process or a baby-trafficking scheme.

BBC Radio 4's *Face the Facts* programme last month revealed that Charles and Miriam Nyeko were the latest couple who claim to have had a "miracle conception". Members of the Gilbert Deya Ministries, they say their three-week old son is a "miracle from God".

But the Church of England and Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology are calling for an investigation into the so-called "miracle babies" being born to British women.

Face the Facts discovered that one of the "miracle babies" has been taken into care after tests revealed that its DNA did not match either of its parents. Later, it was discovered the child's Kenyan birth certificate was a forgery.

"I believe in miracles, but I don't believe that people can have babies miraculously that have totally different DNA," says Dominic Walker, the Bishop of Monmouth. "I think it's very difficult when people are claiming something's a miracle when perhaps it's a criminal activity."

But Archbishop Deya – whose group has more than 36,000 members in Britain and is building a £1 million church in south London – told the BBC that there was no explanation for the miracle babies.

He said he wasn't surprised their DNA was not the same as their parents, as they came from God.

The Archbishop said he has seen post-menopausal women give birth, including a 56-year-old who has had 13 miracle babies over the past three years.

"The 'miracle babies' which are happening now in our ministry is beyond a human imagination, but it's not something that I can explain

because they are of God and things of God cannot be explained by human beings," Archbishop Deya said.

"Unless somebody's blind, how can you say the woman is not pregnant?" he added. "We witness they are pregnant, they went to Kenya and they came with the babies, so we believe that where the tummy was big the baby has come out." The ministry has 14 branches in Britain, as well as locations in Africa, Asia, and other parts of Europe, and Archbishop Deya has attracted the attention of authorities in the past. He was investigated by the Church of England after conducting exorcisms on young children, but no action was taken.

The Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology echoes the Church of England's concerns, saying it's possible vulnerable people are being taken advantage of. "Childless couples were very vulnerable and desperate that they would believe virtually anything," says consultant Patrick O'Brien, noting that medical evidence proved the women were not pregnant before the births.

"These are not miracle children, but someone else's children, and the authorities should

find out whose."

But Charles Nyeko says the birth of his son, Daniel, is simply a gift from God.

"Now we have the proof – a miracle from God," he tells the programme. "We don't understand how it has happened. We are just grateful that it has. We have the son we so longed for and I am convinced that it is a miracle, a miracle I never thought I'd see in my lifetime."

But the couple is unsure that they'll be able to bring Daniel to Britain, as the Kenyan authorities are insisting on DNA testing to determine if he is the biological child of the Nyekos.

Along with the Metropolitan Police, the United Nations Children's Fund told Face the Facts that it will be launching an investigation into child exploitation and baby trafficking in Kenya in an attempt to get to the bottom of how babies born in Africa are being passed to foreign mothers.

"We want to know exactly what's happening," says Anna Miracow, a UN child protection officer. "What are the reasons, if it's happening, how are they being taken out, where are the loopholes?"

Generations of boys were brutalised by Salesian priests and brothers, claims Australian author

AUSTRALIAN author and lateral thinker Michael Hewitt-Gleeson has taken the first step in a campaign to force the Catholic order of Salesian priests and brothers to speak out about the brutalisation of generations of students at the notorious college, Rupertswood, in Sunbury, Victoria, by launching a stinging attack on the ethics of the order.

Dr Hewitt-Gleeson, who founded the School of Thinking with Professor Edward de Bono and wrote the bestseller *Software for the Brain*, has written to the Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, and the Australian Papal ambassador, the Apostolic Nuncio, detailing alleged abuse by Catholic priests and brothers and a brutal assault on him when he was eight years old.

He was left, he says, with "corrugated welts on my bottom, which were wet with the blood that began oozing from the bruises and broken skin".

"Assault ran rife at Rupertswood. Not many people know that Ronald Ryan, the last man hanged in Victoria, was also a victim of Rupertswood," he said in a public statement at the beginning of September. One Salesian priest was recently defrocked by the Pope at the request of the order's Australian leader, Father Ian Murdoch, for sex abuse against students at Rupertswood, while others have been convicted of sex crimes at various Salesian institutions, notably Rupertswood.

Dr Hewitt-Gleeson tells Cardinal Pell and the Papal Nuncio that the physical violence at Rupertswood, which he attended in 1956, was ten times worse than the sexual violence.

He tells the church leaders it is important to describe what happened to him because physical abuse was such a sanctioned part of his Catholic education.

In his paper, *Women in Islam versus Women in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, a world authority on Islam, Dr Sherif Abdel Azeem sets out to prove that the Islamic traditions relating to women far exceed in their tolerance and humanity those in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He acknowledges that he limits his comparisons to doctrines and teaching, and also that the "God" that rules these three religions is one and the same.

But, who or what is this "God"?

The fact is that we know nothing about the entity in question.

It is true, however, that the very oldest recorded myths and nature religions speak of goddesses rather than gods. The moon was regarded by the Mexicans as the patroness of fertility and love, ruling over the hours of night. The Mexican Mother was at one time regarded as forming the Earth and soil.

The Pelasgian Creation Myth has it that Eurynome, the goddess of all things rose naked from Chaos.

In this archaic religious system there were as yet neither gods nor priests but only a universal goddess and her priestesses, woman being the dominant sex and man her frightened victim.

The Orphics say that Blackwinged Night, a goddess of whom even Zeus stands in awe, was courted by the wind and laid a silver egg in the womb of Darkness, and that Eros, whom some call Phanes, was hatched from this egg and set the Universe in motion. According to the Olympian creation myth, "At the beginning of all things Mother Earth emerged from Chaos and bore her son Uranus as she slept".

No, we certainly don't know anything about God, whether He, She or It, is black, white or rainbow-coloured, good or bad. Nevertheless we have created names for this Unknown Entity and have thereby personalised it. It is said that there are a hundred names of God but in truth there is only one - ANONYM.

Dr Azeem's research is limited to the teaching of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He agrees that these religions were all created by "God", the Creator of the whole Universe. But he does not offer or indeed ask for an explanation of why and how the One and Only, the same Creator God should have different names - Jahweh, God, Allah. Neither does he explain how it can be that this one "God" should give different teaching and moral doctrines, thus appearing to quarrel with himself.

Just as intriguing is the fact that Dr Azeem, like all Muslims, Jews and Christians, bases all his beliefs relating to divine truth ultimately on the book of Genesis. But Genesis is not without problems.

For example, the first crucial sentence reads in English, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," where the word "God", with its capital "G" refers to the Supreme

Goodbye and

Being of monotheistic religions. But the original Hebrew has *Elohim barah Ha Aretz*, where the word Elohim strictly translated means "The gods", the little superhuman beings.

Then there are two accounts of the creation. The first, in Genesis chapter 1, includes the creation of man and woman (vv. 26 -7) whom he instructed to, "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it".

The second account is in chapter 2 and differs. Here woman is created from a rib God takes out of man. There is still no hint that fertility is evil, for they were both naked and unashamed. Then in this account another confusion - a new character is introduced.

In the story in chapter one creation is made in six stages. At the end of each stage "God saw that it was good." At the end of the sixth stage, "God saw everything that he had made and, Behold it was VERY GOOD".

But ironically in this very good world, which He alone had made, God met something which was not so very good. Indeed the serpent was "more subtle than any beast in the field which the Lord God had made".

And the serpent is instrumental in occasioning the moral decline of Adam and Eve, and the whole story of the fall involves another question about the authority of Genesis. (And incidentally and more importantly about the authority and responsibility of God. For God created the serpent.)

For Azeem writes: "A careful look into the two accounts of the story of the Creation reveals some essential differences. The Quran, contrary to the Bible, places equal blame on both Adam and Eve for their mistake. Nowhere in the Quran can one find even the slightest hint that Eve tempted Adam to eat from the tree or even that she had eaten before him. Eve in the Quran is no temptress, no seducer, and no deceiver. Moreover, Eve is not to be blamed for the pains of childbearing. God, according to the Quran, punishes no one for another's faults. Both Adam and Eve committed a sin and then asked God for forgiveness and He forgave them both."

The image of Eve as temptress in the Bible has resulted in an extremely negative impact on women throughout the Judaeo-Christian tradition. All women were believed to have inherited from their mother, the biblical Eve, both her guilt and her guile. Consequently, they were all untrustworthy, morally inferior, and wicked.

This sort of controversy between the Bible and the Koran has resulted in quarrelling, enmity and even warfare, which is still not at an end.

That the records of the prehistoric ages in Genesis I - XI are at complete variance with modern science and archaeological research is unquestionable. But although it is impossible to regard them any longer either as genuine history or as subjects for an allegorical interpretation (which would prove the accuracy of any record) they are of distinct value as human documents. They reflect the ideas and thoughts of the Hebrews. They illustrate their conception of God and the universe and they furnish material for comparison of the moral development of the Hebrews with that of other early races.

The time has come for humankind to ditch the concept of gods, argues JOAN SIMKINS

The Koranic "Revived Version" of the Genesis account is equally unscientific and fallible.

Philosophical and rational attempts to explore and reach conclusions about the existence and nature of God have continued throughout the ages but have reached no certainty, though billions of words have been used in the attempt. One of the best-known efforts is based on the theory that God, the eternal Law or Perfect Reason, is at one with human reason, which it has created. It does appear that there is order, pattern and purpose within nature, which suggests that it is controlled by divine and eternal laws. And it seems logical to assume that the human reason which man is aware of in himself is created by this greater Eternal Law (God) and can thus relate to and understand it. However there is a point in the analysis of creative activity beyond which human reason cannot go. It is clear enough that mystery lies at the heart of the "divine" creative reason itself, for creation is an inexplicable miracle, and reason, by straining to comprehend it, finds itself frustrated and contradicted by its own limitations. And since the eternal law is part of the "divine" creativity it too must be largely incomprehensible to man both in itself and in its human relevance. There is not a perfect understanding between "divine" and human reason, and when the nature of the eternal law is sought, not merely in logical terms but in the world of particular things, the human

god riddance!

mind must be still more baffled.

The inanimate world might appear to have reached the highest development of its potentialities and its fullness of being. Any irregularities in it might appear as physical rather than moral problems. But among things in full vitality there is often disorder and distress, and in spheres beyond our control suffering and cruelty, which, if we had responsibility for them, we should call immoral, evil or disharmonious. An earthquake which disturbs or scars a landscape can be regarded as a natural adjustment of impersonal forces, but when it unconsciously kills or injures it appears that the laws of relationship between living and non-living things have not yet achieved infallible perfection. Indeed, when the two meet, there is danger for the living, with whom the burden of adaptability remains.

There is also so much stress and conflict among living things that it is difficult to believe that, outside man, the world is organised by utterly perfect laws, whatever such might be. For according to this conception, there could be no possibility of freaks, not one leaf should be out of place, no flaw could be allowed to crack the perfection of the whole creation, except for the amoral incompleteness of immaturity and growth. For the whole art of the eternal law must be to bring with extraordinary care every individual thing to the climax of its perfection, in such a way that this perfection is fitted to and contributes to the wealth and harmony of all things.

In man the problem is complicated by the partial separation within him of the power and form of the law, which no longer, as in outer creation, inform each other. To some extent he is overwhelmed and shaped by the powers working unconsciously within and without him until he stands on a threshold where he belongs to both worlds, the world of inevitable nature and that of his own choice and making. To some extent he is conscious of a law working within him and possessing him with its dynamic purpose. He is a blind and helpless victim and beneficiary of these forces, and he has to acknowledge even his free will as an extension of something other than himself. He is continually carried along by life, he essentially is part of its mystery.

But at several points he is aware that the eternal law is not the great creative hand of life upon him. He realises that he is not thoroughly possessed by it, nor secure within its confident dictatorship, but is, in a sense, decentralised. He is abandoned to the responsibility of self-direction. Whereas in the rest of creation the laws or

forms of things are one with their own creative energy, at some points in man they separate. He may have to search for a law to guide him or it may overshadow him but as a powerless ideal. His feet are fastened to the earth, but such mental and spiritual freedom as is given him is as void of directions as is the sky.

The purpose, which in the rest of the universe is charged with power, although it remains with him, does so as a powerless unfinished design, which he can perhaps hardly trace in parts, but which he must realise, and colour and fill with detail, for many of the odds and ends of it are only suggestive incentives to his creativity.

He may be encouraged by some to think that he has been invited to co-operate with God, but he may also feel more like a child suddenly set at the wheel of a car amid dangerous traffic, knowing only that he must drive without disaster and that he lacks the knowledge and experience to do so.

Mutual destruction, killing, self-defence, the survival of the fittest seem rife amongst living things outside man. He might therefore quite reasonably understand this as a justification for similar behaviour on his own level. He might, on the other hand, understand himself as being gifted with the responsibility and purpose of employing his reason to introduce another type of conflict, one against destruction itself. He would have to some extent to stand outside the natural scheme of things, to change, redeem, and improve it. This however, implies that man's morality and good sense transcend that of the eternal law, rather than humbly and imperfectly participating in its perfection, so that the eternal law is called upon to participate in the human law.

Reason alone cannot reach satisfactory certainty about God and his nature, and even if it has an inkling and a dim and insecure knowledge of some Infinite Power behind all things, this is not enough to identify such a power with God – and even if reason has a sense of kinship with this power it is not enough to guarantee that its own way of life and its own small authority are divine.

Christian theologians are joining the chorus of disbelief in God. The incomprehensible is today declared a void, and we are recommended by some Christian thinkers to ignore the unknown as unprofitable. The "human" God answers all man's purposes. All other versions of Christianity must go, and with them the three-letter word God, as hopelessly inadequate and ambiguous. Phrases such as the "death of God", "religionless Christianity", "the secular gospel", abound, confound and

confuse. Van Buren feels that Christianity's theological vocabulary, especially the word God, has become empty, meaningless and hence irrelevant to contemporary society. Vahanian, who is a sociologist of religion, studies and evaluates man's religious understanding of God in terms of the history of culture. Christianity's understanding of God today he reckons as distorted, even idolatrous, in that it reflects a bygone culture no longer relevant and meaningful to contemporary man. Hence the God of past cultures is dead. The task of contemporary Christianity is to make its own approximation of God in terms of the secular culture of our day. Only this way can the cultural needs of the times be met.

Although it was supremely successful in speaking to the intelligent layman, there is little original thought in Robinson's *Honest to God*, in which he insists that the phrase *Ground of Being* is the best translation of God. This phrase he acknowledges as borrowed from Tillich, who in his turn is but using the title of the God of medieval natural theology.

Harvey Cox, in *The Secular City*, gives a particular slant to the question. He sees as central what most would regard as tangential sociological influences, such as urbanisation, technology, and the anonymity and speed of modern life. These he believes have abolished or have deeply disturbed and altered man's faith, and his understanding of it. A great shift in emphasis is needed to re-adjust the balance of man's religious stance in the universe. Religion means awareness of man's new human position and his corresponding needs.

This is to mention in bare outline but a few of those who doubt what the language of religion has signified in the past and wish to translate it into something they believe to be of contemporary meaningfulness.

Those, therefore, who think it dishonest to talk inaccurately or vaguely about ineffable entities like God, but who are willing to revere and place their faith in Christ, have not escaped the problem or the necessity of defining him. Unless they think of Christ as merely a very good man, they have only brought it closer, and if they do think this, then they should declare themselves secular humanists.

As theology wanes we can however "thank God" that the sciences are coming to our rescue, bringing meticulous honesty and the fruits of devoted research. These are replacing the power of superstition and the magic fairy tales and dogmas that have dominated man for too long. Life must move on, otherwise it stagnates and ossifies. Science may not teach us anything about God, but is giving us amazing insights into the working of the universe and showing us ways in which we can exploit its potential for the advancement of mankind.

An alternative to fanaticism, superstition and religious extremism in Nigeria

AS a child I often watched the pained, angry expression on the faces of many grandfatherly men as they nodded off in church while long-winded pastors delivered their scripted sermons and appeals to the future citizens of heaven, firmly determined to encourage young and old alike to deposit money in the collection plates. I wondered then what thoughts knitted the brows of these older gentlemen and nudged them forcefully back to sleep in a public place so early in the morning.

Women who came scurried around like wound-up mice compelled to support the preacher in word, if not in deed. Little did it matter that most of these women had few kind words to offer about the "shepherds" who made every effort to minister to the needs of the well-to-do or big name families and lived quite well off the contributions made by the sleepy "sheep".

True, some women came infrequently and attributed their absence to not having the proper attire! As I observed it, church was more of a social exercise than an uplifting experience. It was yet another great place to meet one's friends and to climb the social ladder.

Even today, many a reluctant husband is still dragged to church on Sundays. Not surprisingly, many more men are now also pressured into attending deliverance services and the likes at all odd hours during the week, as such sacrifices become more and more the norm of the day. All of this is not to say that there are not men who willingly and gladly herd themselves to religious gatherings and occasions. The greater percentage of religious leaders contin-

ues to be men; women are the larger part of the congregation. What is astounding is that our men, women and children spend an unseemingly amount of time in religious activities hoping to ward off attacks from evil spirits and to attract prosperity. But to what avail?

The recent revelation that Nigeria was among the most religious countries in the world has prompted two Nigerian humanists to comment on the subject. The first article was penned by Enitan-Doherty Mason, who lives in America, and the second by MA Belo, a Nigerian living in the UK

The work of building infrastructure and maintaining a civil Nigerian society remains unattended. The din of religious "fervour", fanaticism and superstition pulsates in the streets of Nigeria and hearts of too many Nigerians, causing an unprecedented blindness of the mind. The country continues to be exponentially polluted by trash and unconscionable acts of desperate people; people utterly frustrated by seemingly unending cycles of poverty, pretension, ignorance, oppression, stagnation, bigotry, discrimination, disease, traffic congestion, robberies, senseless murders, escalating numbers of drug addictions, empty politics and titular leaders that have neither vision nor direction ...all buried under colossal and ever-growing mountains of trash in residential neighborhoods.

Fear and confusion have become so deeply lodged within the hearts of too many Nigerian men and women and have bound them in an almost inescapable prison. Few – Christian, Muslim or Animist – speak without the signatory "God bless you" or "In Jesus' name" or "God will do it" lest they be thought faithless and godless.

Actually, more and more people adopt all three beliefs to ensure that they are adequately covered by the big illusory umbrella in the sky. The Nigerian preacher continues to paint

images of an unchanging God when in fact change is inevitable. Nigeria lulls in that foggy region where superstition, magic and religious extremism converge.

Has the God inherited from Christianity and Islam lost his power to save and bless? Do the indigenous gods now work their magic erratically like NEPA (Nigeria Electric Power Authority) in both function and use? More than ever, people who ordinarily function with energy and clarity of thought are stagnated in the cesspool of spiritual wails and prayerless prayers forgetting that the life we have to live is in the here and now. One can only be grateful that not everyone is wrapped in this seemingly universal blanket of religious fog. Perhaps those who subscribe to reason and logic will prevail. Perhaps the alternative to madness is humanism.

Humanism takes what is good from all sources; invites us to the door to endless opportunities and creativity through which we can take our lives into our own hands and work to lessen the true ills of this earth – poverty, war, disease, oppression and prejudice. Humanism motivates us to look at each other as opposed to looking over each other; it frees us to provide opportunities that sustain our young such that we will live worthy lives for ourselves and others.

Nigeria, religion and fraud

I AM a Nigerian and I have been a member of the British Humanist Association for well over 40 years. Sometimes I do wonder how rational we humanists and/or atheists tend to be with the kind of views expressed in our journals. I thought I had heard it all as far as humanism and rationalism is concerned, when once at a Hampstead Humanist group meeting discussing rape, the guest speaker, in illustration said "...with a 15-year-old Nigerian girl, it is difficult to prove rape...".

The title of your article in the August edition of the journal is beyond belief – "Nigeria: the land where religion and fraud go hand in hand".

The story of the so-called "Prince Joe Eboh" makes very interesting reading, and the journal can actually do with more of such comical stories once in a while as some relief to the scrupulous business of being freethinkers, atheists and

Driven crazy by the bells

A 43-year-old company director from Duffield, near Derby, has been convicted of threatening behaviour and ordered to do 100 hours of community service following an incident in which he abused a group of church bell-ringers, and brandished a rock in the face of the bell-tower secretary, Catriona Todd.

James Saunders, who lives just yards away from St Alkmund's Church, snapped after the bells pealed out after 9pm just weeks after the vicar had assured him that no ringing would take place late at night.

Saunders grabbed a stone from his rockery and rushed over to the church, where he confronted Mrs Todd, and told her: "I spoke to the fucking vicar a few weeks ago, and he said you should stop at nine."

humanists. However, that headline is ridiculous to say the least. To compound the insult on Nigerians, you then published on the same page, an article by Leo Igwe, the Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, titled "What has Nigeria to show for its piety?" A question which suggests the headline writer is oblivious of the importance of cultural relativism in assessing the gains of religion.

To tackle your headline first, I am appalled at the lack of analytical depth in it. Nigeria has a population of 120 million. The London *Times*' story of the of July 31, 2004, from which presumably your story was culled, did say there are some 100,000 Nigerians like the imbecile "Prince Joe Eboh" in what is locally known as the "419" fraud, which he was trying to peddle. The figure cannot be more than 20,000, considering such fraudsters seem to come from the same ethnic group, whose population is less than a million, and whose literacy rate is about the lowest in black Africa. It does not require much to realise that only semi-literate buffoons will write the type of letters "Prince Eboh" and his cohorts write, or fall for the type of bait set for him by "Mike". You will not find 100,000 of such people in Nigeria. Assuming one even accepts that figure as correct, your headline for the story is still very misleading and a great insult on millions of hardworking Nigerians all over the world.

There is religion, and a lot of it too, in Nigeria without any shadow of doubt. In fact, the BBC programme mentioned concluded 95 percent of Nigerians are "religious", in that they have one religion or another. No one who knows Nigeria well will dispute that, but that is a different issue. It is a simplistic and nauseating religiosity, but how can it "go hand in hand with fraud" if there are 100,000 fraudsters amongst some 114 million religious people? How would it have gone if there had been between, say 57 and 110 million fraudsters amongst 114 million religionists – arse to arse? Such sensational headlines belong more in the gutter press than in a "rationalist" journal.

Now to the headlined question "What has Nigeria to show for its religiosity?" above Leo Igwe's article. It is an unfair question in that it ignores why people turn to religion in the first place. Albert Schweitzer once said "Religion belongs in the infancy of the human race; now that the race has come of age, it should be discarded". That is a point of view I agree with, but how one views "coming of age of the human race" depends on what lenses one is using. An African like me who has been exposed to the revolutionary thoughts of the likes of Copernicus, Hume, Russell, Popper, etc, living in Britain where the rule of law is fundamental to our lives, and where the state provides me protection against nearly all vicis-

situdes of life, is hardly in a position to see the advance of the human race from the same perspective as my brothers and sisters in Nigeria.

The concept of religion, as Schweitzer suggested and as most serious writers on the subject have shown, is primordial. At one point or other in time, in every culture, it fulfilled a function. Some cultures found it unnecessary earlier than the others. The fact that Britain is now in her post-Christian era, where it is now possible to explain most things without any reference to some religious mumbo-jumbo, cannot justify our asking what those still in the Christian era, whose answer to most things is found in religion, benefit from religion. If Igwe and other freethinkers who share his views will analytically consider first, "why is there so much religiosity in Nigeria?", they will easily realise how much Nigeria has to show for its "piety". The fact that such "gain" will not be our cup of tea does not mean they find it tasteless, but we are not in any position to judge.

Let us see if I can help them out on this. Nigeria is faced with the typical black African dilemma – what to do with a social and political system which colonialism assumed must be good for them. As Julius Nyerere once said, "the worst crime of colonialism was the attempt to make us (black Africans) believe that what we had before colonialism was worthless". The results today in most parts of colonial Asia, where some respect was given to what existed before colonialism (Asians were noble savages while we Africans were savage savages!), most especially in terms of religions, show the futility of imposing foreign systems on Africans. The Japanese' total rejection of Christianity and other foreign religions cannot be unhelpful in ensuring the stable society they have.

That Lee Kuan Yew, in Singapore, was able to curtail civil liberties as a price for stability and economic progress, cannot be unrelated to the homogeneity of his society. Black Africans came out of colonialism with multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-national societies, with compulsion from powerful external influences to forge homogeneous states out of those complex heterogeneous societies. This led to a total collapse of traditional African institutions, and with no stable imposed foreign institutions to replace them, succour must come from somewhere. Where else could it come from except foreign religions brought by powerful external forces?

Foreign religions spread like wildfire throughout black Africa. Christianity, with the help of the "maxim gun," and Islam, with the sword of the Jihadists. For instance in 1897, when the people of Benin Kingdom in Southern Nigeria refused entry to some British Christian missionaries, an Expeditionary Force

was sent to accompany them and ensure they were allowed in. The commotion that took place destroyed nearly the entire Benin Kingdom. The king was sent into exile, and every artefact of value in sight was removed to Britain as war booty. From that point on, the Benins became convinced the Christian God that can wrought so much destruction on everything that used to make sense to them must be so powerful that it can do and undo anything and everything.

That was the basis on which Christianity got into most parts of black Africa, and that is why today Africans are religious – because they expect their problems to be solved by their religiosity. And their problems are innumerable. Where there are laws, they are unenforceable. Where people have rights, they cannot assert those rights. Where people feel hapless and become hopeless, they would need a stimulant – "religion is the opiate of the people".

Considering the situation in which most Nigerians find themselves today, any hope whatsoever, including false hope, is better than no hope at all. Their religiosity promises them some hope, false ones in all cases. But, should Igwe and those who share his views of Nigeria's religiosity, remove religion at this point in time from the lives of those 114 million Nigerians, what would they put in its place? As Bob Marley said, "a hungry man is an angry man", and as events in the history of our affluent western societies have shown, it is easier to be rational when you are affluent than when you are not. That was probably the reason why Socrates' students did not come from the slaves and low classes of his society.

A political system that guarantees the rule and enforcement of law, that would guarantee a sound body into which a sound mind can be implanted, is not something that can be imported and planted in any society just like that. It is a culture that must be nurtured and developed while ensuring the establishment of some institutions that would guarantee social order. While this is going on, religion has been known to fill the vacuum by providing "false hopes" – that is what Nigeria today has to show for its piety. Without the false and simplistic religiosity now pervading the country, life would be more intolerant for everyone, both the religious and non-religious, than it is at present. Nigeria currently has not got the psychiatric and psychoanalytic facilities to replace the therapeutic facilities that religiosity offers Nigerians.

In conclusion, like other societies before them, Nigerians too would sooner or later wake up and confront their lives with more rationality, but, until that happens, those of us who have the wherewithal to be rational must view Nigeria's religiosity with the compassion it deserves.

FROM the experience of the '30s we ought to be alert enough to recognise the point at which trying to be reasonable with the enemy is appeasement. That point was, in fact, reached when our masters decided, during the Rushdie furore, that there could be one law for Muslims and another for the rest. Muslims calling for the murder of a British novelist should have been brought to court and weren't. It was as shameful as the British refusal to take on the Nazis when the Rhineland, contrary to international treaty, was occupied. It was a big bill that had to be paid then, and it will be a bigger one this time. And this is what worries Anwar Shaikh.

Out of a store of a lived knowledge, Anwar Shaikh savages Islam. It is not only a nasty political construction, it is subversive of Western civilisation and it is this for two reasons. First it emerges out of a tradition of robbery made politically correct – the *razzia*, the lightning raid on a careless passing caravan, with God thrown in.

Secondly, it is sustained by the refusal of our official masseurs to approach the texts with at least the degree of honesty that has been applied to other religious texts these past 100 years. As this book elaborates, it is not just that the Koran is merely a military manual, a useful guide to a welfare system to provide stability behind the lines while the infidel are being trashed – which has to be said, and often – it is the systematic cheats in it which should stop people in their tracks. Even Arabists will allow that the text is a-syntactical. Many will apologise for its gaseousness. Some will acknowledge – dangerously – that it was cobbled together in the last decade of the eighth century. This book is primarily concerned with another significant fraud, the one that Gibbon didn't elaborate because in the 18th century there was no urgent need to the way Mohammed – or his editors – cheats on authorship. One of the reasons contemporary Jews dismissed him was precisely his fusion of god-head with himself. When the Lord came unto Moses, even the religious could and can enter into a fictional truce, if not an agreement. There is no such fictional honesty in the Koran. There is regular confusion between the personae – god talking, the prophet talking – and it is immodest to say the least. And, of

course, it would never have worked but for the fact that the Byzantine and Persian empires were ripe for picking. As they were comfortably picked, the texts had to be the word of God and will stay as the word of God while

KEITH BELL reviews *Islam and Terrorism,* by Anwar Shaikh, Principality Publishers, £15.00

there are pickings and triumphs such as September 11 which confirm them as the word of God.

Shaikh's book provides the quotations and references which, for anyone who hasn't yet tested his or her endurance with the Koran itself, makes it a good publication to have near when the local press is, again, saying something daft. Apart from the scholars who are entirely ignored, there have been two journalists – noticeably, women – Melanie Phillips and Minette Marrin, who have tried to persuade our masters that there is a problem here. Also ex-parliamentary candidate, Michael Knowles, determined not to parley with imams, Rotherham's Dennis McShane who is resigned to having to, and the rejected Conservative Mr Townend of Hull have drawn attention to the matter. But it is largely silence. The explanation is straightforward and Anwar Shaikh allows the holy texts to tell it.

Whether you are considering them, as Muslims must, as truthful accounts of 7th century events, in particular involving the increasing number of companions after plunder, especially from neighbouring Jews, or as propositions on how to behave in the Emperor Aurungzebe's India and anywhere else, they are apologies for terrorism. Because Muslims – this is the crucial point – may not read the texts as atheists can read the Old Testament, *Beowulf*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they must read them as objective statements of Allah's handiwork from all time and for all time, including right now.

Our rulers are frightened and don't know what to do about a fascist movement which embraces greater numbers than European Nazism ever did; is better located and has far better weapons at its disposal. Fascism entails the government of the State by the Party. The Party, nodding in the direction of a prophet say, Mohammed, is the State so that anyone not a member of the one is always in danger of being an outcast of the other.

Further, the fascist State must always be on tip-toes to conquer, for power and success alone legitimise it. At this level, there is nothing new in the book. There couldn't be. What

is new and makes at least parts of the book good reading is the tone.

This is an intensely personal statement from someone who was a sympathetic part of the Islamic system. So, it tells the danger better than that great scholarly book. *Hagarism* (Crone & Cooke) or the scholarly but journalistic *The West and the Rest* (R. Scruton), for Anwar Shaikh, who is as familiar with the texts as they are, does not present the matter in the style of the scholar trained in academe. Further, because it is straight from the heart, it hits off the anger and frustration many people feel who have to observe the treason of our betters, the *trahison des clercs* of our time. And you can't help but compare it with the stuff endlessly peddled not only by our Commons folk who, for several reasons, could be forgiven their fear – though not the ignorance – but also by nearly all the media.

Above all, from this former stalwart of the system, it is refreshing to have sentences such as the following.

"Islam cannot be anything but the ambassador of terrorism.

"Without his (Ataturk's) bold action, Turkey would not have been a modern democracy but another old-fashioned Sheikdom known for treating women as sexual toys and enjoying all the traditions connected with slavery in mediæval times."

Readers might consider the bravery of Anwar Shaikh and send £15.00 for a copy of the book from Principality Publishers, PO Box 918, Penarth Road, Cardiff before Mr Blunkett makes it treason for it to be bought.

Freethinker fund

THANKS to the generosity of subscribers, the Freethinker fund has received a boost of £728.50 in donations received between June 23 and August 22.

We extend our thanks to the following for their contributions: C Ablethorpe, R Baker, M A Belo, D M Bennett, R A Bennett, A J Bloomfield, J Bosley, G Broady, J Camden, M Chauhan, A Clay, R A Corfield, D Dawson, R Deacon, J Deamer, J Dillon, M Doubtfire, J Evers, D Fane, J Ford, N Green, W Harman, A E Harrowing, I Haslam, H Hinchcliffe, Humanist Society of Scotland, J G Hunt, J R Hutton, H Khan, J C W Lewis, J R Mackay, D E Mansfield, G S Marlowe, T Martin, H Mehra, A F Nash, M Ohren, N J Potter, G Preece, R Richardson, H Smith, C Tott, D Walker, R J Walton, A Watson, B C Whiting, F Wright, T Wyatt,

Priest and nun wind up in the cells after a sexual encounter

A MALAWIAN priest, 43, and a nun, 26, from Zambia pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct after being caught engaged in a sexual act in a car parked at Lilongwe international airport. They spent a night in the cells after police were alerted to the fact that the car, with tinted windows, was rocking in a suspicious manner.

Faith schools

JOHN Bolton's call for an end to support for faith schools suggests that readers of the *Freethinker* should themselves start a campaign. This is an excellent idea, but the primary objective should be to separate the promotion of religion from the serious business of education. The first step must be to end the compulsory inclusion of Religious Education in school curricula.

One way to achieve this is by organising a nationwide boycott of religious education (which is perfectly lawful). Parents should be encouraged to campaign for their children's precious time in education to be spent more profitably than in learning fairy tales, preferably by broadening the curriculum by making more effort to encourage understudied subjects such as philosophy, by strengthening PHSE, or by reinstating neglected areas such as music, drama and design, which currently are being pushed aside by the "league table" subjects.

If this end can be achieved, it is only a matter of time before improvements in other results demonstrate the folly of the terrible waste of state resources which RE represents.

Unfortunately, without some sort of framework, parents who do take their children out of RE lessons are very much in a minority, and because there are not enough of them, there is no pressure for schools to organise alternative activities. Add to this the natural reluctance of people to make a fuss and children to appear out of line, and you have a recipe for conformity.

LAURENCE N MANN
Twickenham

More venom than sense

MICHAEL Hill is obviously good at arguing by assertion (*Points of View*, August, "Cranks at the helm of the *Freethinker*"), and labelling everyone who disagrees with him crank, barking, windbag, loonies, even worse (the Social Democrats), mad-staring eyes, stooge, terrorist, vile little hate-monger or dullards. Going by the content of his letter, there is far more venom and bile in him than sense. Or perhaps the poison is in his PC.

To assert that Mrs Thatcher "gave 100 percent to the country" sounds impressive until one asks why she was dumped by her own party. That she allowed council tenants to buy their houses was a vote-winning bribe that made the country's housing shortage worse by removing from the market dwellings that had enabled people to save up for a deposit and then move into their own property, leaving the council house free to help another family in a similar position. Council houses were sold off dirt cheap, well below market prices, so it's not surprising that those who benefited from the scam are profusely grateful. It was Mrs Thatcher too who sold off school playing fields all over the

country to property developers, as a result of which the number of pupils playing sports and keeping fit has fallen drastically; it's one of the main reasons why the UK does so badly in international sports and athletics competitions. At the World Junior Championships at Grosseto in Italy in July, the British national team didn't win a single medal.

Everyone knows Ronald Reagan died from Alzheimer's disease, but fewer people are aware that he was showing the symptoms while in office. During his presidency, the US funded and trained death squads in Latin America whose purpose was to massacre all groups and individuals who spoke out against right-wing policies, and it is well documented that hundreds of thousands were killed in brutal attacks over the years. "Stopping in the street to chat to a group of ordinary people" does nothing to wash the huge amount of blood from his hands. Only suckers for PR are taken in by such gigs. That is what "photo opportunities" are all about: creating false images, false perceptions.

Mandela has never been a terrorist nor a communist. At a time when governments in the West were supporting the apartheid regime in order to protect the investments of private companies in South Africa – investments yielding very lucrative returns thanks to cheap labour and appalling working conditions – Mandela sought the help of any and every nation, including communist ones, willing to assist the ANC win freedom from systematic oppression.

When he became the first black president of South Africa in 1994, Mandela spoke loud and clear for reconciliation; he wanted nothing to do with vengeance against those who had imprisoned him for 27 years. He personified the quest for peace and reconciliation and was welcomed ecstatically wherever he went. His attitude explains why there are in cities and towns all over the world places named in Mandela's honour. Michael Hill is thick as two planks if he thinks the world admires Mandela because he was a terrorist and a communist.

What I admire enormously is Barry Duke's courage and freethinking spirit in printing Hill's gormless letter; even morons have the right to free speech. Barry extended this courtesy even though Hill indulged in *argumentum ad hominem* by referring to Duke's sexuality. I personally think the July 2004 issue of *Freethinker* was one of the best I've read and that the piece by Steve Altes was inspired, it was so hilariously true. More power to you, Barry!

ENVER CARIM
London

CONGRATULATION to Michael Hill for his hilarious spoof letter.

KARL HEATH
Coventry

WERE the points of view of Michael Hill and Steve Driscoll in the August *Freethinker* real? It looked as if the editor was pulling our legs. The former demonstrated the freedom of thought this publication celebrates as well as the limits of the thinking ability of a writer which seems to be a closed BNP mind.

The latter seemed to be the usual Near Death Experience enthusiast who is unaware of the rest of the literature on the subject, but I expect he might agree with me that agnosticism, like liberal democracy, is a less easy target than the popular idea of atheism. Michael Hill may have ranted because he has not noticed that articles and even points of view in this publication usually attempt to persuade, and try to avoid merely making statements unsupported by reasoning or evidence.

PETER ARNOLD
Channel Islands

Pymalion v My Fair Lady

BARBARA Smoker (*Points of View*, July) is obviously an expert in matters Shavian, and I am happy to acknowledge her superiority in this field. She takes me to task for "upholding" the adaptation of Shaw's *Pygmalion* into the musical *My Fair Lady*, whereas in fact I neither defended nor attacked it in my letter, but simply used it as an example of how fiction and drama are subject to revision and reinterpretation. In doing this I certainly did not imply that all such changes are necessarily for the better, but that textual inviolability has to be balanced against artistic freedom and the rights of other writers and composers to adapt literary works in different ways.

Of course the laws of copyright must be adhered to, but if the holders of the copyright have sanctioned an adaptation, then no law has been broken and technically no "literary theft" has taken place.

Ms Smoker argues that *My Fair Lady* romanticises, sentimentalises and trivialises the play (what we would now call "dumbing down") and subverts the feminist message of the original. She is probably right, but does it therefore follow that the musical should never have been made? Musicals by their very nature have to simplify texts. *The Sound of Music* was undoubtedly a travesty of the lives of the Von Trapp family, but is nevertheless a wonderful piece of entertainment. No one pretends *Kiss Me Kate* takes on board the more serious issues raised in *The Taming of the Shrew*, its inspiration, but within its limitations it is a clever and humorous piece of musical theatre. For all its faults *My Fair Lady* is a great musical with glorious melodies, sparkling dialogue, and memorable characters. It is of course popular entertainment, tosh if you prefer, but it is superior tosh. The fact that it uses some of Shaw's own dialogue in preference to cod

American dialogue is surely a mark in its favour rather than otherwise.

In 1961, at the age of 11, I was taken by my parents to London to see a production of *My Fair Lady*. If the Shaw Society had had its way, I would never have had what was for me an unforgettable experience. My mother explained it was based on an old play, and when she was young she had seen a film version of it with Wendy Hiller as Eliza.

Later on, I was able to read the original and compare the two. In my opinion, the musical version complements rather than diminishes the original, and I find both endings satisfying in their own way, though I don't expect Ms Smoker to agree with me. It was unforgivable of Hollywood to ban productions of *Pygmalion* for whatever reason (though I doubt whether the ban had much effect on the musical's takings) and equally unforgivable not to give Julie Andrews the role of Eliza in the film version.

It is likely there will always be conflicts and tensions around issues of authorial and textual integrity, artistic freedom, pornography, censorship, good and bad taste, commercial pressures, and the need to preserve against demands for change. Some will remain unresolvable, and these debates (though not I hope this particular one!) will doubtless carry on as long as there is a literary heritage to protect and foster.

DINAH FOWERAKER
Bristol

Left hand custom

WITH regard to Antony Chapman's letter (Points of View, August) as I understand it, the rule about using the left hand exclusively for toilet purposes, and not using it for handling food etc, and indeed keeping it discreetly at one's side or to the rear when shaking hands with the right hand, is on account of the general lack of clean water for washing in desert environments. They did not have the luxury of being able to wash their hands, so they had to segregate their "dirty" hand from their "clean" hand; so it is not really odd at all.

REG LE SUEUR
Jersey

Conway Hall celebration

THE 75th Anniversary of the opening of the Conway Hall takes place on Thursday evening, September 24. The panel of speakers for the celebration includes Richard Dawkins, Polly Toynbee and former NSS President, Barbara Smoker. The celebration will include tours of the hall and library, live music, exhibitions and refreshments. Tickets on request free from SPES administrative secretary 0207 242 8034, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, WC1 4RL. Email: admin@ethicalsoc.org.uk.

Ridiculing the religious

WHAT a refreshing change was Steve Altes article about ordination in the July issue – and what an effective weapon ridicule is against religion, an almost "too good to be true" target. Dog knows, we need more of it.

So often we bombard ourselves with grindingly analytical and almost deliberately obscurely-worded articles, for example the one by James McKenna in the same issue. He had a valuable, and for me, a completely new concept to offer on the nature of consciousness. But it took my penny a long time to drop through the welter of references to "protohumans" (who they?) and "duality", the latter said to be "the defining feature of the mind". Oh dear.

I understand why, inevitably, we only ever speak among ourselves. It is because our enemy appears totally deaf to reason. But the mirrored reflection of ridicule provides a much more convincing antidote to the stark, staring idiocy that religion really is.

J R CRADDOCK
Lincoln

Challenging prison chaplains

AS a life sentence prisoner with an uncertain future and one which will always be subject to scrutiny and periodic reports, in which the prison chaplain will be expected to submit his own reports to the various internal boards, and, more importantly, to the Parole Board, I decided to adopt a policy of non-cooperation in the procedure. I started by becoming a member of the National Secular Society where I thought that I might receive some support for my stance.

Disregarding the shade of any religious belief or indeed non-belief, the chaplain is always expected to interview and report on prisoners although it's not clear whether he is also expected to have a special criminological insight of, or knowledge about an individual's offending behaviour, and because I have an absence of religious faith I also decided, I believe quite reasonably, to challenge the role of prison chaplains who, as ministers of religion, serve a very insignificant minority of prisoners and probably a lesser proportion of worshippers than community-based ministers.

Having become a member of the NSS, I then made approaches to the Chaplain General of the Prison Service, who alongside his civil servant colleagues in their Ivory Towers at Prison Service headquarters at Westminster, determines policy for HM Prison Service.

My line of reasoning was that as those prisoners who pursue or purport to follow a religious faith are often rewarded by extra time out of their cells to engage in religious activity that is often little more than a social gathering, I too demanded a consideration for pursuing a non-religious philosophy, including the right to have appointed to me a secularist/humanist vis-

itor with the same status as any other visiting ministers of religion – who are free to enter a prison, given keys and permitted to attend upon their charges in whatever location they might be situated, including punishment units.

Having already subscribed to the *Freethinker* and made contact with a local humanist group, I was on my way to reinforcing my case for an official recognition of a local member of that group who had given his time to visit me in a social capacity.

I believe that Article 9 of 1998 Human Rights Act – The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion went some way in persuading the Chaplain General that for him to deny me the right to pursue my philosophy of non-belief and be accorded the same privileges as believers would seriously open him up to challenge in the courts.

Accordingly, I was granted permission to convert the status of my humanist social visitor to that of an approved and officially recognised humanist officiant (minister is hardly the appropriate term) with the same rights of attendance at the prison and status as a minister of religion, the first in the UK.

This did not exactly endear me to members of the prison chaplaincy, who no doubt took the view that I had upset the status quo, and of course there was always the fear that at some stage this would rebound on me.

After all, the non-religious have always been seen as eccentric at the least, and at the more ridiculous extremes, devil-worshippers; and for a life sentence prisoner convicted of murder such notions do not provide for a very positive future.

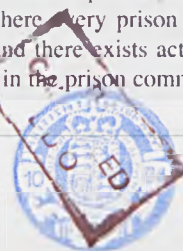
However, everything went from strength to strength, as prisoners in other establishments with whom I corresponded became interested in registering as humanist and following in my footsteps by having an officially appointed humanist officiant.

Unfortunately, the same interest was not forthcoming from the humanist community.

Eventually I was transferred to my current establishment where I had hoped that a member of the local humanist community would take up the role as the official humanist visitor to the prison.

To date there have been no offers, and perhaps like my friends in other establishments who gave up on pursuing the appointment of a humanist officiant, I still rely on the officiant from my previous prison, who lives some 80 miles away and who occasionally visits this part of the country.

I fear that we still have some way to go before we are able to establish a humanist involvement in prisons in the way that Holland has, where every prison has a humanist officiant and there exists active humanist participation in the prison communities.



Remarkably, over thirty Christian groups are involved in prison work in the UK including Alpha, whilst the humanist-secularist community are content to meet in small groups to smugly preach to each other about institutionalised religion and its discriminatory practices.

Of course, prisons have always been fertile ground for religious indoctrination and it is only in recent times that we have seen the role of the prison chaplain's influence being diminished from that where they supported the silent regime, capital and corporal punishment and bread and water, all under the notions of religious penance.

Nowadays, compulsory church attendance has also become a relic of the past and few prisoners are bothered enough to get out of bed to attend unless there is some material benefit to be gained or it will serve as a central meeting point to carry out some illicit activity.

Meanwhile, those who share my humanist-atheist philosophy in prison are ignored with our views being treated as an irrelevance, and sadly we are also neglected by the humanist-atheist community who might persuade others that they have an interest in the wider world of humanism and a world without religious prejudices.

CHARLES HANSON
Somerset

Editor's note: In the UK prison chaplains are funded by taxpayers. Humanists prison visitors are not, unlike, say, in Holland where both chaplains and humanist visitors are funded by the state.

Barbara Barrett: two responses

MAYBE some Muslims do get off lightly, as suggested by Barbara Barrett in her *Freethinking Allowed* piece (August), but then animal rights terrorists get away with intimidation, death threats, criminal damage and worse with seeming impunity. The standard tariff for throwing stones in the Bradford riots has been four years; I would not call that lenient treatment. The animal-rights extremist who attempted arson did not get 18 years, he got off comparatively lightly considering that the maximum sentence for arson is life.

He is now back to his old ways running a website that effectively encourages terrorism even though he says he is only giving information. I do not see that a demonstration of large numbers shouting and blowing whistles can be regarded as peaceful; even less so if it is carried out at night at a private house with paint or excrement put through the letterbox, bricks thrown through windows and paint-stripper poured over cars. Those who listened to *Face the Facts* by John Waite on Radio 4 on 20th August heard how a whole village is being intimidated and terrorised by these extremists.

I note that Ms Barrett writes "Most of us

would faint if we had to terrorise anybody". That still leaves a sizeable minority who protest that they demonstrate peacefully, but who also carry out these acts of terrorism or condone them. I can only conclude that they do not act out of love of animals but are happy to have an excuse to persecute their fellow humans.

During his editorship the late Peter Brearey claimed that the *Freethinker* was "for animal rights". I do not know how he got the authority to say that but I note that although you have published pro-animal-rights articles you have never published one defending the use of animals in medical research. I really do wonder if you live up to your name. I have not given my postal address as I do not want Ms Barrett's bullies in balaclavas round.

A NON
(Name and address supplied)

BARBARA Barrett's rant leaves a most unpleasant taste. Setting aside her espousal of the impossibly woolly notion that animals could have rights, and passing lightly over her disingenuous attitude to the violence and intimidation regularly inflicted on dedicated, humane medical scientists by some of those who share her bizarre views, what is really troubling is the nature of her perceived grievance against those she terms "Muslims".

She resents Muslims not because of their daft religion, but because "they" enjoy freedom of speech; because "they" receive education at the taxpayers' expense; because she heard that one of "them" was involved in a credit-card scam; because she thinks "they" are unsympathetic to the victims of September 11; and because one of "them" once nearly spilled his coffee over her. She resents them for being different from her, even when the difference is purely cultural and has nothing to do with religion, as in the foot-pointing example. She questions why they are here.

Then she has the gall to ask "am I racist?", and to tell us that the answer must be "no" because there are some of them she does like: principally, it seems, those who know their place and are properly subservient to her in restaurants.

Trenchant criticism of religions and their feeble-minded followers is always welcome, but this piece has nothing to do with religion: it is pure xenophobia from start to finish.

The last time I saw a diatribe as racist as this it was on a BNP election leaflet. The BNP seek to blame all Britain's troubles on "the Muslims", just as the Nazis sought to blame all the woes of 1930s Germany on "the Jews". Like Ms Barrett, the BNP use the term "Muslim" as code for "Asian". But for legal reasons, the BNP are careful not to let the mask slip. Ms Barrett apparently has no such qualms, blithely interchanging the terms "Muslim", "Asian" and "foreigner" throughout.

I have news for you, Barbara. The answer to your question is "yes". You are dreadfully racist. You should be ashamed of yourself.

And Barry Duke should be ashamed of himself for exposing our precious magazine to the danger of prosecution just to print such a worthless article.

GRAHAM NOBLE
Fareham

Bringing bi-sexuality into the open

AS a first time letter writer to the *Freethinker* may I congratulate you on your informative and enlightening article "Islam, Pathway to Perversity" (*Freethinker*, August).

I was also pleased to see the term bi-sexual included in the piece, as most humans are bi-sexual.

When it comes to sexual orientation, the greatest hurt and distress occurs when it becomes the subject of ignorance, bigotry and hypocrisy.

G STEFF
W Yorkshire

The
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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 461404. The Freemasons Tavern, Western Road. Tuesday, September 7, 7.30pm. *Religion: Above Criticism or Fair Game?* Speaker: Barry Duke, Editor, the *Freethinker*. Tuesday, October 5, 7.30pm. Robert Stovold: *Confronting Creationism with Common Sense*.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday September 14, 8pm. Frank Jordans: *New Ways of Spreading the Message That There is No God*.

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

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. Email: info@devonhumanists.org.uk. Website: www.devonhumanists.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. Summer newsletter available.

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, October 8, 7.30pm. *Memories Are Made of This: Speaker: Alan Horsfall.*

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, October 7, 8pm. Lord Graham of Edmonton: *The Cooperative Movement*.

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506. Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, Bournemouth.

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/Iss>. Public meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Programme from above address.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883. **Musical Heathens:** Monthly meetings for music and discussion (Coventry and Leamington Spa). Information: Karl Heath. Tel. 02476 673306.

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

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

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

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

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, October 6, 8pm. Speaker and subject to be announced.

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.

South Place Ethical Society, in association with the **Freethought History Group.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London W1. Saturday, October 23, 1.30pm. Lecture: Robert Forder, 19th Century Radical.

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. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. Email: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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.freeservers.com

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

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