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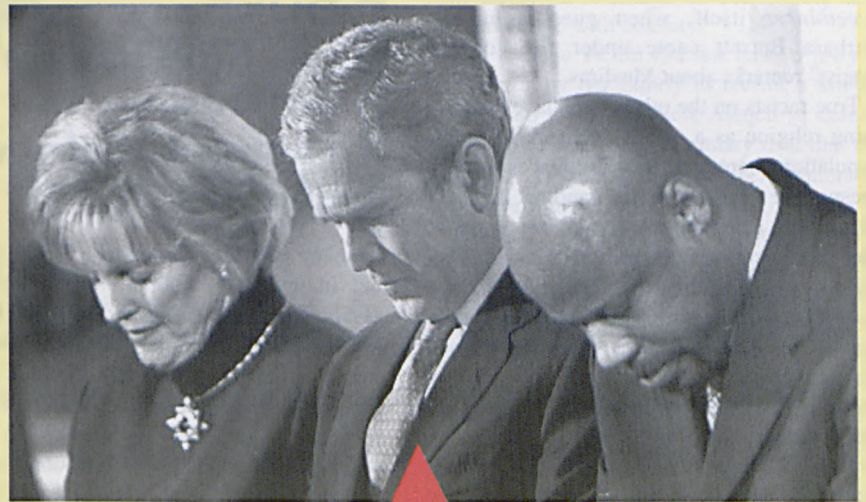
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Freethinker

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◀ This is a sea squirt ...



▶ This is a land squirt, flanked by two fellow Christians. So what do the two creatures have in common? Professor John Radford provides the answer on page 4

This is Islamic justice: A teenage girl is publicly hanged in Iran for 'having a sharp tongue' – see page 3



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AT the end of a talk entitled "Religion: Above Criticism or Fair Game?" that I gave last month to the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, a woman in the audience expressed her discomfort over some of what I said about Islam.

I replied that I, too, felt a great deal of discomfort in preparing my talk – and that many times I have wished that all Muslims were white, so that at no stage could I be accused of racism.

But most Muslims are not white – and herein lies the problem, and it is a very serious one indeed. When we criticise Islam – and goodness knows, this nasty ideology has so much to answer for – many people, freethinkers among them, immediately perceive such comments as racist.

Indeed, the issue lately came to a head in the *Freethinker* itself, when guest columnist Barbara Barrett came under fire for her "racist" remarks about Muslims.

True racists on the other hand have taken to using religion as a means of attacking Asian populations here, and in many places abroad, irrespective of their faith, branding them all "Muslims", using the word as a term of abuse. This complicates the issue horribly, and I can see no way out of this troubling situation.

As I sit writing this piece, a Briton, taken hostage by Islamic terrorists in Iraq, faces a horrible death by decapitation. Two fellow hostages have just died in this ghastly manner, their murder video-taped and broadcast on Arabic TV. One cannot begin to imagine what despair he must be in, or the terror his family is being forced to endure.

This latest atrocity, following so closely on the heels of the attack on the school at Beslam by Islamic fanatics, has been condemned by Muslim leaders across the globe – but it is all too little, too late. And the weasel words "ter-

rorism has nothing to do with true Islam" serves only to enrage freethinkers such as I. For, as Anwar Shaikh says in the introduction to his latest book, *Islam and Terrorism*: "One wonders whether Islam is a religion or the art of camouflage. Islam, literally, means 'peace or submission', but in practice it is a dreadful type of terror. Even worse is the fact that it grades terror as Jihad – the Holy War."

It is this association with terror that makes

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE says the time has come for Muslims to confront their own demons



so many people "Islamophobic." As I pointed out in my talk, "phobia", according to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*, is a morbid fear or aversion. I, for example, am phobic on several fronts. I am arachnophobic. Spiders fill me with revulsion and fear and whenever I see a particularly large one I let loose a girlish scream and scamper from the room. I am phobic about flying, heights, white-knuckle rides, enclosed spaces and – yes – Islam. However, I am surely being rational in fearing a religion which can allow the public hanging of a 16-year-old girl for the heinous crime of "having a sharp tongue", as happened recently in Iran? The very same religion would have homosex-

Under US law, nations that engage in violations of religious freedom deemed "particularly severe" are designated by the State Department as "countries of particular concern."

The US Commission on International Freedom, an independent group that receives government funding and offers advice to the State Department, recommended last February that Saudi Arabia be declared a CPC country.

Preeta D Bansal, the commission chair, said that she welcomed the addition of Saudi Arabia to the US government's "list of the world most egregious violators of religious freedom." She said the commission has been advocating the inclusion of Saudi Arabia on the CPC list since legislation was approved in 1999 to evaluate the state of religious freedom around the world.

Bansal said the commission's stand was based not only on violations of religious freedom within Saudi Arabia's own borders "but also its propagation and export of an ideology of religious hate and intolerance throughout the world."

uals stoned, or thrown from a high building.

I pointed out too that most people in this country, and indeed throughout the West, only began to sit up and take notice of Islam after the destruction of the twin towers on September 11. It was only then that it began to dawn on people that a very dangerous ideology had taken root in their respective societies.

Benign, liberal democratic societies tend to take a *laissez faire* line regarding their minorities, which is as it should be, or else Muslims would never have found a welcome in these countries in the first place.

But every society has to protect itself, and take the necessary action when its core values are put under threat. My belief is that the wake-up call should have come well before September 11 – in fact, in the eighties when radical Muslim clerics here and abroad began baying for Salman's Rushdie's blood following the publication of his book *Satanic Verses*. Despite the fact that the law against incitement to murder had been broken – not once but many times – no action, as far as I know, was taken against the perpetrators. This gave the green light to every fanatic – and the UK appears to be awash with them – to vent their feelings on a whole range of subjects, and to make all sorts of ludicrous demands in the name of Islam.

The genie is now out of the bottle and there is no forcing it back. But, instead of looking at ways of containing it, or, more importantly, bringing it to heel, as the French have done, for example, with the ban on the wearing of the hijab to school, our government is set to hand it an additional weapon – David Blunkett's proposed incitement to religious hatred law.

And how will Muslims use this weapon? Speaking on BBC Radio 4's *The Moral Maze* on July 14 Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain, the main umbrella group representing Britain's Muslim Community, stated that "any defamation in the character of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) would be a direct insult and abuse on the Muslim community". He indicated that insulting the prophet should be made illegal under the new law. If such a law had been in place 15 years ago, Salman Rushdie, instead of being protected by the law from death threats, would have wound up in the dock, and possibly in prison for maligning the prophet.

If the law is drafted as Sacranie wants, it would prevent *all* criticism of the founder of Islam irrespective of whether the speaker intended to incite hatred against Muslims.

It is attempts like these that harden secular attitudes towards Islam. If Muslims truly want people to stop fearing Islam, they must start by exorcising the demons within their own religion – not try and have us believe that Islam, as it exists today, is a benign entity, when clearly it is anything but.

Religious freedom 'non-existent' in Saudi Arabia

THE American State Department revealed last month that Saudi Arabia has engaged in "particularly severe violations" of religious Freedom, and for the first time is including the kingdom, a key US ally, on a list of countries that could be subject to sanctions.

A department report assessing the state of religious freedom worldwide said that in Saudi Arabia, freedom of religion does not exist and is not recognised or protected under the country's laws. The report also said that those who do not adhere to the officially sanctioned strain of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia can face "severe repercussions" at the hands of the religious police.

According to an Associated Press report, last month's announcement was a departure from the Bush administration's practice of avoiding direct criticism of Saudi Arabia – a key ally in the war on terrorism, a strong backer of US policies in Iraq and a major oil supplier.

All school lessons 'should be infused with Christian truth'

THE views of a fundamentalist Christian foundation which runs a series of state schools on Biblical principles have come in for renewed criticism, according to a BBC report.

A curriculum document by Emmanuel College in Gateshead describes how it should seek to infuse all lessons with Biblical Christian thinking.

It asks, for example, whether Hitler halted at the English Channel rather than invade England because of divine intervention.

Emmanuel stresses it teaches the national curriculum, but a teachers' leader fears lessons are being used for "indoctrination".

The document, *Christianity and the Curriculum*, was published on the college website. A spokesperson said it was "part of the philosophy" of the Emmanuel Foundation, set up by car dealer Sir Peter Vardy.

'If people want to teach about religion it should be done within the measured framework laid down in the national curriculum'

He sponsored Emmanuel City Technology College and the new King's Academy in Middlesbrough, and plans two other academies in the Doncaster area.

The document says "Christian Truth" has a role in all curriculum subjects. "Religion and Art are linked together by a common goal: to serve the glory of God and celebrate the complex beauty of His creation," it says.

Business and economics teaching should include "the power of the media and of revisionist and relativist thinking which would seek to redefine Truth."

A value system "rooted in Biblical Truth" would give students "a solid starting point upon which they need 'lean not on their own understanding' (Proverbs 3.5)".

In history, "we are also able to present to students certain historical actions or philosophies held in the past which are consistent with Biblical Truth". "In this context, it becomes important to peruse why Hitler paused at the English Channel when an immediate invasion might have led to a swift victory. Could it be that God was calling a halt to this march of evil?"

Mathematics is "a disciplined thought-structure which is used to describe the numerical and spatial attributes of God's Creation".

On other religions, the curriculum document says personal faith is "just that", so students should not "put themselves into the shoes" of others. And "the traditional family unit, het-

erosexual marriage, faithfulness, the positive option of celibacy/singleness, sexual purity and self-control shall all be presented in positive and sensitive light as God's ideal, accepting that many people today fall short of it."

The study of science is not an end in itself but "a glimpse into the rational and powerful hand of the Almighty".

The document also stresses the importance of pastoral support for students, especially those with special needs.

But it has added to concerns of some parents in the Conisbrough and Denaby area of south Yorkshire, where the Emmanuel Foundation plans to open a new city academy.

The parents' action group says that, at a consultation meeting, some people were not troubled by the idea of a Christian fundamentalist outlook, except that it might jeopardise students' examination chances.

Others were worried that "Creationist" teaching and "Biblical Literalism" would give children an unrealistic view of the world.

And some were "outraged" that a form of "brainwashing" may be taking place. One woman Tracey Morton, whose daughter would be at the new academy, said some children would be extremely vulnerable to such "crackpot" ideas. Academies – state-funded but independent – did not have to teach the national curriculum, she said.

"At the outset they would be treading quite lightly but 10 years down the line it's appalling to think what freedoms they might have and what they might be teaching in the school."

The general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Mary Bousted, thought the document "extremely worrying".

If people want to teach about religion it should be done within the measured framework laid down in the national curriculum, she said. To take the rest of the curriculum and use that as a vehicle for teaching fundamentalist Christianity is using state schooling and the national curriculum for indoctrination.

"It is completely distorting what education should be about," Dr Bousted said.

A spokesperson for the foundation said this was "old ground" and it had always made clear that its schools had a Christian-based ethos.

"The material doesn't represent what's being taught on a day-to-day basis in our schools. We teach the national curriculum and have always received excellent Ofsted reports.

"The schools' popularity among parents is proven by the many applications we receive, with both schools substantially over-subscribed and achieving outstanding results."

Teenage girl hanged in Iran for having 'a sharp tongue'

A JUDGE presiding over a religious court in Iran ordered the execution of a 16-year-old girl in the town of Neka because he decided that she had "a sharp tongue".

Ateqeh Sahaleh was brought before judge Haji Rezai on a charge of committing acts "incompatible with chastity."

The teenage victim did not have a lawyer, and efforts by her family to recruit a lawyer were to no avail. This left Ateqeh to defend herself. She said at her summary trial that the judge should punish the main perpetrators of moral corruption, not the victims.

Angered by her remarks, the judge passed the death sentence on the teenager. The sentence was later upheld by the mullahs' Supreme Court and carried out with the approval of Judiciary Chief Mahmoud Shahroudi.

Ateqeh was hanged in public on August 15, on Simetry Street off Rah Ahan Street at the city center.

After her execution Rezai said that her punishment was not execution [for her original crime], but that he had her executed for her "sharp tongue".

Kenya police investigate Deya

"ARCHBISHOP" Gilbert Deya, central figure in the "miracle babies" scam (see *Freethinker*, September), is wanted by Kenyan police over an alleged baby trafficking racket.

Deya's link to the child-smuggling conspiracy first emerged in 1999 when his wife Mary said she had "reanimated" a foetus lost in the womb of a post-menopausal woman for 14 years. That woman, Eddah Odera, went on to "give birth" to a further ten children at a Kenyan hospital.

These claims helped Deya to expand his following in Britain to more than 34,000 people – with churches in London, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham, as well as Kenya, India and Zimbabwe. And in the process the "archbishop", once a street beggar, has become a millionaire with a lavish lifestyle.



The sea squirt, *Ciona intestinalis*, is, like all animals on earth, a relative of us humans, though a fairly distant one. We are both members of the phylum *chordata*, which means we share a common ancestor some hundreds of millions of years ago. We have a good deal in common genetically. Partly for this reason the sea squirt is of interest to scientists, and in fact in 2002 had an international conference devoted to it, which is more than can be said for most of us.

What interests me here, however, is its life cycle. In its larval stage, the sea squirt is mobile, and looks rather like a tadpole. It possesses a notochord, a sort of proto-backbone, part of which is a ganglion, a group of nerve cells that receives information about the environment. This can be said to be perhaps the most elementary form of a brain. It has been seen by some as constituting the beginning of "the ultimate brain function, the capacity to predict" (Rodolpho Llinas, *I of the Vortex*, 2002). At any rate, it enables the sea squirt to "find", if that is not too intentional a word, a suitable rock, to which it then attaches itself. The ganglion has then served its purpose, and is reabsorbed, ceasing to exist. The sea squirt thereafter leads a blameless existence (unless it has fastened itself to a ship, when it becomes a nuisance), devoted to drawing in sea water, extracting the nutrients such as plankton, and expelling it again.

And now for something completely ... Well, judge for yourselves. The Right Reverend Dr David Jenkins, now retired, was for some years a controversial Bishop of Durham. In his book *The Calling of a Cuckoo* (2002), he tells us that at about the age of 12, knowing nothing as yet of theology, he nevertheless knew that God existed, and God loved him. In time he came to feel called to the priesthood, and eventually gained "preferment", as promotion is called in the Church, to the see of Durham. Unfortunately he discovered that the more he bishopped, as it were, the less he could believe in what he was bishopping. Noah's Ark, the sun standing still at Joshua's command, even the very cornerstone of Christianity, the literal bodily Resurrection of Jesus, he simply could

not reconcile with reason.

He was too honest to conceal his doubts, as many have done in similar situations; indeed, he went out of his way to publish books discussing them, causing considerable grief among the faithful. But now, finally, as it seems to him, after years of clearly genuine mental struggle, he has reached a state of certainty. He knows that God exists, and he knows that God loves him. Pointless to ask how he knows; he just knows.

This is, indeed, the final resting place of many religious persons. When put to it, after all the arguments and evidence showing that their beliefs do not withstand critical scrutiny,

Is it too far-fetched to suggest an analogy between the mindless certainty of the sea squirt, and the thoughtful certainty of a devout Christian? JOHN RADFORD poses the question

they fall back on the claim that they simply know. The obvious trouble with this is that individual certainty does not guarantee truth, as numerous philosophers have pointed out. Trivially, I am often quite certain that a book contains a particular quotation, or that I locked the back door, only to discover that I was mistaken. There doesn't seem to be any reason why religious certainty should be any different. We should have to suppose that there is a kind of privileged certainty that God grants to some people, which carries with it a guarantee of being true. (And then of course there is the problem of other gods, and even other non-god religions, of which believers are equally certain.) This seems to me a circular argument – we know it comes from God because it is certain, and we know it is certain because it comes from God. And if we go round in circles we get nowhere. But religious persons, it often seems, do not want to get anywhere. They are, as it were, there already. Like the sea squirt.

Is it too far-fetched to suggest an analogy between the (now mindless) certainty of the sea squirt, and the thoughtful certainty of Dr Jenkins? It is true that the sea squirt's rock does actually exist, whereas the existence of God is at best dubious. When I was at school a teacher, not to proselytise but by way of discussion, suggested that the fact that large numbers of people seem to feel a need for God implies that God, in some form, must exist. Everyone feels hungry, he argued, and this cor-

responds to the fact that food really does exist. I did not believe in God, but for a long time I could not see what was wrong with the argument. It is (I think) that what religious persons are seeking does indeed exist, but it is a mental or psychological state, not an external object or being. Pretty well every-



The Right Reverend Dr David Jenkins

one wishes to be happy. It is a cliché that money does not make you happy (though it enables you to be miserable in comfort). There are things that are conducive to happiness, such as health, affection, reasonable material wealth, and so on. But these things are not themselves happiness, and indeed people can be happy without them. Happiness is a state of mind, a psychological condition. What religious people want is no doubt a whole complex of factors, which will vary considerably between individuals. Some want above all assurance of a future life, for others religious ecstasy is more important, and so on. But one factor would seem to be a sense of certainty and security. God is a good image of certainty, because he is not easily disproved (although he can be shown to be most unlikely). He is better than death and taxes, both well known as certainties, because they are both unpleasant. And God can be as loving as you want. He may not show it, but if you believe it, that is just as good. And of course many people consider that God does show his love. If he seems not to, that is just our inability to understand his ineffable purpose. If we win on the pools, that is a mark of favour, but if we don't, no doubt it is all for our own good in the long run. Research shows that, at least in the USA, favourable outcomes are attributed to God far more frequently than unfavourable ones.

Religious convictions are very often extremely powerful. Many have killed and died for them, and continue to do so. It is hardly original to suggest they must involve some very deep-rooted drives. Both humans and sea squirts exhibit two fundamental characteristics, although in the latter case in the most rudimentary form. On the one hand, an urge to explore, to enquire, to question, in short to think; on the other, a need for certainty and stability. Unlike our distant cousin, we have a choice as to whether to go on thinking, or settle for a quiet life.

John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London

AGM of the Freethought History research group

THE Annual General Meeting of the Freethought History Research Group takes place on Saturday, October 23 at 3pm in the library at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London. WC1.

Robert Forder will be speaking on the activities of his great grandfather (also named Robert Forder) as Secularist, Radical and Malthusian.

Pope told to 'stay out of NZ's business'

THE New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists has urged their Government to tell the Pope to stay out of NZ's business. This follows a statement made by the Pope last month that New Zealand's planned Civil Unions legislation "violated God's plan for humanity".

The Pope was meeting a delegation of New Zealand Catholic Bishops. The delegation was led by Cardinal Thomas Williams, who recently fretted about "the spiritual bankruptcy of liberalism".

Atheist mountaineer dismisses idea of 'divine intervention'

MOUNTAINEER Joe Simpson revealed himself as an atheist when he was the guest last month on Sue Lawley's popular Radio 4 programme, *Desert Island Discs*.

Simpson, who was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1960, showed an early adventurous spirit and love of sport. But it was only after reading the classic account of attempted ascents on the Eiger – *The White Spider* – by Heinrich Harrer that he developed an interest in his future passion. He tackled a previously unconquered route up Siula Grande – a peak in the Peruvian Andes. This climb was to make his name. He and his partner Simon Yates made the first successful ascent of the mountain's west face, only to run into difficulties after Joe shattered his leg on their descent.

After running out of resources and with no prospect of rescue, Simon painstakingly lowered Joe towards shelter before being forced to cut the rope on his friend. Joe had inadvertently slid over an overhanging rock and was slowly pulling the two off the mountain. He landed in a crevasse and, after being left for dead, amazingly managed to crawl miles back to safety. Simon Yates was widely attacked for his actions in the climbing community, leading Joe to write a defence of the rescue with his book *Touching the Void* which has been made into an award-winning film. Told he'd never climb again following the accident, Joe went on to climb many more mountains over the last two decades. He's worked as a mountaineering guide all over the world, written five more books, and is a popular after-dinner speaker.

When Lawley suggested that his survival might have been the result of divine intervention, he dismissed this as nonsense, saying he did not believe in God.

Paul Litterick, Secretary of the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists, noted that the Pope's commitment to marriage was such that he prohibited any of his nuns, monks and clergy from entering into it.

Likewise the Pope's support of the family was shown by the way his church had implemented a deliberate policy of concealing numerous cases of sexual abuse committed by members of his clergy. "God's plan for humanity" also seems to involve Catholic authorities in developing countries denying people access to contraception, thereby creating unwanted pregnancies and spreading AIDS.

Mr Litterick went on to note that the Pope recently lectured the Canadian Government about its plans for formalising same-sex unions.

"Canada dismissed the Pope's comments as an intrusion in Canadian politics. Our Government should do the same."

The humanists' statement immediately came under fire in a reactionary editorial in the *New Zealand Herald*, which stated:

"John Paul II's papacy will be remembered for his wish to stamp his conservative authority on the world. He has sternly upheld Catholic teachings on the likes of abortion, contraception and homosexuality, even as many in the church chose no longer to adhere to them. For him, compromise has not been an option. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that he judges this country to be the victim of a tide of 'unrestrained secularism', as evidenced by the undue dominance of sport and entertainment on Sundays. Or that, in a veiled criticism of the Civil Union Bill, he should speak of the need to defend 'the sanctity and uniqueness of marriage'.

"Nothing less would have been expected of a Pope who has fought such an unrelenting rear-guard action against the forces of liberalism. His sentiments, indeed, echo those of conservative local Catholics, including Cardinal Tom Williams ... It was Cardinal Williams who earlier this year warned that this country was descending into a 'moral wasteland' and who described the politicians promoting the Civil Union Bill as 'modern barbarians'.

"Such vitriolic criticisms are, in many ways, a reflection of religion's ebbing fortunes. Those who decline to make accommodations are apt to lash out when the tide is running against them. That is their right and, as the leaders of a major church, their obligation. It is nonsense to suggest, as the Rationalists and Humanists Association has done, that the Pope has no business intruding in New Zealand affairs."

You don't have to be crazy to be Christian – but it helps

AN evangelist in Salisbury, Wiltshire, found himself in police custody after complaints from residents about his public tirade against homosexuality – and the volume at which it was delivered.

John Holme, a 44-year-old computer software salesman was released without charge on police bail pending further inquiries, after his car and trailer were seized as he bellowed his message of hate through the streets of the cathedral city in August.

Holme, married with two children, was asked to tone down the volume of his sermon, in which he berated homosexuality as a wicked perversion.

He refused, claiming his human rights were being violated, and was eventually arrested when a police officer noticed that his trailer bore the slogan "God says if you reject him you may become homosexual."

A YOUNG Christian was taken by police last month for psychiatric assessment after he climbed into Melbourne Zoo's lion enclosure brandishing a bible.

The man climbed the six-metre wire fence surrounding the enclosure at about 3 p.m. just as four adult lions were released for feeding.

"All the staff started going crazy. He had a yellow bible in his hand, and was asking the crowd outside the enclosure if they wanted him to go and pat the lions," zoo visitor Trevis Lonnie told Australia's Channel Ten television.

Onlookers were cleared out of the area before zoo staff convinced the man to climb back to safety, some six minutes after he entered the enclosure. Police took the unnamed man to Royal Melbourne Hospital for assessment. No charges are expected to be laid over the incident.

A Swedish pastor has been jailed for a month following a sermon to a Pentacostal congregation in Malmo in which he referred to homosexuality as "abnormal – a horrible cancerous tumour in the body of society." Pastor Ake Green also quoted the usual biblical injunctions against homosexuality.

He was later reported to the authorities and charged under new hate-crime legislation passed in 2002.

Abortion activist who found God fails to overturn controversial Roe v Wade ruling

A THREE-judge panel of a federal appeals court in the US last month dismissed a motion from the original plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade* to have the landmark 1973 abortion case overturned. Norma McCorvey was once an abortion-rights supporter. She began her association with one of the most contentious and volatile socio-political issues in 1970, when she became the lead plaintiff in the class-action lawsuit challenging the strict anti-abortion laws in Texas. The case was appealed to the US Supreme Court. Its 1973 decision legalised the right to abortion in all 50 states – and sparked a political debate that remains charged to this day.

But McCorvey has switched sides: she is now a vocal anti-abortion activist.

McCorvey, the “Jane Roe” in the original case, was 21 when the case was filed. She was on her third pregnancy, and never had an abortion. She gave birth to a girl, who was given up for adoption.



McCorvey revealed her identity in the 1980s and wrote a book about her life called “I Am Roe: My Life, Roe v. Wade, and Freedom of Choice.”

In 1995, McCorvey was working at a Dallas women’s clinic when the anti-abortion group, Operation Rescue, moved its offices next door. She and the Rev. Phillip Benham, of OR, struck up a relationship.

Benham, an evangelical preacher, began discussing Christianity with McCorvey. She became friendly with some of OR’s office staff, and then she accepted an invitation from the daughter of the group’s office manager to attend church. That night, she converted to Christianity.

McCorvey co-wrote a book about her religious conversion titled “Won By Love.”

Television violence en

CONTROVERSIAL Somali-born Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, well-known for her uncompromising attacks on Islam, has stirred up a fresh row with a short film which sets out to unmask Islamic domestic violence.

The central message in the 10-minute film *Submission, Part 1*, is that the Koran preaches that Muslim women should submit to Allah in all things – and that their men should beat them when they are judged to have stepped out of line.

The film opens with a woman in dark robes placing a prayer mat on the floor. She begins to pray to Allah. She is surrendering to her God and Allah’s wishes as expressed in the holy Koran. When the camera moves closer, we see all is not as it first appears: her garments are transparent and her breasts are clearly visible. Quotes from the Koran are shown written on her body. The texts from the Koran deal with the prescribed punishments for women who “misbehave”.

As the film continues, we hear four tragic

Linda Smith takes over BHA Presidency

COMEDIAN and broadcaster Linda Smith officially became the new President of the British Humanist Association at its AGM on July 10, 2004.

At first sight, acting as the public face of an organisation best known for its excellent funerals seems an unlikely new role for a comedian – but in fact it represents a true meeting of minds. The BHA trustees were impressed by her account of her beliefs on a recent *Devout Sceptics* on Radio 4, and recognised her poten-

tial as a powerful ambassador for Humanism, and Linda was delighted to find an organisation with which she felt so in tune.

Linda says: “I only found out that the beliefs I hold are ‘humanistic’ when the BHA kindly invited me to be its President! I am sure that I’m typical of many ‘unconscious’ humanists. The BHA’s work is more important than ever – with fundamentalism of many kinds on the rise, the rational voice of Humanism needs to be heard. I see publicising Humanism in order

that other people might identify themselves not just negatively as atheists, but positively as humanists, as a vital part of my role. I’m looking forward to evangelising – if that’s the right word!”



The BHA anticipates some unconventional evangelising from its new President, who was voted “Wittiest Person” in a BBC Radio 4 listeners’ poll in 2002. Executive Director Hanne Stinson says, “Linda Smith is one of the few comedians who regularly makes me laugh out loud, but when I met her to talk about the President’s role, I was struck by how everything she said about her beliefs was completely in keeping with the BHA’s position.

“She certainly convinced me that she will do a great job on our behalf. Claire Rayner, the BHA’s much loved President for many years, will be a very hard act to follow, but I am sure that Linda can do it.”

Members, who have greeted their new President as “an inspired choice”, were treated to an entertaining talk from Linda at the AGM.

Kaballah puts the ‘mad’ in Madonna

POP idol Madonna recently embarked on a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel to practise her new-found faith in the mystical Jewish Kabbalah. But the Catholic-bred singer’s journey has raised controversy among some ultra-Orthodox Jews, afraid that the growing popularity of the movement among non-Jews is nothing more than a trend that demeans their religious beliefs.

Madonna, who recently adopted the Hebrew name Esther and wears a trademark Kabbalah red string on her wrist, says she is serious about her belief in Jewish mysticism and is irritated by accusations that her faith is nothing more than a celebrity fad.

Many of her fellow followers of Kabbalah find the “Material Girl’s” provocative costumes

well out of step with the movement. Ultra-Orthodox Jews frown upon women the raunchy, anatomically exaggerated bustiers and fishnet stockings synonymous with a Madonna concert.

Pop star Britney Spears, who exchanged an intimate kiss with Madonna at an MTV awards show, and Hollywood actress Demi Moore are also followers of Kabbalah although neither joined Madonna in Israel.

In Judaism, Kabbalah means literally “what has been handed down” – writings dating to the Middle Ages and oral teachings which are held by the faithful to describe the true nature of God and man and reveal the secrets of Creation.

n film about domestic enrages Dutch Muslims

stories of women being forced into arranged marriages, being whipped, beaten and raped. We see images of backs marked by a whip and a woman's face reduced to a bloody pulp by her man's fists.

All the time these women, we are told, are meant to surrender themselves to Allah and accept their fate. The film, shown last month on Dutch TV, has provoked a lot of controversy, but *Submission* has little new to say that Hirsi Ali has not said before.

Since her election to the Dutch Parliament one-and-a-half years ago, she has doggedly criticised the treatment of women under Islam, both in immigrant communities in the Netherlands and overseas.

She has made headlines for describing Islam as backward and its prophet Mohammed as a pervert because he married a 12-year-old girl.

Remarks like that have drawn the wrath of

fundamentalists: her life has been threatened more than once and she is accompanied everywhere by armed security officers.

Her criticism of Islam has been very heavy-handed and even some liberal thinkers have tended to dismiss her as an embittered crank. (She fled, aged 22, to the Netherlands when her father tried to force her into an arranged marriage in Kenya in 1991.)

But with *Submission, Part I*, Hirsi Ali is continuing her campaign, no matter how uncomfortable her message might be to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

She teamed up with Theo van Gogh, one of the most brilliant, if controversial, directors in the Netherlands to make her case through art.

The nudity, Hirsti Ali claims, was important, for it reveals Muslim woman are just like everyone else; flesh and blood humans.

She was a member of the Labour PvdA

party, but she left spectacularly in 2002 when she was forced to flee to the US following death threats in the Netherlands. She claimed the social democrats in the PvdA were only paying lip-service to women's rights, particularly when it comes to rights for women in immigrant and Muslim communities.



She joined the right-wing Liberal VVD which welcomed her call for Muslims to integrate into Dutch society. But even there, some of her pointed condemnations of Islam have been an embarrassment to party colleagues.

Chain-smoker writer and director Van Gogh has been described as the Netherlands' Michael Moore.

He publishes his own website – *De Gezonde Roker (The Healthy Smoker)*, in which he comments on current events. He is currently making a movie about Pim Fortuyn, the populist gay politician and critic of Islam who was murdered in Hilversum in May 2001.

Mary Whitehouse enters the annals of gay history

THE late Mary Whitehouse, self-styled watchdog of the nation's morals, entered the annals of gay history last month when the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) celebrated its 25th anniversary in Brighton.

GALHA was officially launched to serve the needs of non- and anti-religious gays and lesbians at a CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality) conference in Brighton in 1979, but the idea for such a group took root a couple of years earlier in reaction to private prosecution brought against *Gay News* by Mary Whitehouse. She was roundly condemned for this action, and hit back by saying that she was being attacked by "the humanist/gay lobby".

Although such a lobby existed only in her twisted, over-fertile imagination, a group of gay humanists and atheists thought this an excellent idea, and decided that such a lobby should be formed as quickly as possible. So, during the August bank holiday of 1979, the Gay Humanist Group (later to become the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association) was born. Whitehouse was given full credit for her part in the establishment of GALHA at the celebrations, and a commemorative T-shirt, bearing her image and the words "Born of Mary", was produced to mark the occasion.

The group was formed in Brighton in the face of fierce religious hostility. When it became known that Brighton was to host a

Campaign for Homosexual Equality conference over the same 1979 August bank holiday, a group of evangelical Christians tried, unsuccessfully, to have the conference scrapped, and went so far as to place a half-page ad in the local newspaper, the *Argus*, warning that the city was about to be over-run with "perverts", and that local children would be put at risk.

A special prayer meeting was arranged under the auspices of the Elim Pentacostal Church to ask God to deliver Brighton from "the abomination of homosexuality". This was held at an historic old chapel in the Lanes. The newly-formed GHG immediately mobilised supporters and organised a peaceful picket of the prayer meeting. It was the group's first public protest. Many more were to follow.

A delicious irony is the fact that the chapel is now a popular pub called The Font.

At last month's silver jubilee celebrations, four of the original "gang of six" who founded the group warned GALHA members that, despite enormous gains made by gays and lesbians over the last 25 years, reactionary religious forces were at work determined to reverse those gains. While it was true that "Christianity had all but withered on the vine" in Britain, Islam was now the country's fastest-growing religion, and, "with its inherent hatred of western values, and its barbaric attitude towards women and homosexuality, it posed a very real

threat to civil liberties in general and the gay and lesbian community in particular".

GALHA members, who gathered for the anniversary event at the Imperial Hotel in Hove, were also warned that, should Home Secretary David Blunkett succeed in introducing a new incitement to religious hatred law, freedom of speech would be severely curtailed.

"If such a law were enacted, fundamentalist religious organisations would be left free to continue their hate-mongering, but those opposing them could well face criminal charges of stirring up religious hatred".

In a letter of support to GALHA, and read out at the celebration dinner on Saturday by GALHA Chairman Derek Lennard, Brighton and Hove Mayor, Mrs Pat Drake, said: "As Mayor of Brighton & Hove I am honoured to welcome the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association and to express my congratulations on the association's silver jubilee. I wish you a successful, enjoyable, and memorable gathering in the city where GALHA was born 25 years ago."

Born of Mary



GALHA 25th Anniversary 2004

"It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data."

— *Sherlock Holmes*

In my local newspaper there is a weekly column – hopefully now sabotaged by a letters campaign – which devotes itself to Christian evangelism. By and large this is a matter of hell-fire sticks for the many wrongdoers (other faiths and even other Christians, and, most certainly, atheists) and heavenly carrots for the few righteous. Usually providing a mix of biblical authority and heartening anecdotes about saved souls, the writer occasionally waxes intellectual with the most pervasive of all arguments for god(s), namely that of design. Everything from the beauty of a butterfly wing to the wonder of eyesight proves a loving creator who is perfectly good, knowing and powerful, so necessarily to be loved and worshipped in return.

The design argument is so ubiquitous – and so frequently reappearing in new guises – that it requires its regular dose of rebuttal and ribaldry, which is my present purpose. Before the weight of centuries descends fully, let's kick off with a famous example and with some unfamiliar attempts at knock-down arguments.

"Suppose I found a watch upon the ground ... [it] must have had a maker ... every manifestation of design which existed in the watch, exists in nature, with the difference of being greater ..." (Paley 1802).

The watch is certainly a well-chosen image, an elaborate but personal artefact betokening the infinity of time. There is here an interestingly dark metaphor to be developed that only with the Fall and expulsion from Eden did the arrow of time begin, marked by the sexual succession of generations and by the decay of ordered perfection. But for the purpose of the argument any made object would do: thus a flint tool is recognised by an archaeologist as different from the stones around and produced by a known and reproduceable technique.

Three counter-arguments follow. First the watch is recognised as made only by comparison with its surroundings: therefore nature must, precisely, be unmade. Second, we cannot by a parallel test ever ascertain that the natural universe is made: if god created everything there cannot be anything unmade available for the purpose of a comparison. Third, any such creation was unique and unobservable: so its technique is unknown and cannot be replicated.

The weight of centuries is, of course, unhelpful to the sceptic. Believers are buoyed up by the legacy of so many while the atheist finds it hard to establish an independent foothold. Laplace remarked that given a firm footing he could move the Earth, and the sceptical task can feel nearly as impossible. But ideologies and schema do change, however dominant they seem. From Aristotle's teleolo-

gy to the chemist's phlogiston, error does become corrected. So why not imagine you are hearing The Good News for the first time? React with astonishment and curiosity before rapid destruction of the absurd edifice.

The great Aquinas recognised that the case for god should be established by argument, including that of design, which for him embraced sustaining and directing rather than only an installation job. As he put it: "...the arrow, for instance, requires an archer... Everything in nature, therefore, is directed to its goal by someone with understanding" (13th C).

So, what further counter-arguments are available when confronted by the religious enthusiasm for backwards attribution?

To start let's note that there are often deep (not to say dark) problems with many arguments that run backwards. To take an otherwise unrelated example, it is impossible to set a surprise exam for theologians. If the test is left to the last day of term they can confidently revise the night before, and excluding that day then obviously the day before also becomes unavailable, and so on backwards. Recently I observed that cars parked adjacent had registration letters constituting an anagram for 'god lives'. What a stupendously unlikely event that surely evidenced a purpose designed for my salvation.

The absurd bible code claims to prophecies hidden in the text (searching the whole sequence of letters for short runs of Nth letters that happen to make a word eg the confirmatory "whYiexpEctitSevilBobwhOshotBen!") are essentially of the same kind. Every mere contingency of brute fact becomes unique and mysterious on this approach. So when somebody points out that without the moon there would not be tides, then there wouldn't be inter-tidal organisms etc etc, the response is that it would indeed be otherwise and it is wholly unproblematic that the alternative happening happened not to happen. In real life, however, we can and do choose to give meaning by the converse but wholly plausible procedure of adjusting the end to suit the beginning (see my piece on chosen deaths in the December *Freethinker*).

A sophisticated-sounding modern version of this backwards stuff is the so-called anthropic principle. This term covers a variety of ideas connecting ourselves with the nature of the universe, from how it is unavoidably interpreted by us as observers (and philosophy has long recognised that mind tends to impose structure) to the extreme of how it must necessarily be because we exist, not just as a matter of fact but as necessarily existing (somewhat egocentric!). The principle argues back from the existence of god-comprehending humanity (strong version) or from the existence of our kind of universe (weak version) to a claim for design. Again it is true, for example, that if our atmos-

Dark D

phere had a little more or less oxygen there might be no forests: that there are results not from a design committee of ramblers but a historically specific happenstance of the interaction of physical and biological systems which is now largely understood. Equally, if some of the fundamental constants (such as the speed of light) had different values the universe would be different. But there is no pressing reason to suppose that there would somehow be absolute nothing because only this particular universe is possible. We simply don't yet understand how such "constants" are mutually determining rather than arbitrary values as if announced by God.

The design argument is so ubiquitous – and so frequently reappearing in new guises – that it requires its regular dose of rebuttal and ribaldry, argues EDWIN SALTER

So can we claim to have utterly demolished the design argument? Quibbles about whether it should be "argument to/from/by of design" may be sidestepped. Who, it might be complained, are we to scrutinise God's design anyway? We are surely morally frail and intellectually fallible even if not fallen. Philosophical certainties are hard to come by. Hence Descartes's desperate appeal to "I think" to establish his existence, the possibility of solipsism, and so on. Perhaps there is some greater, more god-like, perspective to overwhelm our feeble view. "Which god?" is a fair and challenging question. The list of suspects is short, the forensic evidence is, well, everything. Can one, for example, discern in nature any peculiarly Christian signature to outmatch the constellations which represent more ancient gods?

Consider, for unrealistic fun, that perhaps we do not know what we think we know. There is a splendid version of this which solves many theological problems by simply denying the reality of evil and pain – thus sin, sickness and death are unrealities which merely "seem real to human, erring belief" (Mrs Eddy, 1875). The

Designs

errors and confusions of science must of course be admitted (and, not relevant here but far more serious, the sometimes dreadful immorality of applied science in furthering harm to humanity, for science now gives wide access to the same corruptions of wealth, fame and power as did, and does, religion). A standard response to this accusation is that scientific knowledge can at least be shown to progress, that understanding advances as previous ideas are shown to be mistaken or partial. Science comprises not only proposal (hypothesis) but testing (falsification), whereas religious assertions typically cannot be tested. The evangelical column with which I began this article did predict that life would not be found beyond our planet, but no doubt any error will prove harmless. Pray for a particular outcome, a "miracle" even, and, if you get it, god is loving and you are good, if not god is mysterious and you are a bit dim but not to worry. In the absence of understanding, belief in god purports to explain and, perhaps even more important, it does enable and direct some kind of action (rain dances, prayers ...) which is psychobiologically much preferred to the passivity and frustration of inaction. (It might be said that all these are not bad outcomes as psychotherapy goes, and I look forward to tackling the apparently desirable side effects of belief if readers aren't revolting as well as sinning.)

Plainly we can do no better than to work with the best knowledge available. If anything can succeed, then, pragmatically, that will. So we can proceed to two standard arguments directed against the notions of the designer and of the design. The first claims that no designer is necessary, the second that the design is clearly imperfect.

What does help to sustain religious talk of a designer is a genuine fact of human psychology which inclines us to attribute personal qualities to natural phenomena. This anthropomorphic tendency finds sprites in rivers and demons in volcanoes. By thinking in personal terms we find it easier to explain, to remember and even to predict: the gods of the seasons have their sequential relationships and their individual characteristics. I recall my bank card number because the numerals tell a story; half remembered literary fragments (the ice which roared and howled, the village not even the ghost of its dead self) are replete with personifying figures of speech.

The most thoroughly-trodden ground concerning the designer centres on the account of biological evolution given by Darwin and

Wallace (who I always think deserves a mention) and clarified by Mendelian inheritance. There are several reasons for the reluctance to accept this account. One is distaste at the idea of being related to beasts. But one recalls how readily people discount the essential humanity of others (as I write, American atrocities against prisoners in Iraq are reported), and conversely how many people seem to care for their pets or even animals in general above humans.

Another reluctance is disbelief in the evolutionary mechanism because organisms are so complex and "could not arise by chance assembly" (yes, it's that column again). Alas, patient education is the best response here and explanation of how tiny improvements by chance variation can give advantage and so be propagated. It is not too difficult to see that the human hand is, at least in its versatility, superior to though resembling other mammalian appendages. As Mr Micawber remarked about money, only a tanner makes all the difference. A more combative response is to ask why the designer bothered to make and bury fossils for us to dig up (bones for the pets perhaps?). Sophisticated believers accept evolution as the means god chose to adopt, but pay the price of their god retreating further into invisibility.

As to the design itself, plainly a perfect god and an imperfect design are paradoxical. The great craftsman exclaiming "Whoops, oh never mind" somehow won't do. One tactic is to hive off bad design, however closely integrated with the good design, as the work of the devil. Again, this is unanswerable because untestable, though it poses the problem as to how evil emerged when in the beginning all was good.

Example of imperfect design abound. Human back-ache is a familiar reminder of our struggle to get up on two legs. On the same theme of locomotion how curious that swimming mammals retain as an up-down swish the forward-back quadrupedal action of their ancestors. Anyway what's the point of your appendix, your tail bones, what is your point anyway, your contribution to the design? More sombrely what of ageing, let alone suffering? Such deterioration is surely questionable for both the skilfulness and kindness of the creating god.

In the absoluteness of theology even a simple blemish counts fully as an imperfection and there is an interesting tradition in Islamic art to slightly deface too perfect a human artefact. Historical prototypes of perfect design have been the idealised human form and the Earth itself. Familiarity and misuse breeding contempt, the Sun then seemed to best symbolise the creator as a perfect sphere and generator of all warmth and light. What disaster then when Galileo observed it to be spotty! Light too has a special status in religious iconography: a quaint example is that the colours of the rainbow are traditionally named to include the improbable

indigo because Newton desired them to number a magic seven.

Having abandoned Earth and Sun as exemplars, some scientifically minded apologists now treat the proposed Big Bang as the quintessential instance of godly creation: its singularity, totality and sheer remoteness in time, should certainly appeal to those seeking ever more inaccessible regions for god's habitation. So the yeti climbs higher, the monster in the lake dives deeper, god is only in the darkest gaps.

The task of design often used to include maintenance, with a sense that without god's attention the world would cease utterly. An anonymous verse to a puzzled worrier guaranteed the college tree thus: "Dear Sir, Your astonishment's odd, / I am always about in the Quad, / And that's why the tree / Will continue to be / Since observed by Yours Faithfully, God". More recently however many believers incline to the view that starting it all off (as the First Cause) was enough to establish the natural order, following the sustaining realisation that "bodies continue in a state of rest or uniform motion unless acted upon". This reduction in god's workload solves one difficulty but does rather leave occasional miraculous interventions which perturb that order even more problematic.

Designed nature might properly be regarded as sacred. Sadly this notion has not protected our world from depredation and pollution, and awful consequences are perhaps almost upon us through climate chaos. Most Christians have preferred to remember the giving of power and dominion and not the gentle caring required of stewardship (Matthew 5,5 and Luke 16, 1). I think they are textually wrong here because dominion was given only for Eden where all was to be kept (Genesis 1,26 and 2,15). But of course the text is only ever there when wanted – compare the prohibitive devotion of fundamentalists to the sexy bits of the Old Jewish Testament and their scrupulous disregard of the reiterated warnings against wealth in Christ's New Testament. Being very godly as well as all powerful, the USA naturally now leads the charge where dominion is concerned. It is in art that the notion of sacred design has been significant chiefly by forbidding likeness. This rule can be found variously in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and is at home with the Platonic distrust of illusion. Portraying what god has already rendered is sheer cheek: or, as we might observe more anthropologically, is akin to the magical capturing of a soul by such cunning plans as making wax dolls and to the ordinary experience of (rightly) feeling offended by intrusive camera pointing.

After all this, is God wholly disposed of or still lurking in the darkest undergrowth? There is, of course, nothing to prevent my believing that everything is designed and maintained by

a fairy at the bottom of my garden. Aside from doing everything, the fairy remains totally invisible and believing merely predicts that what will be will be. There is no way to test this proposal since no feature is additional by which it might be tested. Unfortunately this modest fairy has not been able to write a book claiming total responsibility, but then Christ also showed no interest in the serious business of securing early publication on which an enduring religion could better have been founded. Others might object, rather academically, that the alleged fairy is an unnecessary entity and offends parsimony. But my response – superb – is that one fairy does for all.

Deriding my fairy, rather like smiling at the child-like appeal of the “person in the clouds”, may be accompanied by the argument that God is not apart but is in all things. This pantheistic move however leaves God utterly indistinguishable because precisely identical to the natural order, an empty personification that

does no more than denominate what we already know or believe. If god can have independent form, Spinoza shrewdly asserts the backwardness of the biblical claim by arguing that it is we who make god in our image – “a triangle, if only it had power of speech, would say that God is eminently triangular” (17th C).

When Earth alone was known but partly, and beyond it could be relegated to a limited set of fixed heavenly spheres, the notion of a designer concerned with humanity was not too preposterous. With every expansion of the known universe and likelihood of other life that notion surely becomes more desperate and pointless.

Perhaps our consciousness of the universe is illusory, our sense of volition spurious, all false. But then that would wipe the slate clean and make meaningless all sense of God. It could be argued that we are simply not intelligent enough to comprehend the designer. This final defence is not easily dismissed for we notice clearly enough the limited understanding of others less

able than ourselves. It licenses unthinking faith in authority, and an atheist can only ponder why God might find such an uncomprehending creation worthwhile or value its adoration as some humans do their dog’s.

Perhaps God is just happily playing with toys, winding them up to strut about, giving them brains that can produce the curious side-effects of mental life. Perhaps God is actually a race of fantastic-alien-brains and we are a table top amusement on their fab computers. Perhaps the ultimate being is merely capricious and cruel and enjoying of a small laugh, we flies to the sport. The dark tale of human suffering and wretchedness makes this the more likely of godly designers. The garden fairy is better.

Facing such absurdities, it is more hopeful as well as more sensible to scrap the designer label altogether. Not automatons, but autonomous. And hewing out the pattern of things by reason founded upon the evidence.

Incitement to religious hatred: debate over Blunkett’s proposed law rages on

HOME Secretary David Blunkett’s proposed law against incitement to religious hatred has opened up fierce debate – not only among many religious organisations, a sizeable number of whom are opposed to such legislation – but also among secularists and humanists.

The National Secular Society, for example, vigorously opposes such legislation, although the British Humanist Association, in its original submission to the Select Committee on Religious Offences in England and Wales (June 2002) said it “supported in principle a law against incitement to religious hatred”.

The BHA asserted: “We accept that in an open and inclusive society the government has a duty to protect groups and individuals that are subject to hatred and violent attack. Incitement to violence is of course already illegal, but hatred stopping just short of violence is inimical to the values of a civilised society and the principles of reciprocal tolerance and cooperation, can be devastating to the lives of individuals and communities.”

The BHA insisted, however, that the safeguards for legitimate freedom of speech needed to be adequate: “The BHA would oppose any legal constraints on vigorous debate, including satire, mockery and derision, about beliefs and doctrines, religious or otherwise. We see a clear distinction between this and incitement to religious hatred, ie, hatred of individual persons on grounds of their religious or other beliefs. The distinction between beliefs and persons is fundamental.”

But the September issue of the *New Humanist* carried a swingeing attack on Blunkett by Nick Cohen, who, in an article entitled “Assault on Freedom”, pointed out that “British neo-fascists who cover anti-Asian and anti-Arab racism with a religious gloss could be taken to court under the existing and uncontroversial laws against the incitement of racial hatred. Any half-decent prosecutor should be able to reveal the clumsy strategies of the British National Party and others to deliver coded racist propaganda in a morning – and the distinction between inciting hatred against a race, which can’t be right, and against ideas, which can, would be maintained. (The Government would be on far more principled grounds, incidentally, if it banned the incitement of sexual hatred, but I suppose that would lead to the suppression of half of modern journalism, most of modern literature and nearly all of modern religion.)

“Presented with the flimsiest of justifications for an assault on the basic principle

of liberalism that ideas must be subject to free debate, a significant section of liberal opinion has crossed over to the other side.

“Or to put it another way, things have come to a pretty pass in England when we have to rely on the Tory Party to stand up for freedom of speech. But that, I’m afraid, is the state we’re in. In the whole debate, only the Tories demurred and sensibly pointed out that the law would be impossible to enforce.”

David Pollock, of the BHA, amazingly responded thus: “Nick Cohen’s piece on the proposed law on religious hatred is good tub-thumping lefty journalism ... It is sad, however, to see *New Humanist* choosing to publish an article taking this easy line rather than giving a difficult subject the careful consideration it deserves – especially as the BHA has already done the necessary groundwork.

“There is good evidence that Muslims at present are suffering this sort of corrosive religious hatred, and that it is being incited by racists who find it a convenient way round the law on incitement to racial hatred.

“Cohen glibly assures us that ‘any half-decent prosecutor’ could easily reveal the real racist motives of such propaganda – suggesting that convictions would follow. Is he really wanting to extend the scope of criminal offences by allowing speculation about the ‘real motives’ of the accused?”

“In other contexts he would be just as emphatic in his denunciation of such an abuse of the law.”

US turns back singer-turned Muslim

YUSUF Islam, formerly pop star Cat Stevens, was turned back from the US last month. When it was discovered that he was a passenger on board the United Airlines flight from London to Washington on September 21, the US authorities diverted the flight to Maine. He was interviewed then denied entry on national security grounds

The religion of George Bernard Shaw

Shaw (1856-1950) was one of the world's most celebrated playwrights. With such plays as *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Arms and the Man*, *Saint Joan*, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *Heartbreak House*, *Candida*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *The Devil's Disciple*, *Back to Methuselah*, and *Pygmalion* (made into the musical *My Fair Lady*), the expatriate Irishman forged a grand repertoire in English second only to Shakespeare's.

Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923, long after his days as a struggling artist, Shaw refused the £7,000 prize, commenting that "the money is a lifebelt thrown to a swimmer who has already reached the shore in safety." At his behest, the money was given to the Anglo-Swedish Literary Alliance.

In his waning years, he became an international icon. In *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality*, Hesketh Pearson describes the adulation: "Whatever he said or did was treated with respect, tinged with awe. When he clowned people laughed dutifully, when he cut a caper they applauded reverentially. Every word he uttered was cabled across several continents. Every nonsensical joke he made was gratefully accepted as the garnered wisdom of a profound thinker." Though Shaw was prone to bouts of megalomania, he viewed his apothecosis with amused detachment. "I am the most extraordinary man in London," he informed writer Ernest Rhys, "and you are quite welcome to give this fact on my authority."

Shaw was an indefatigable crusader for social amelioration. At a time when the English stage trafficked in romantic fripperies, he awakened complacent audiences to a host of social ills abetted by conventional morality, bourgeois respectability, and ossified institutions. "I was a social reformer and doctrinaire first, last, and all the time," he wrote. "I saw a way through the Valley of the Shadow and believed that when men understood their predicament they could and would escape from it." Enlivening didacticism with mordant wit, he dissected slum landlordism, prostitution, marriage, free love, politics, militarism, nationalism, jingoism, capitalism, evangelism, and other isms steeped in hypocrisy, cant, and deceit.

He was a lifelong socialist, vegetarian, and pacifist. His first public speech, made in 1885 before the Industrial Remuneration Conference in London, scorched capitalism. The speech opened: "I hope any shareholders and landlords who may be present will accept my assurance that I have no more desire to hurt their feelings than to give pain to burglars. I merely wish to point out that all three inflict on

the community an injury of precisely the same nature." As a leading pundit for the Fabian Society, Shaw was instrumental in the formation of the Labour Party, which assimilated the genteel form of Marxism espoused by Fabians.

GARY SLOAN examines the beliefs of GBS

His vegetarianism was actuated by an egalitarian view of species and concern for humanity. He envisioned a cortege of animals paying him posthumous homage: "My will contains directions for my funeral, which will be followed not by mourning coaches, but by herds of oxen, sheep, swine, flocks of poultry, and a small traveling aquarium of live fish, all wearing white scarves in honor of the man who perished rather than eat his fellow-creatures. It will be, with the exception of the procession into Noah's Ark, the most remarkable thing of the kind ever seen." A carnivorous lifestyle, he believed, coarsened sensibilities, squandered natural resources, and debased workers in the meat industry.

Shaw was reviled for his intransigent pacifism. During the First World War, his *Common Sense About the War* earned him the epithet Most Hated Man in England. Having averred that the British were as crass and pugnacious as the Germans, he was ostracised throughout the land, even by erstwhile friends. On the eve of World War II, in a talk broadcast by the BBC, the octogenarian defended pacifism by citing the Gospels: "The pacifist movement against war takes as its charter the ancient document called 'The Sermon on the Mount.' The sermon is a very moving exhortation, and it gives you one first-rate tip, which is to do good to those who spitefully use you and persecute you. I, who am a much-hated man, have been doing that all my life, and I can assure you that there is no better fun; whereas revenge and resentment make life miserable and the avenger hateful. The lesson we have to learn is that our dislike for a certain person, or even for the whole human race, does not give us any right to injure our fellow-creatures, however odious they may be."

Until he was 30 or so, Shaw called himself an atheist. He later quipped that he became one before he could think. He adjudged the doctrines of the Church of Ireland, which he attended as a child, unintelligible or absurd.

Since the first of its 39 Articles describes God as "without body, parts, or passions," he waggishly theorised that the church was atheistic. An incomprehensible God, he opined, was tantamount to no God. In 1875, he blazoned his atheism abroad. In a letter to *Public Opinion*, a Dublin newspaper, he "announced with inflexible materialistic logic, and to the extreme horror of my respectable connections, that I was an atheist." In *Immaturity*, the first of five novels he wrote in his twenties, the young protagonist, obviously Shaw's alter ego, walks pensively in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey: "His hushed step, impressive bearing, and reflective calm, marked him as a confirmed freethinker."

At a bachelor party, when someone alleged that a local infidel had been slain by a wrathful god, Shaw proposed to demonstrate "the absurdity of the belief in violent interferences with the order of nature by a short-tempered and thin-skinned supernatural deity." Pulling out his watch, he announced he would dare the Almighty to strike him dead within five minutes. "The effect," he later recounted, "was electrical. Neither sceptics nor devotees were prepared to abide the result of the experiment. In vain did I urge the pious to trust in the accuracy of their deity's aim with a thunderbolt, and the justice of his discrimination between the innocent and the guilty. In vain did I appeal to the sceptics to accept the logical outcome of their scepticism. It soon appeared that when thunderbolts were in question there were no sceptics." The host, fearing the impious chal-



Shaw, as pictured on the cover of *Time* magazine, 1923

lunge would precipitate a stampede of guests, forbade the experiment.

To save Shaw from hell-fire, a friend prevailed on a Roman Catholic priest to catechise the upstart atheist. Having repaired with his catechumen to a church cell, the priest began:

"The universe exists; somebody must have made it."

"If that somebody exists," interposed Shaw, "somebody must have made him."

"I grant that for the sake of argument," said the priest. "I grant you a maker of God. I grant you a maker of the maker of God. I grant you as long a line of makers as you please; but an infinity of makers is unthinkable and extravagant; it is no harder to believe in number one than in number fifty thousand or fifty million; so why not accept number one and stop there, since no attempt to get behind him will remove your logical difficulty?"

"By your leave," Shaw replied, "it is as easy for me to believe that the universe made itself as that the maker of the universe made himself, in fact much easier; for the universe visibly exists and makes itself as it goes along, whereas a maker for it is a hypothesis."

Fifty years later, Shaw stuck to his guns. He told an interviewer for a church magazine: "A First Cause is a contradiction in terms, because in causation every cause must have a cause; and therefore there can no more be a First Cause than a first inch in a circle. If you once admit a cause that is uncaused, you give up causation altogether. And if you do that, you may as well say that everything makes itself. I daresay every black beetle thinks it must have a complete explanation of the world as one of the indispensable qualifications of a respectable cockroach."

Congenitally deprived, he liked to say, of the phrenologist's "bump of veneration," Shaw scoffed at superstition, churches, ecclesiastics, rituals, ceremonies, and creeds. In *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, a sardonic tale published in 1933, he derided the myopic sectarianism that strews dissension among Christians. In an African forest, the girl meets a stooped and dishevelled fisherman (St Peter) bearing on his shoulders a huge paper cathedral. As he is leaving, several more bedraggled wayfarers appear, each carrying a smaller paper church. They implore the girl: "Do not believe the fisherman. Do not listen to those other fellows. Mine is the true church." As the girl hastens away, the sojourners throw stones at one another.

Shaw favoured parliamentary legislation to abrogate the Church of England. In *The Church Versus Religion*, he limned the average rector as a bigoted toady of secular power and privilege: "He claims and exercises all the lib-

erties of a country gentleman, and wallows openly in class prejudices. Often he snubs the poor and sides with the squire against them; he sees to it that servility and imperialist militarism are inculcated in the Church schools; he pitches the emblems of Christian peace into the cellar and waves the Union Jack the moment there is any question of war; he supports the way of the police as God's appointed way of dealing with crime."

Shaw depicted the God of Abraham and Moses as a boastful, imperious, and sanguinary fiend. When the black girl finds him, he commands: "Kneel down and worship me this very instant, or dread my wrath. I am the Lord of Hosts: I made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. I made the poison of the snake and the milk in your mother's breast. In my hand are death and all the diseases, the thunder and the lightning, the storm and the pestilence. On your knees, girl; and when you next come before me, bring me your favourite child and slay it here before me as a sacrifice; for I love the smell of newly spilled blood."

While Jesus fared better than Yahweh, Shaw impugned the doctrines of atonement and universal love. Atonement he deemed "a demoralising and unchristian doctrine, a means by which we cheat our consciences, evade our moral responsibilities, and turn our shame into self-congratulation by loading all our infamies on to the scourged shoulders of Christ." Vicarious remissions of guilt were inherently ignoble and unjust.

Notwithstanding his pacan to "The Sermon on the Mount," Shaw considered it psychologically impossible to obey the commandment to "love one another." Humans weren't lovable animals: "If you tell me to be perfect as my Father in Heaven is perfect, I can only say that I wish I could. That is more politic than telling you to go to the zoo and advise the monkeys to become men and the cockatoos to become birds of paradise."

Even when he no longer thought of himself as an atheist, Shaw lauded atheists for clearing minds of theological rubbish: "The real religion of today was made possible only by the materialistic-physicists and atheistic critics who performed the indispensable preliminary operation of purging us thoroughly of the ignorant and vicious superstitions which were thrust down our throats as religion in our helpless childhood." Against an atheism born of despair and anger, Shaw counterposed "the youthful atheism with which every able modern mind begins, an atheism that clears the soul of superstitions and terrors and servilities and base compliances and hypocrisies, and lets in the light of heaven."

In the 1890s, Shaw renounced atheism and repackaged himself as a mystic. He also tinkered with his past. Now, his atheism had not

really been atheism. He had called himself an atheist only "because belief in God meant belief in the old tribal idol called Jehovah; and I would not pretend I did not know whether it existed or not." While atheists still cleaned the Augean stables of superstition, they were now deemed "superficial and light-minded." They overrated reason: "I exhausted rationalism at the age of twenty-four," Shaw told his friend Dame Laurentia McLachlan, an abbess, "and should have come to a dead stop if I had not proceeded to purely mystical assumptions." The roots of his mysticism stretched deeper and deeper: "I am, and I always have been, a mystic," he informed an audience in 1911. As an Irish Protestant, he was born to the manner: "The true Protestant is a mystic, not an institutionalist."

Shaw's renunciation of atheism was accompanied by sallies against scientific materialism. By undermining teleological conceptions of the cosmos, science eviscerated joy and hope: "If there is no purpose or design in the universe," Shaw told an audience, "the sooner we all cut our throats the better, for it is not much of a place to live in." At a toast to Einstein in 1930, Shaw polarised science and religion: "Religion gives us certainty, stability, peace. It gives us absolutes which we long for. Science is always wrong and never solves a problem without raising ten more problems."

Shaw skewered Darwinism. "When its whole significance dawns on you," he wrote in the Preface to *Back to Methuselah*, "your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you. There is a hideous fatalism about it, a ghastly and damnable reduction of beauty and intelligence, of strength and purpose, of honour and aspiration, to such casually picturesque changes as an avalanche may make in a mountain landscape, or a railway accident in a human figure." Darwinism sabotaged morality. It "proclaimed that our true relation is that of competitors and combatants in a struggle for mere survival, and that every act of pity or loyalty is a vain and mischievous attempt to lessen the severity of the struggle and preserve inferior varieties from the efforts of nature to weed them out." Apparently, it never occurred to Shaw that natural selection might favour altruism and cooperation.

Victorians, Shaw contended, initially embraced Darwinism because it resolved the metaphysical problem of evil. In an undesignated world, plague, pestilence, famine, diphtheria, cancer, tuberculosis, and other natural ills no longer had to be reconciled with the sovereignty of an omnipotent and benevolent deity. People could say: "All this wonderful adaptation of means to end, all this design which seems to imply a designer is an illusion; it may have all come about by the operation of what we call blind chance." Good riddance to

“a spiteful, narrow, wicked, personal God, who was always interfering and doing stupid and cruel things.” Later, after the flush of relief had subsided, the world “felt the void”.

To fill the void, real or imagined, Shaw began to spread “the Gospel of Shawianity.” He evangelised for an idiosyncratic version of Henri Bergson’s creative evolution, stripped of the Frenchman’s lucubrations on space, time, duration, memory, and mind. From the first decade of the 20th century to the end of his life, in speeches, essays, stories, letters, and plays, Shaw expatiated on the life force – a mysterious power, immanent in living matter, that supposedly drove evolution. Shaw reified the power as an inchoate deity struggling to actualise itself in organisms.

Shaw’s motive for believing in the life force was more emotional than intellectual. The conviction that virtue and wisdom will ultimately vanquish wickedness and ignorance justified his humanitarian zeal, bulwarked his native optimism, and quieted his inner demons

Every species had been an instrument of its effort to acquire power, knowledge and understanding. Through trial and error, at a laggard pace, it inched its way upward: “Conceive of the force behind the universe,” Shaw said in “The New Theology”, a 1907 speech, “as a bodiless, impotent force, having no executive power of its own, wanting instruments, something to carry out its will in the world, making all manner of experiments, creating reptiles, birds, animals, trying one thing after another, rising higher and higher in the scale of organism, and finally producing man, now and then inspiring that man, putting his will into him, getting him to carry out his purpose.”

The life force exhorted humans to seek signs of cosmic intent: “Remember, you are not here merely to look after yourself. I have made your hand to do my work; I have made your brain, and I want you to work with that and try to find out the purpose of the universe.” The life force esteemed self-sacrifice. In his play *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, the life force infiltrates the conscience of a reprobate who risks his life to save a child. Afterwards, the homespun philosopher edifies his cohorts: “You bet the Lord [aka the life force] didn’t make us for nothing; and He wouldn’t have made us at all if He could have done His work

without us. By gum, that must be what we’re for! He’d never have made us to be rotten drunken blackguards like me. He made me because he had a job to do. He let me run loose till the job was ready; and then I had to come along and do it. And I tell you it didn’t feel rotten; it felt bully, just bully.”

Like Darwinism, creative evolution demystified evil. It was an inevitable byproduct of the life force’s quest for self-realisation: “Many of the earlier efforts of this force – for example, the tiger – remain, and the incompatibility between them and man exists in the human being himself as the result of early experiments, so that there are certain organs in the body which are perishing away, and are of no use and actually interfere with our later organs. And here you have the explanation of that great riddle which used to puzzle people – evil and pain. A number of things which are at present killing and maiming us in our own organism have got to be evolved out of us and the process is painful.”

In Shawianity, God was a work in progress, not a fait accompli. In a 1909 letter to Leo Tolstoy, Shaw explained: “To me God does not yet exist; but there is a creative force struggling to evolve an executive organ of godlike knowledge and power; that is, to achieve omnipotence and omniscience; and every man and woman born is a fresh attempt to achieve this object. We are here to help God, to do his work, to remedy his whole errors, to strive towards godhead ourselves.” In its odyssey to achieve fruition, the life force would create ever-higher forms of humanity – supermen, super-supermen, supermen to the third power: “When one instrument is worn out. I will make another, and another, and another, always more and more intelligent and effective.”

Shaw fused (if not confused) the life force with the instrument. In “The New Theology,” he prepped his audience: “When you are asked, ‘Where is God? Who is God?’ stand up and say, ‘I am God and here is God, not as yet completed, but still advancing towards completion, just in so much as I am working for the purpose of the universe, working for the good of the whole society and the whole world, instead of merely looking after my personal ends.’” God “would provide himself with a perfectly-fashioned and trustworthy instrument. And such an instrument would be nothing less than God himself.”

The concept of a life force, vital force, *élan vital*, *res naturae* (Shaw considered the terms interchangeable) scarcely needs a critique. That ghostly impresario was exorcised long ago from mainstream biology. In the 1930s, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* set forth the standard model of life: “A living organism, from the point of view of the scientific observer, is a self-regulating, self-repeating, self-repairing,

physico-chemical complex mechanism. What we call ‘life’ is the sum of its physico-chemical processes, forming a continuous interdependent series without break, and without the interference of any mysterious extraneous force.” Today, the mind itself is being elucidated in the language of nerve cells, neurotransmitters, hormone surges, and repetitive neural networks. Despite the protests of die-hard vitalists, the life force remains a superfluous will-o’-the-wisp.

According to Hesketh Pearson, “Shaw’s most sympathetic friends agreed that he had a hopelessly unscientific mind, and to discuss biology with him was impossible and ridiculous.” Shaw adduced no evidence in favour of the life force, other than an extraneous insistence that Darwinism was incompatible with hope, aspiration, and altruism. He merely postulated its existence and described its *modus operandi*. When Shaw invoked the life force to explain the course of evolution up to the present, he violated Occam’s Razor, the principle of parsimony in hypotheses, since what the life force purports to illuminate can be illuminated without it. When Shaw described the future course of evolution, he ratcheted up his propensity for wild surmise.

Shaw’s motive for believing in the life force was more emotional than intellectual. The conviction that virtue and wisdom will ultimately vanquish wickedness and ignorance justified his humanitarian zeal, bulwarked his native optimism, and quieted his inner demons. Shaw, someone said, was a mixture of Mephistopheles and Jesus Christ. Though he ridiculed churches, clerics, orthodoxy, and anthropomorphic gods, he retained the moral fervour of his Protestant heritage. When hawking the life force and socialism, he was a holy prophet pitching the Kingdom of Heaven.

Ironically, despite his repudiation of atheism, Shaw may have died an unwitting atheist. Though he called himself a mystic, his credentials were suspect. He had had no mystical visitation, he didn’t believe that the ultimate reality is ineffable, that the material world is illusory, or that all is well despite appearances to the contrary. He didn’t deny the reality of space and time, nor did he think a beneficent spirit suffuses every nook and cranny of the universe.

He didn’t believe in the God of the Bible or the God of the philosophers. He rejected the concept of a transcendent Creator, “a somebody behind the something.”

In truth, Shaw didn’t believe in an existing God at all. What he believed was that evolution, eons hence, will produce a godlike race in which the life force will consummate its quest for godhead. So if, as theologians and philosophers have traditionally maintained, existence is a necessary attribute of God, Shaw qualifies as an atheist, albeit an involuntary one.

Easy ride for the religious

THE victims of religion "need our sympathy" instead of ridicule ("Comment", September *Freethinker*). Perhaps they receive enough sympathy already? Religious belief seems to me to have an easy time compared to atheism. Religion is often seen as self evidently benign and criticism is regarded as unacceptable, if not offensive, even when backed by facts.

Atheism, by comparison, is often viewed as self-evidently wicked and non believers as morally flawed and wilfully obtuse in their views. However, I think the article raises a worthwhile issue – how should religious belief be confronted. The religious fundamentalist is a lost cause but there are millions of people who would describe themselves as believers without thinking much about what they are believing.

The best way to reach those people would to expose to reasoned and temperate challenge, in public forums, what is asserted by believers. If this were to occur on prime-time television, or even radio, the results would be interesting. The aim of the faithful, resolutely supported by the BBC, is to ensure that this never happens. They can only feel secure if the current censorship of sceptical views continues to block any challenge on the air. A very occasional appearance will be permitted as a fig-leaf to cover the censorship. However, their aim is to preserve the unchallenged appearance of clergy and others on such programmes as *Thought for the Day*. This enables biblical stories to be referred to as if they were truth and biblical principles to be extolled as if they provided a valuable guide for decent living.

Robert G Ingersoll wrote, "Somebody ought to tell the truth about the Bible. The preachers dare not, because they would be driven from their pulpits." He referred to people forgetting "its ignorance and savagery, its hatred of liberty, its religious persecution; they remember heaven, but they forget the dungeon of eternal pain. They forget that it imprisons the brain and corrupts the heart."

They forget that it is the enemy of intellectual freedom." We still need that truth to be told in places where it can be heard by the general public. The Emperor has no clothes and that is why a fair exchange of views in the forums of the mass media is so passionately resisted. Consider the resolute resistance to sceptical views on *Thought for the Day*. Sceptics need fair access to the media and particularly the BBC, which they are forced to support on pain of punishment.

The intellectual argument was won a long time ago. What is left to shore up the crumbling edifice of religion is mere posture. None know this better than the clergy themselves. The resistance to a fair hearing for sceptics will continue. And so must the struggle to overcome that resistance.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Outdated rule

IN response to Reg Le Sueur (*Points of View*, September), may I just comment that what strikes me as odd is that a rule such as which hand to use for "clean" or "dirty" functions – constructed for different times – should be accepted uncritically as part of contemporary Muslim tradition wherever the practitioners of that faith happen to live. But then that is an often central problem with religious tradition; holding to an outdated rule and making of it a shibboleth for all time.

On a different tack, I thought the article by Joan Simkins ("Goodbye and god riddance!") was the best piece of argument for the secular/humanist cause that I have read in a long time. It has long seemed to me that a few misguided individuals have over time created a god figure in their own image and then proceeded to worship (and expect the rest of us to worship) it as an idealised, abstract, projection of how they would like to be viewed. But the term and concept of "god" is too useful a construct for projection of human hopes, fears, ideals and worries to be abandoned altogether. Let's just keep in perspective the human con-

struct involved and retain our sense of proportion about the need some undoubtedly have for creating god in their own image. After all, we do need something or someone to blame for the mess that we have made of our world. We can't of course help being flawed if we all share the burden of Original Sin, and so we can then blame the Big G God for creating us in the first place with free will.

So s/he/it can't win really; but that's no reason to abolish our cherished and familiar avatar.

MARGARET JACKSON-ROBERTS
London

Literary Analogy

IN her reply to my July letter (September *Points of View*), Dinah Foweraker says that, had the Shaw Society had its way, she would have been denied the "unforgettable experience" of seeing *My Fair Lady* in 1961. But until she reached her late twenties she was in fact denied the possible experience of seeing, anywhere in the world, a public performance of Shaw's feminist play *Pygmalion* – even if unaware of the prohibition at the time.

What the Shaw Society was campaigning against was the entrepreneurial ban on *Pygmalion* by commercial contract – just as, analogically, Political Correctness not only introduces new labels but actually bans the existing ones. (Which is where we came in.)

A further analogy is the tendency of prevailing religious orthodoxies to stamp out alternative opinions.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Consciousness misunderstood

HAVING read J R Craddock's comments (*Points of View*, September) on James McKenna's article "Consciousness Misunderstood", I should like to add my voice in its defence. I thought it gave an entirely plausible hypothetical explanation on the cause of the origin of Religion – one which I have been using recently in my dealings with stubborn Christians. I see nothing obscure about "proto-humans" as an evolutionary concept, and surely, ever since Descartes, one should feel at home with the idea of mind-body Dualism, or "duality".

Being a bit "proto" myself, I often have earnest conversations with my imaginary friends, which I assume originate in my own mind and are my own invention. However, early primitive, and even more proto types than myself, would, I think, have wondered where this inner voice came from, and (perhaps) assumed it must be a separate Being or "Spirit", which therefore inhabited a Spirit world, and was probably a powerful controlling influence as well. This would have evolved in to the concept of gods, demons,

Socialism v religion

THE Socialist Party of Great Britain has published an excellent 28-page booklet entitled *Socialism versus Religion, War, Capitalism*. In its preface, the party says it has not dealt with the subject of religion in pamphlet form since 1910, when it published *Socialism and Religion*. This went through three editions running into the mid-1920s.

"Religion", it asserts, "has no basis in knowledge or science; it is built upon myths and superstition, and sustained by poverty, fear and ignorance. The study of religion reveals more than anything the seemingly infinite capacity of the human mind to fantasise and to believe the unbelievable ... the myths of creation, of almighty spirits, the immortality of the soul and the efficacy of prayer have trapped believers in the grip of predatory ruling classes whose interest it is to perpetuate their submission and servility."

The booklet is available at 75p direct from The Socialist Party of Great Britain, PO Box 46753, London SW17 9YP. Email: enquiries@spgb.org.uk



heaven and hell – and thence into organised religion. If I am correct, this is what James Mckenna's article was all about.

REG LE SUEUR
Jersey

Bonking clergy

I HOPE your mention (*Freethinker* September) of a Malawian priest and a Zambian nun having sex was not meant to be condemnatory. We should congratulate members of religious orders who have adult consenting sex – perhaps they will leave the children alone.

D HARDING
Norfolk

Medieval customs

I THOUGHT *Freethinker* readers might be interested in a recent experience I had one Sunday in Sussex.

The rather smartly-printed invitation I received from friends promised Sunday lunch. I must also confess to a desire to view my friends' newly-restored country home, which would be on show for the first time.

But first I must present myself at the 13th-century village church for a christening. A mere formality, I thought. On the appointed Sunday I motored through the South Downs accompanied by a pink bunny rabbit, my choice of a suitably secular christening gift.

The christening service was part of the weekly Sunday parish mass. The parents, godparents and infant assembled around the font and, at the end of the ceremony, the congregation of assorted villagers and guests applauded.

Afterwards, another infant, with parents and grandparent, came before the congregation, and the parish priest performed a service of exorcism on the baby. This included the banishment of evil spirits, the laying on of hands and anointment with oil. This was to "cleanse" the infant, and prepare him for his christening in a few weeks' time.

My friends, I learned later, had brought their daughter to a parish mass a few weeks earlier for a similar exorcism.

Over tea and biscuits in the village hall I questioned the young parish priest. I was assured that infant exorcism was usual practice in the parish, and is common in the Chichester diocese. I also asked about the churching of women. The priest said he would be happy to perform this service if requested. A parishioner told us that the last time a "churching" had taken place in the parish was in 1983.

It would appear, from my recent experience, that medieval church practices are thriving in the South Downs. Sadly, unquestioning Sussex villagers, including very new ones, are happy to play along with this. I think my friends have paid dearly for social acceptance in their

Sussex village.

Had my invitation mentioned infant exorcism, I would have thought twice, and stayed home to listen to The Archers.

A MORRIS
Brighton

Questioning religious belief

WHY do so many people who claim to believe in an all knowing, all powerful god provide, by their own behaviour, so much evidence of their own disbelief?

Statements that the validity of religious beliefs must not be questioned imply that the speaker already has doubts. The basis of scientific method is that valid beliefs cannot be dtsproved by any amount of questioning. Honest answers to honest questions can only validate and clarify genuine beliefs.

People who have questioned, often only by implication, one or other religious belief have often been attacked or killed. Do the persons making such attacks not realise that such actions imply that they believe their god to be incompetent? Why then do they claim that such a god must be worshipped?

R G SILSON
Hertfordshire

Islam and sex

THE August *Freethinker* article "Islam: Pathway to Perversity" reminded me that, when I was in India during the last war, I heard it said of the Arabs: "A goat for pleasure, a boy for ecstasy, a woman for necessity". Perhaps things have changed since then, goats no longer being so readily available.

J R CRADDOCK
Lincoln

Statistics

I INTERPRET the figures quoted in the piece "US religious survey yields surprising results" differently to that published in a recent *Freethinker* article. It seems to me that the figures pertaining to older believers – "beliefs get stronger with age" – may indicate that the older people are survivors of an older day. They do not indicate to me that the younger ones will ever have such faith again.

K G SPENCER
Burnley

Not racist

CONGRATULATIONS to Barbara Barratt for her article "Freethinking Allowed" (*Freethinker*, Aug 2004) and to Barry Duke for publishing it. I, too, get annoyed to see such double standards, that many Muslim fanatics are getting away with offensive behaviour because so many politicians are bending over backwards to appease the Muslim community, and I am glad that the *Freethinker* is one of the few publications that dares to criticise some aspects of Islam and its more intolerant fol-

lowers. Pointing out criminal or antisocial or cruel behaviour committed by Muslim or other religious fanatics is neither xenophobic nor racist, as suggested by Graham Noble in his insulting letter (*Points of View*, September 2004). Calling Barbara Barratt a racist is most unfair but typical, as "racist" must be one the most frequently misused words these days, when it is difficult to make any statement without some politically correct enemy of freedom of expression accusing you of racism.

ALEX HILL
London

Wrong David

PETER Richards ("Secular Saints and Godless Greats", July *Freethinker*) is mistaken. St David's Street in Edinburgh is not named for David Hume; it is named for Wales. Nor did David Hume live there.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

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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, October 5, 7.30pm. Robert Stovold: *Confronting Creationism with Common Sense*. November 2, 7.30pm. *Classroom religion – education or indoctrination?*

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, October 12, 7.45pm. Geoff Meaden: *Pacifism – am I backing a loser?*

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.

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, November 4, 8pm. Giles Hart: *"I'm not superstitious but ..."*

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.

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

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

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

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9

3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Thursday, October 14, 7.30pm. Janet Fletcher: *Human Evolution – Where's the Evidence?*

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

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

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, November 3, 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, 2.30pm. 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@fiscali.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.freesevers.com

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

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