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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

Getting Wet for Jesus!



This is 'The Portable Baptistry™', yours for a cool \$1,999.00 But what on earth could these two gormless god-botherers be saying to each other as they pose for a product shot? Enter our winter caption contest and you could win an array of tasty prizes

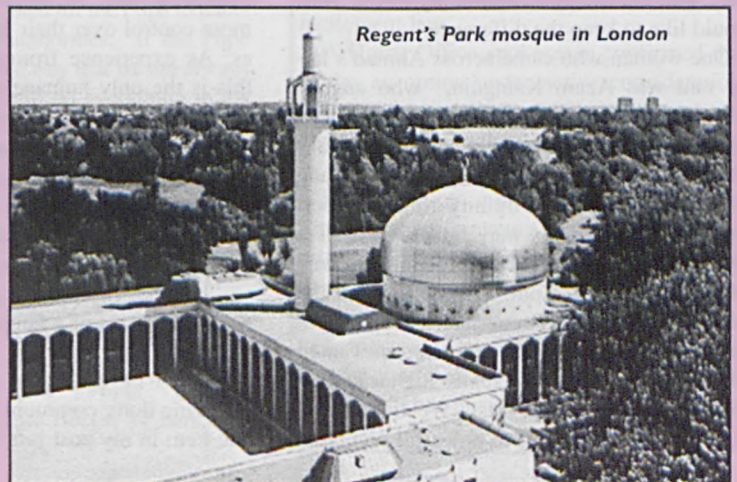
– see details on p3

British mosques: what secrets are they hiding?

– see our special centrepage report

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TECHNOLOGY, particularly in the field of communications, is truly a wonderful thing. Today, anyone with access to a computer and the internet can both access and disseminate information in a way undreamed of just ten years ago. But what technology cannot do – and I doubt that it ever will – is eradicate the GIGO factor: Garbage in, Garbage Out. If it could, the words of people like Iftikar Ahmad, head of the London School of Islamics, would automatically be shredded in cyberspace, and never find their way into anyone's email box.

Ahmad, for all his contempt of all things Western, has enthusiastically embraced modern Western communications techniques in an attempt to sell us the idea that educational and cultural apartheid is a good thing. Ahmad wants separate schools for Muslim children and insists they be taught by teachers imported from Pakistan. British Muslim teachers simply will not do because they have been contaminated by Western values.

Ahmad's emails are as stupid as they are repetitive. Nevertheless, I do examine them all in the forlorn hope that one day he might say something faintly intelligent. Or even original.

Well, an email with a difference *did* arrive last month. Ahmad had discovered The Silver Ring Thing, the barmy American movement designed to keep youngsters virgins until they marry (see *Freethinker* report, June). Ahmad thinks the SRT is a *good* thing and he wants it tailored to Muslim youth in Britain.

This is what he wrote: "In Afghanistan 99.9 percent of teenagers are virgin. The reason is that all teenager girls leave homes wearing Afghani burkhas. There is no mixed gathering. They attend single-sex schools. They marry as early as possible. If teenager girls start wearing Afghani burkhas or jilbab, I am sure that they are not going to lose their virginity before marriage."

I responded thus: "Thank you for your email. It goes a long way to explain why homosexuality is so prevalent in Islamic societies."

Back came this reply: "Homosexuality, drinking and adultery is a crime in Muslim countries, and such acts are legal in the so-called civilised countries. This is the difference, and the Muslim community in the West would like to keep the difference."

One woman who came across Ahmad's latest rant was Azam Kamguin, who angrily responded: "Instead of putting chastity belts on women or burning them, contemporary Christians merely pressurise girls and young women into wearing virginity rings on their wedding fingers. This may be progress of a kind, but as some American commentators have already pointed out, when wearers of the rings do have sex it is more likely to be unprotected, and rather than reducing unwanted pregnancies the rate is actually higher among these self-declared 'virgins'. We live in the 21st century, and thanks to powerful secularist

and liberationist women's movements, Christian nonsense of this kind had been forced onto the defensive – but it is fighting back. We need to push it back to where it belongs – to history.

"Mr Iftikhar Ahmed envies American Christians and sees the Afghan-style oppression of women as the solution to teenage preg-

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE reflects on chastity, savagery, and the latest thing in baptism tanks

nancy: he proposes burkhas and sexual apartheid in British schools. He suggests that if we segregate girls, we would have no sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), no teenage pregnancies and stable families.

"Like all other religionists and fanatics, Mr Ahmed either lacks intelligence or refuses to use it. Do we have regular and systematic surveys and statistics on STD, teenage pregnancy and divorce rate in Afghanistan, Iran and other Islam stricken societies? No, of course not. Instead, how many times have we heard about depression, self-immolation, suicides and honour killings, and of young women and girls escaping from home and the brutal violence used against them?"

"Mr Ahmed intends to sell the products of a closed, corrupt Islamic society such as Afghanistan to the people – and particularly the youth – in the West. You want to get rid of STDs and teenage pregnancy? Lock up your girls, wear burkha, hijab and jilbab! Let women suffer lifelong sexual oppression while the men follow the example of the Prophet Mohammed and the army of ayatollahs: innumerable sexual relationships, as many as they wish! This is Islamic morality.

"But what about the real problems of teenage pregnancies and STDs? We should educate youth. We must provide proper sex education and provide free, safe and reliable contraceptives. We should give young girls more control over their lives and more choices. As experience from Holland has shown, this is the only humane and effective way to reduce unwanted pregnancies, abortions and sexually transmitted diseases.

"Islam and Christianity with their chastity rings and burkhas belong to the dark past, and in the name of human dignity and women's autonomy must be rejected.

"Burkha, Hijab and Jilbab are nothing but the sick dreams of a fanatic Islamist."

WHILE I have become quite accustomed to receiving dotty communications from Ahmad, one item in my post last month took me com-

pletely by surprise.

Addressed to the editor of the *Freethinker*, it was a brochure from EasyHajj Limited, a London-based organisation which provides "a quality Hajj in comfort". For a modest outlay of £1,695.00 per person you can obtain the "economy Hajj", but if you are a bit low on the green and crinklies you can opt for the "Super Saver Hajj" – a snip at just £1,275.00 per person.

Clearly, some misunderstanding has occurred in the EasyHajj promotions office. The editor of the *Freethinker* would sooner stick his genitals in a blender than go on a pilgrimage to Mecca – particularly as it appears from the brochure that it would be compulsory, once in Saudi Arabia, for each pilgrim participating in the *Tamattu* or *Qiran* Hajj (whatever the hell that means) – to sacrifice a sheep or a goat. For this pleasure one is required to fork out £45.00. But if a sheep or a goat seems too scant a sacrifice, you can get six other people to join you in the slaughter of a camel or a cow. It is not entirely clear how much it will cost to engage in this ghastly group blood-letting, and frankly, I lack the curiosity to find out.

The brochure even has a picture of a pair of male Muslimics taking obvious delight in drawing a knife across a hapless animal's neck.

And to think there are folk out there – yes, Mr Blair, I do include you – who would have us believe that Islam is not a stupid and barbarous religion.

Another brochure to come mysteriously my way last month – this time via the internet – was for "The Portable Baptistry™" which is "elegant, contemporary and 100 percent portable ... the perfect solution for churches that want to conveniently have beautiful baptisms, without the expense, space and maintenance required by traditional baptistry 'tanks'.

"The one-of-a-kind, modular design of the Portable Baptistry™ allows for easy set-up indoors or outdoors, by one person, in minutes, and accommodates up to three people for standing, full-immersion baptisms. Uniquely lightweight, yet incredibly sturdy, the sectional structure can be conveniently transported, or compactly stored away when not in use.

"Thoughtful accessories such as handrails, instant heaters, splash guards, and more, are also available.

"Lastly, the Portable Baptistry™ is available in your choice of decorative color motifs to best suit the decor of your sanctuary."

All this can be mine were I to splash out \$1,999 for the "Basic Entry Package" or \$2,399 for the "Grand Entry Package" which has "a handrail, planters and flowers."

Hmmmm ... £1,695.00 plus £45.00 to engage in an orgy of superstition and savagery in Saudi Arabia, or £1,200.00 or so to install an indoor pond for imbeciles in my front room.

Dear Dog, Why does life have to be so damn full of difficult choices?



Scots told: ditch religious observance in schools

A CHURCH of Scotland minister has called for the term "religious observance" to be dropped in Scottish schools and replaced with a "time for reflection".

The Rev Ewan Aitken, the education leader of Edinburgh City Council and also education spokesman for the local authority umbrella group COSLA, said the term was "restrictive" and "carries too much baggage", according to a report in the *Scotman*.

His comments came two months after the Scottish Executive backed the findings of a report by its religious observance review group, which was set up two years ago by Jack McConnell when he was education minister.

Among its recommendations were calls for schools to "provide opportunities for religious observance at least six times in a school year", in addition to traditional celebrations.

At present, Scotland's primary schools are required to hold one session of religious observance a week, with secondary schools expected to have an assembly once a month.

The Church of Scotland's education committee backed the review group's report, insisting that "quality of religious observance is

more important than quantity".

But speaking in the latest edition of the *Kirk's Life and Work* magazine, Mr Aitken says the term "religious observance" itself should be dropped.

He said schools should, instead, follow the example set by the Scottish Parliament, which has a weekly "Time for Reflection", when representatives of different faiths address MSPs.

Mr Aitken said: "To build time for reflection into the rhythm of the school will be a huge boost to ethos, reflections and values and the whole idea of what it means to be in society today.

"I think religious observance is a restrictive term which carries too much baggage," he added. "We need to talk about spirituality in the broadest sense, and you just have to look at the 'Time for Reflection' sessions at the Scottish Parliament to see what a success they have been."

Mr Aitken's comments appear to be at odds with the Kirk's General Assembly, which voted in May in favour of a motion which stated that not only should there be religious observance in schools, but that it should also

reflect the "Christian tradition" of Scotland.

The Rev Bill Wallace told the Assembly: "We are constantly told that we are in a multi-faith society and we have to dumb down Christianity in our presentation.

"We should be bold and courageous and we should not be ashamed of Jesus. We are not doing down other people's faiths."

Michael McGrath, the director of the Scottish Catholic Education Service, also rejected Mr Aitken's suggestion, and said it was more important than ever that school pupils were given the opportunity to think about religion. Mr McGrath said: "We are happy with the term 'religious observance'. If anything, it helps people to think fully about what religion means in our society today.

"Time for Reflection could be a bit vague – it could be reflection on anything, such as political issues, rather than religious issues.

"It's important that religion is seen to play a part in our life today and that young people are helped to understand it, especially at a time when anti-religious forces in society want to show religion to be irrelevant."

Editor faces show trial for insulting the Pope

THE National Secular Society has protested to the Polish Ambassador in London about the trial of one of Poland's best-known magazine editors, Jerzy Urban, who is on trial – facing a possible prison sentence of three years – for "insulting the Pope". The NSS has also written to the Vatican asking the Pope to intervene and speak out in defence of Mr Urban.

Two years ago, Urban wrote an article in his satirical news magazine calling the Pope a "senile divinity" and "a fading old man". These

simple statements of fact apparently caused outrage throughout the country – particularly as they were published at the time of the Pope's visit to Poland. The trial is unprecedented – and is based on a technicality allowing the public prosecutor to bring charges against Urban for "insulting a foreign head of state."

In a letter to the Polish Ambassador, the NSS says that the trial is an alarming infringement of free expression, and very unwelcome in a supposedly free and democratic society. Poland recently acceded to the European Union and needs to take seriously its responsibilities under the terms of the European Convention on Human Rights, article 9 of which protects the right to free expression.

In a letter to the Vatican's ambassador in London, the NSS has asked for the Pope to intervene with the Polish authorities. "If the Pope values forgiveness in the way that we are always told he does, then he will do everything in his power to ensure that Mr Urban is not sent to prison, and that this unjust, undemocratic and sinister trial is brought to a halt immediately."

You can add your voice to the protest. Write to: H E Zbigniew Matuszewski, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Embassy of the Republic of Poland, 47 Portland Place, London W1B 1JH. Fax: 020 7291 3575; 0870 774 2755. E-mail: polishembassy@polishembassy.org.uk; and the Papal Nuncio Archbishop Pablo Puente Buces, 54 Parkside, London SW19 5NE.

Blasphemy laws to be scrapped

BRITAIN'S ancient laws of blasphemy and blasphemous libel are likely to be repealed under proposals being considered by the home secretary, David Blunkett, according to a report last month in the *Guardian*.

The move is being considered as part of a package that will include a new offence of incitement to religious hatred, in order to make clear that freedom of speech and the freedom to criticise religions will not be curtailed. Home Office officials disclosed that Mr Blunkett was considering the abolition of the blasphemy law at a recent meeting with the National Secular Society, in answer to their concerns about the creation of the new incitement law.

A Home Office spokesman confirmed that it was an option under active consideration: "We are interested in whether the blasphemy laws should be retained, extended or amended in any form."

Home Office ministers believe that the repeal of the blasphemy law will help answer critics, and make clear that the new incitement law will not bar criticism of religion, cartoonists' lampoons, or jokes about vicars and priests. Mr Blunkett said three years ago that he favoured scrapping the common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel.

Caption contest

OUR main cover picture cries out for an amusing caption, so get your brains in gear and you could win our top prize of a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*, plus a DVD of your choice from the National Secular Society's Movie Store (check out www.secularism.org.uk), as well as a set of Heroes of Atheism mugs, and £20.00 worth of book tokens generously donated by *Freethinker* subscriber Ivor Williams.

Two runners-up will each receive a year's subscription to the magazine, and a DVD of their choice. If any of the winners do not have access to the internet, we will supply them with a list of the movies on offer.

Entries to the *Freethinker* Caption Contest, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD, to reach us by December 15, 2004.



I WOULD like to react to some of the issues raised by M A Belo in his Viewpoint on Nigeria, Religion and Fraud (*Freethinker*, September, 2004). Obviously, Belo was irked by my piece and what he regards as the sensational headline of the August edition of the *Freethinker*. He deems the whole piece an "insult on millions of hardworking Nigerians all over the world". Well, that was not intended – either by me or the *Freethinker*.

Belo said that my article did not take into consideration "the importance of cultural relativism in assessing the gains of religion".

Well, I think cultural relativism has this tendency of creating a situation of cultural anomie. That is one where every act or belief can be excused or justified on grounds of its unique gain, good, place or significance to a people's way of thinking and living. If we are to follow the persuasions of cultural relativists then there will be no basis for condemning or criticising obnoxious beliefs, and practices like witch burnings, ritual killing, human sacrifice, female genital mutilation, child marriage and other "cultural" crimes against humanity and rationality.

As rationalists, I think we should be able to apply our reason to every belief and practice without fear or favour, without pandering to cultural sentiments and sanctimonies.

Again, Belo drew my attention to the fact that it's only a tiny segment of the Nigerian population that indulges in the "419" internet scam. I quite agree with him, but I want to quickly add that that segment is religious. And again, the "419" scam is just an aspect of the general regime of fraud and corruption in Nigeria.

As we all know, Nigeria is not only regarded as the most religious nation in the world, it is, according to Transparency International, the second most corrupt nation on earth after Bangladesh. So it logically follows that in Nigeria, religion and corruption *do* go hand in hand. The two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in Nigeria, religion and fraud reinforce

each other because they thrive on deception, fake promises and "false hopes". Both feed on human gullibility, stupidity and ignorance.

Belo also inquired if I had tried to find out why there is a high level of religiosity in Nigeria. Yes, I have done that. And these my findings. Firstly, Nigerians are religious because of poverty and hardship. Most Nigerians live on less than one dollar a day. They feel defeated, dejected, and losers in the battle for wealth and happiness in this life, so they cannot harness the mental rigour and discipline needed for rationality, scientific thinking, technological intelligence, and of course affluence ... In despair, they hang their hopes on the illusive promises of eternal wealth and happiness in the hereafter.

Responding to M A Belo's observations about

Nigeria's religiosity, LEO IGWE Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement



argues that 'no hope is better than the false hope offered by religion'

Another reason for the high religiosity in Nigeria is fear and insecurity. Most Nigerians live and languish under social, economic, political and financial insecurities and uncertainties. And religion provides them with some consolation, some spiritual security and some false hopes.

Also Nigerians are religious because of ignorance – ignorance of nature and how nature works. Most people in Nigeria see nature as an object to be worshipped, not a phenomenon to be investigated, explored and exploited. Hence Nigerians have so many gods and spirits named after natural forces.

Lastly, Nigerians are religious because they are taught to be so. From childhood most Nigerians are taught not to question but to swallow hook, line and sinker, received wisdom and revealed knowledge.

In the Islamic North, the first form of education children are exposed to is religious (koranic) indoctrination. The same is applicable to children in the Christian-animist South. So every Nigerian child grows up to see religion as a primary mode of identity, of knowledge and understanding of life and nature. Surely I agree with Belo that Nigerians, nay Africans, are religious because they expect

their problems to be solved by their religiosity. But my question is: Is their religiosity solving their problems? No, not at all. Instead, their religiosity is exacerbating their problems. Religion is worsening the crisis situation in Nigeria and Africa. And sadly, religious leaders are cashing in on the situation – enriching themselves in the here and now. That is why I totally disagree with Belo's idea that "Considering the situation in which most Nigerians find themselves today any hope-including false hope – is better than no hope at all". I believe Belo should know that giving false hope is no different from fraud. And I think a situation of no hope is preferable to one of false hope. A situation of no hope provides the opportunity for the creation of *genuine* hope, while false hope produces nothing at all. So while a situation of no hope is a tragedy, a situation of false hope is double tragedy. And religion by giving or promising false hopes – effectively engaging in a spiritual "419" scam – has continued to orchestrate double tragedy in Nigeria and Africa.

In fact it is right here that Belo unknowingly contradicted himself, and ended up vindicating my stand (and that of the *Freethinker*) in that article.

As Belo rightly stated, religiosity promises them (Nigerians) some hope, false hope in all cases; scammers promise some hope, false hope in all cases as well. And by saying that what Nigeria today has to show for its piety is "false hope", Belo indirectly asserted not only that religion and fraud go hand in hand in Nigeria, but that religion is fraud. Personally, I wonder why Belo has not – after all these years – realised the negative and destructive effects of religion in Nigeria.

Recently a Nigerian columnist, Reuben Abati, had this to say concerning the rot caused by religion in Nigeria: "Part of the problem with Nigeria is that there are too many persons who openly worship God but are closet animals. They go to the church and the mosque but they are agents of Satan. All the evils that have been committed against national progress in this country have been done in God's name! The big and small thieves can be found in places of religious worship. Religion is at the centre of the rot in our lives."

Now would I want religion removed from the lives of Nigerians? Yes, of course. And what would I want put in its place? Reason, critical thinking, scientific temper, technological intelligence, free inquiry, openness to new ideas, tolerance of different life styles, creativity and industry.

So without further delay or compassion for religious false hopes, I am calling on all Nigerians, all Africans to rise up to the challenge of enlightenment, intellectual awakening, religions reformation and rebirth, *now!*

'We don't want your sort in Cardiff'

FUNDAMENTALIST American preacher Luis Palau has been told he is not welcome in Cardiff because of his homophobic views. Cardiff Council has withdrawn a civic reception, originally planned for the end of October, due to be hosted by Lord Mayor Jacqui Gasson. Said Mrs Gasson: "I was not prepared to host an event for a gay-basher."

Council leader Rodney Berman, himself gay, added: "Someone who holds this sort of intolerant views is not someone we should be spending money on – that would be sending out completely the wrong signal."

Archbishop of Canterbury accused of 'prostitution' and 'cowardice'

THE Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has been left reeling by an astonishing series of attacks unleashed on him by conservative Anglicans on the one hand, and secularists on the other. And central to the furore is the issue of homosexuality, which might well end up tearing the entire Anglican Church apart.

In mid-October, the Anglican Dean of Sydney denounced Dr Williams as a theological prostitute who was taking his salary under false pretences.

He condemned Dr Williams for his liberal views about homosexuality, although Dr Williams has publicly maintained a traditional stance in opposing gay marriage and ordination.

"That's no good. That's total prostitution of the Christian ministry," Philip Jensen told the evangelical group Reform at a conference held in Derbyshire.

"He should resign. That's theological and intellectual prostitution. He is taking his salary under false pretences."

Philip Jensen is the brother of Sydney Archbishop Peter Jensen, who, according to a report in *The Age*, Melbourne, immediately distanced himself from the dean's remarks.

The archbishop's media officer, Margaret Rodgers, said Archbishop Jensen had spoken to his brother, but had only seen a report of the speech in the *Guardian*.

"Dean Jensen presented his own reflections on the present state of the Anglican Church. He was not speaking on behalf of the Diocese of Sydney or the archbishop," she said.

"In these troubled times for the Anglican communion, Archbishop Williams is assured of the prayers of all faithful Anglicans."

The outspoken Dean Jensen has been in the thick of a number of controversies, including attacking other religions as Satanic in his first sermon as dean.

A senior Sydney Anglican said the Jensen brothers were close, but the archbishop had been embarrassed by these remarks.

"Philip is a demagogue who in the flights of oratory sometimes appears to get carried away. He's a very intense and emotional man," said the church leader, who did not want to be named.

The Anglican Church world-wide is deeply divided over homosexuality, with many African and Asian branches severing relationships with the church in Canada for blessing homosexual unions and in the US for appointing an openly gay bishop.

Immediately after the dean's outburst made international headlines, Australia's Anglican

leader rebuked him for "extreme and intemperate remarks" that bordered on defaming the church's world leader, Rowan Williams.

Australia's primate, Perth Archbishop Peter Carnley, said it was inappropriate for Australian Anglicans to go to England and lecture church leaders there.

"Such an extreme and intemperate statement can only represent the person who said the words," Dr Carnley said.

"It will be up to the general public to make their judgement as to whether it was appropriate civil or Christian behaviour."

Dean Jensen had meanwhile responded to the *Guardian* report, saying in a letter to the newspaper that he had been grossly misrepresented.

Jensen admits he called for Dr Williams' resignation but denies calling him a prostitute.

Meanwhile, eight Reform clergy, representing some of England's largest Anglican churches, endorsed Dean Jensen's position, saying they had also called on the Archbishop of Canterbury to resign.

Windsor report does little to unite Anglicans

ANGLICANS worldwide last month cautiously welcomed a report on homosexuality and the church, but the first cracks in church unity began appearing immediately after its launch in London.

The Windsor Report, commissioned by the church's 38 national leaders, recommended a moratorium on gay bishops and blessing same-sex unions, and called on both sides to apologise.

But it did not suggest any punishment for the US and Canadian churches that defied leaders last year.

There were early signs that the Africans – who constitute a majority of the world's 78 million Anglicans and have led the anti-gay fight – were not appeased.

A Ugandan leader, Johnson Ebong, said an apology from the US church would not be enough. "Apology is not the word used in the Bible. We use repentance, meaning turning away from sin and sinning no more," he said.

The secretary-general of the Nigerian church, Archdeacon Oluranti Odubogun, said: "Ordaining homosexuals is heresy, unbiblical, should never have been done, and should be reversed."

Seizing on the opportunity to leap into the fray, GALHA (the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association) issued a statement claiming that "the Anglican Church was creating a fantasy world in which gay people are either evil or unworthy of participation as full citizens". Reacting to the publication of the Windsor report, GALHA Secretary George Broadhead, said: "The Anglican Church is engaged in a debate that is not only damaging its own image, but is creating hostility and mistrust of gay people in wider society." Mr Broadhead said the debate has been carried on as though gay people were "some abstract entity without feelings" that could be insulted, patronised and scapegoated with no consequence.

"In fact it is very dangerous to portray gay people as being either evil or in some way unworthy of full participation in society. Platitudes about 'hating the sin but loving the sinner' are no longer acceptable. They can no longer expect gay men and women to live lives of loneliness and isolation."

Terry Sanderson, a columnist on *Gay Times* magazine backed up George Broadhead's comments, with an attack on Dr Williams whom he described as "a coward who doesn't have the courage of his own convictions". "When he was appointed, it was clear that he was personally gay-friendly, but now he seems to have thrown his lot in with unpleasant evangelicals who think gay people are 'lower than dogs' (Archbishop Akinola of Nigeria) and who are using gay people ruthlessly in a power struggle within the church. Well, it's time for gay Anglicans to find their backbones and refuse to allow themselves – and the rest of us – to be used in this way. Gay Anglicans – and there are thousands of them – should make themselves known, and fight back against this dehumanising depiction of gay people as being unfit to serve the church to which many have devoted their lives." Mr Sanderson said that, because of its establishment, the Church of England's policy was important even to those who have no religion.

"With 26 bishops in the House of Lords these people are making laws that affect us all. The bishops have already done their bit to try to scupper the Civil Partnership Bill. They got big exemptions from the workplace discrimination law so that they could continue to kick gay people out of jobs. This is not theoretical discrimination, and the hatred being expressed by bigots from Africa, Asia and America who have gathered in London to discuss this report is deeply offensive."

Blood flows as religious rivals come to blows

ROMAN Catholic and Orthodox clerics last month exchanged blows inside Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of Christianity's holiest sites.

The punch-up began after Greek and Russian Orthodox believers took offence at a door left open by members of the Franciscan order during a service. At least five people were injured in the fracas – including Israeli police officers called in to quell it.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City is said to be the site of both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church is shared jealously by six rival Christian sects.

The latest trouble began after a procession through the church on Holy Cross Day to mark the discovery of the cross which some believe was used for the crucifixion.

"There was lots of hitting going on. Police were hit, monks were hit ... there were people with bloodied faces," said Aviad Sar Shalom, an Israeli tour guide who witnessed the brawl, according to Reuter news agency. Police said they made several arrests.

The six Christian sects sharing the church have come to blows before.

In 2002, monks from the Ethiopian

Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church of Egypt – two groups which for years have been vying for control of the church's roof – fought over the position of a chair on the roof.

Rivalry between the six different churches dates back to the aftermath of the crusades and to the great schism between Eastern and Western Christianity in the 11th Century.

To prevent squabbling, two Muslim families have had guardianship of the key to the only entrance to the church since 1178 when they were entrusted with it by the Muslim ruler Salah el-Din (Saladin).

Meanwhile, Christians in Jerusalem are complaining about what they say is the increasingly common practice of ultra-orthodox Jews spitting on them. The latest incident was a brawl between an orthodox Jewish religious student and an Armenian archbishop. Trouble began after the student spat on a cross being carried in a ceremony near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Archbishop slapped the student, who then retaliated by breaking a piece of of the clergyman's jewellery.

Daniel Rossing, the director of the Jerusalem Centre for Christian-Jewish Dialogue said the increase in such incidents was "part of a general lack of tolerance".

Pushy Catholics push for greater EU influence

THE liberal Catholics for a Free Choice organisation has issued a fact sheet about "Catholic Influence in Europe", profiling Anna Zaborska, MEP, who has been elected chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.

Among its responsibilities, the Committee is charged with the promotion and protection of women's rights in developing countries. Dr Zaborska is a senior member of Slovakia's Christian Democrats and a member of the Slovak Parliament. She publicly identifies herself as a "conservative".

She is firmly opposed to both abortion and equal rights for homosexuals. She is a prominent member of the Forum of Life, an association of anti-choice NGOs. She has stated that she intends to pursue her conservative agenda within the European Union. She told the Slovakia *Spectator* in July this year "AIDS is God's vengeance for homosexuality" and "If we have the opportunity to create legislation according to our beliefs we should take advantage of it."

Meanwhile, a personal friend of the pope, Rocco Buttiglione, was nominated last month

FOLLOWING its craven banning of the satirical cartoon *Popetown* at the behest of the Catholic Church, the BBC has confirmed that it will not reconsider its decision to exclude non-believers from *Thought for the Day*.

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society wrote to the new Director General of the BBC, Mark Thompson, hoping that he would reconsider the ban, given that at a previous meeting with the NSS, Mr Thompson gave the impression that he was sympathetic to our case.

However, Mr Thompson, a high profile Catholic, replied: "As I understand it Ms [Barbara] Smoker's [original] complaint was carefully examined by Glenwyn Benson, the BBC's Director of Factual and Learning at the time. She concluded that the policy was appropriate. Ms Smoker appealed against that decision, and her appeal was then heard by the full Board of Governors. The Governors did not uphold the appeal..."

"I know that you will find this letter disappointing. However, we do recognise how important it is to reflect as wide a range of views and beliefs in our programming as possible in order to serve the diversity of our audience, and we

Spineless BBC kow-tows to Catholics

will continue to look for opportunities to do so. The non-religious approach to life has been regularly featured on *Belief* on Radio 3, *The Heaven and Earth Show* on BBC One, and *Sunday, Beyond Belief* and *The Moral Maze* on Radio 4. A three-part series on the history of atheism, presented by Jonathan Miller, is scheduled for this autumn, with a companion series of interviews with leading atheists."

Terry Sanderson, media spokesman for the NSS, said: "Although the BBC's new complaints procedure was announced in a great fanfare of hype about treating the viewer with new respect, it is actually almost identical to the one they had before. The BBC remains unaccountable to anyone but itself, and injustices and prejudice – such as that surrounding the exclusion of non-believers from *Thought for the Day* – are, in effect, unchallengeable."

Mark Thompson was also instrumental in deciding to scrap *Popetown*, which has cost the BBC £2.4 million to produce

Alan Bookbinder, head of religious propaganda at the BBC was also involved in scraping the series. Catholic Leader Cormac Murphy O'Connor told the *Church Times*: "I raised this issue with the BBC. I am very happy that they have heeded my wishes and concerns of the Roman Catholics."

Terry Sanderson commented: "We also raised the issue with the BBC, but were sent away with a flea in our ear. The *Popetown* scandal shows that if the Catholic Church snaps its fingers, the BBC capitulates – and we suspect even more so now that Mr Thompson is in the chair. It is a sorry day for free speech when decisions at our main broadcasting organisation appear to be being made by authoritarian Catholic clerics. And what happens when the Church next misbehaves, as it has done so often recently? Will Mr Thompson be happy for his journalists to investigate, or will they have got the message by now, and not even bother trying? In effect, the BBC has introduced a blasphemy law for Catholics and it is very sinister."

tholics seek U influence

as European Commissioner for Justice. Mr Buttiglione, an Italian MEP, has described homosexuality as a sin. He is well-known in Italy for his strong religious views and is reputed to have learnt Polish in order to read the Pope's works in the original. He has defended the traditional notion of heterosexual marriage, with men in the role of protector of women.

The Labour MEP Michael Cashman, who is also an NSS honorary associate, said: "Some of the things he said about homosexuals are very worrying. His definition of marriage was very narrow." The Labour MEP Claude Moraes, argued that the nomination of Mr Buttiglione was a "retrograde step" and an "abrupt and brutal end to the current regime in the Commission on questions of civil liberties, migration, protection of minorities and respect for women".

The European Humanist Federation (EHF), representing humanist organisations in Europe, has also slammed Buttiglione's nomination, and has objected to the intolerant way in which he has spoken about immigration, homosexuality and the role of women in the family.

Creationists told to bog off

THE Mayor of Doncaster has announced that plans for an academy sponsored by creationist millionaire Peter Vardy have been dropped.

The energetic parents action group CAD-PAG is celebrating after winning a long and imaginative campaign against the establishment of the school.

Tracy Morton, a youth worker who organised the resistance, said: "It has been a long, hard fight. It seemed as if anybody who comes along and fits the criteria can take over a school.

"If parents want to send their children to a faith school then that's fine, but this is the only comprehensive in the area so we will have no choice but to send them to a place with a strong Christian ethos whether we want it or not."

Ms Morton added: "Around the country, communities that are the most vulnerable and most deprived, that need the most help, are being used as an educational experiment. I sincerely hope that other people look at this and actually start to ask questions. I hope they will say they would like the money in their community but keep democratic control of their school."

The campaigners are now offering support

"The European Commissioner Designate, during his hearing with the Committee on Legal Affairs of the European Parliament, has, once again, shown much intolerance and a considerable lack of openness and respect for others," the EHF said in a statement issued last month.

The EHF considers that "his fundamentalist moral positions do not allow this Commissioner Designate to hold the position of 'Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security' which requires impartiality in judgment and much more tolerance."

Buttiglione's nomination was then rejected by the European Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee. Although their rejection is not binding, it enraged Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who blamed Italian leftists for the vote against Buttiglione.

He described it as a "dreadful start" for the new session of the European Parliament.

But the rejection of Buttiglione was hailed by Italy's left-wing opposition.

"This is just the latest confirmation of the lack of credibility Italy is subject to in the European institutions because of choices made by Berlusconi," said former Industry Minister Pierluigi Bersani, a member of the Democrats of the Left.

Sergio Lo Giudice, president of the Italian gay rights group Arcigay, said the vote showed the EU's strong commitment to human rights, including those of gay people.

to other communities worried about the incursion of religious fundamentalists into their children's education, including those in nearby Sheffield where new academy plans were put forward earlier this month.

Earlier this year it seemed almost inevitable that Vardy's educational wing, The Emmanuel Schools Foundation, would be permitted to take over Northcliffe School in Conisbrough near Doncaster.

However, Sir Peter had not reckoned with the determination of Tracy Morton and her supporters. Protest marches, petitions, demonstrations and a superb website were all deployed to let the council know that Vardy and his anti-science garbage weren't wanted in Conisbrough. They even enrolled Richard Dawkins into their cause, and he described Vardy's approach as "educational debauchery".

Peter Vardy was, naturally, hopping mad: "It is a missed opportunity [not] a victory for the campaigners. Far from celebrating they should be reflecting on the opportunity they have denied their children for an education of the very highest standard in the state-of-the-art facilities."

Adelaide chaplain held on sex charges

A FORMER Anglican chaplain at a prestigious Australian boys school has been arrested in Thailand on child sex offences.

The Reverend John Mountford was arrested in Bangkok last month by Thai police after a provisional arrest request by Canberra Justice Minister Chris Ellison.

Mountford, a former chaplain at St Peter's College in Adelaide, fled Australia after reportedly admitting to the college headmaster in June 1992 that he had sexually assaulted a 14-year-old male student.

Mountford has claimed he was told at the time by former Anglican Archbishop of Adelaide Ian George to flee the country or police would be called. Mountford subsequently fled to Bali and had since lived in Britain and Thailand.

Archbishop George, who resigned earlier this year, has denied telling Mountford to flee but admitted to meeting the chaplain before his departure.

Mountford was arrested on five counts of indecent assault, one charge of unlawful sexual intercourse and two counts of procuring the commission of an act of gross indecency, Senator Ellison said. The offences were alleged to have occurred between 27 October 1991 and 31 May 1992, he said.

Police sources in Bangkok said Mountford was expected to be deported from Thailand to Australia on October 19.

Abuse 'an industrial accident', claims Dutch Catholic Church

The Dutch Catholic Church has gone to court to force insurer Aegon to reimburse a damages pay-out to a girl who was sexually abused by a priest. The Bishop of Rotterdam claims the abuse was an industrial accident and was covered by the Church's liability insurance.

The Church's legal action against the insurance company began with a preliminary hearing behind closed doors in a court in The Hague, according to *De Telegraaf*.

The girl was six when she was abused by the priest in Rotterdam. She made a claim against the diocese and in February 2000 she was awarded £31,000 compensation. The priest was prosecuted for the sexual abuse.

Rotterdam diocese wants Aegon to reimburse it with £40,000 to cover the full cost of dealing with the case because it claims the abuse should formally be recognised as "an industrial accident". It further argues that there is a risk that a priest performing his pastoral work may carry out such an attack.

British mosques

secrets are

A voluntary "morality" teacher at a Peterborough mosque was jailed last month for hitting an 11-year-old pupil with a 3ft stick during a lesson. Mohammed Abdullah, 44, was convicted of assaulting the boy, who cannot be identified, at the mosque.

Abdullah, a father-of-four who worked as a cleaner at Peterborough Crown Court, denied common assault but was found guilty. Peterborough magistrates sentenced him to four months in prison.

The court heard that Abdullah hit the youngster, bruising his arms and neck, after discovering a "rude picture" in an exercise book in April. Passing sentence, magistrates' chairman Peter Marshall said: "Because of the seriousness of the offence, aggravated by the breach of trust and the use of a weapon on an 11-year-old child, we feel there is no alternative to a custodial sentence."

Lawyers for Abdullah told the court they would be appealing against the conviction and sentence.



Mohammed Abdullah

Although very few cases such as this come to court, there is evidence that Muslim youngsters attending mosque schools, or *madrassas* as they are known, are at risk. Earlier this year, the BBC's *File on 4* programme scrutinised British mosques – and uncovered many disturbing facts, not just about child abuse but mismanagement, corruption and even murder.

The programme opened with the words of a 68-year-old Muslim man, who told the BBC's Zaiba Malik: "I went to the mosque one day for prayers. The Imam was teaching the Koran to some youngsters. One kid, born and brought up in this country, had difficulty in pronouncing an Arabic word. After repeating his mistake three or four times, the imam hit him with a stick – a solid bamboo stick. He began crying, and when he recited the Koran again, and made the same mistake, he was hit once more."

The man, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, said: "I was sitting about three feet away from the imam. The second time he hit him, I just could not hold myself. I went up to him and I said, 'Do you realise you're not supposed to hit children in this country? It's illegal to hit children.' Without saying anything, he grabbed me by the neck and threw me to the floor, and while I was falling he hit me. I couldn't believe that a man of my age could be hit in the mosque. To me that was a disgrace to the religion as well as to the mosque."

In her introduction to the programme, Malik pointed out that, "since 9/11, Britain's mosques have come under close scrutiny. Fears that they have become hotbeds for militant Islamists have raised alarm. But while the

focus has been on terrorism, other problems in mosques are being ignored. Tonight *File on 4* investigates allegations of physical and financial abuse. We reveal how children are being put at risk, how donations are not being accounted for, and how disputes are being resolved through violence. At a time when the government is proposing tighter controls for imams, could the Muslim community be doing more to put its own house in order?"

She added: "Learning to read the Koran in Arabic is a core part of a Muslim child's education. Many attend mosques and their schools where they are taught the basic tenets of Islam. There is a strong emphasis on discipline, but sometimes this can go too far."

Another interviewee, who also feared identification, said his younger brother had been slapped across the face, hit on the head and sworn at by a teacher at a mosque school in Scotland. "All this because he made a mistake while reading the Koran."

Malik added: "The Muslim community in Scotland is small and tight-knit. The fear of retribution means that few are willing to talk openly about such abuse, let alone report it to the police."

She revealed that pressure had been put on her interviewee not to pursue the matter. The man said: "The pressure actually came from the leaders of the community. They said 'It's a community problem, we'll take care of it'. The police said to me that they knew what would happen. 'You are going to end up dropping this matter because of the pressure from the community.'"

Such pressure often takes the form of being ostracised. "You go down the street, people look at you and no one wants to talk to you," the man said.

Malik pointed out that, as few cases of abuse are reported to the police, it's impossible to gauge how extensive the problem in mosques and *madrassas* is. "But within the confines of the building, away from prying eyes, there is often little attempt to conceal it.

"Unlike many other major religions, there is no one governing body in Islam which sets out a code of practice for mosques and their imams. In the absence of such guidelines, each mosque is left to regulate itself. But self-regulation has its faults.

"The imam is held in such high esteem that worshippers are reluctant to make any allegations against him."

Imam Abduljalil Sajid, a consultant to the government on Islamic affairs and a scholar, says it's an unsatisfactory situation.

Said Sajid: "I think a whole culture of secrecy exists. There is no state protection or

The BBC, in its investigative programme, *File on 4*, recently scrutinised British mosques – and uncovered many disturbing facts. BARRY DUKE reports on its findings

state regulation. People will make their own rules and their own laws, and some become dictators within their own domain, and some abuse their power."

Asked whether he thought that there was a tendency in the Muslim community to put the imam on a pedestal, where he was beyond any criticism or transparency, Sajid replied: "Well, I think there is justification in that, because the imam is the highest, most respected institution in Muslim society. Not only the leader of the community, but religiously most knowledgeable



Learning to read the Koran in Arabic is a core part of a Muslim child's education

mosques: what are they hiding?

able. He deserves that respect, he deserves that protection. But if a few are misusing that position, then the community must have checks and balances to address that issue."

Malik pointed out that there are thought to be over 2,000 imams in Britain, of which only about 10 percent have been trained here. "The lack of training colleges, coupled with an increasing number of mosques, means that there's a shortage of qualified imams, so many mosques are turning to their homelands to find preachers. But Dr Mahmood Chandia from the Lancashire Council of Mosques, and an academic in Islam, says that this recruitment policy has brought with it problems."

Chandia said: "Historically, most of the people who have been involved in the mosque sector have been coming from South Asia, where it is an accepted form of discipline to smack a child. To some extent this culture was imported to Britain. This is not a good practice and it has been stamped out."

"But not completely", Malik asserted.

Chandia replied: "There have been isolated cases and we have dealt very thoroughly with these cases. We have recommended a total ban on smacking within the mosque sector, and we have made this very clear to all those who tutor at mosques."

Concerns about imams from abroad have prompted the government to take action. Traditionally there has been a reluctance to lay down restrictions for religious communities. But the Home Office is in the process of introducing tougher entry tests for foreign imams. The Muslim Council of Britain has been privy to the government's consultation process. Ibrahim Mogra, who chairs the Mosque and Community Affairs section of the Council, thinks the possible restrictions are too harsh.

He told Malik: "If they are talking about imposing a language test on imams, I think that will be very unfair. So far, from what we hear, the imams will be the first to be tested. And maybe in time such tests might be imposed on others. What we are saying is 'Why should it start with one particular community? Why don't we start with all?'"

"With an increasing number of the younger generations going to mosques who maybe don't understand their mother tongues then

English will obviously be their first language, so doesn't it make absolute sense that there should be a language requirement test?," Malik asked.

Said Mogra: "That's another misreading of the situation. The majority of the congregation are not young people, they are the elderly. There are areas where we definitely need English to be used, and there are places where perhaps English is not needed because the congregation can get by without English."

Mogra thought that an insistence that imams coming from abroad should possess a high level of English "would have a huge impact. I think 98-99 percent of them will not make it into the UK".

These government proposals have yet to be approved. Current Home Office policy means that it's relatively easy for ministers of religion, including imams, to preach here. They just have to show documentary evidence of an offer of employment and sponsorship by a British mosque. Despite the close contact that many imams have whilst teaching children, there is no formal vetting system to ensure that those coming from abroad do not have convictions, Malik said, and pointed out that in October 2002, a preacher from the Faiz-ul Quran mosque was accused of sexually abusing a young girl while teaching her religious lessons at her home. He disappeared shortly after the allegations were made, and before West Midlands Police could question him. It is thought that he may have fled back to Pakistan, although the police won't comment on the allegations.

"Without an effective monitoring system, imams with criminal records can easily enter the country. But the safeguards against convicted imams already in Britain are not much better. There is no legal obligation on mosques to run criminal record checks on their employees. Anybody can work at or set up a mosque or *madrassa*. But it's not a worry to Ibrahim Mogra of the Muslim Council of Britain, who feels that the system of informal checks, with the emphasis on personal networks, is effective."

"The absence of a child protection policy in mosques and *madrassas*," said Malik, "can have serious implications for the worshippers'

safety. Weak financial and management controls can also hit their pockets. One of the five pillars of Islam states that Muslims must donate to charity, of which the mosque is a major recipient. With most donations given in cash, financial accountability and transparency are crucial. For many mosques there is no organisation to ensure that their finances are kept in order. But for those that are registered as charities, the regulatory body, the Charity Commission, provides vital checks and balances, such as a constitution, a board of trustees, and an elected committee."

One institution where financial impropriety occurred is the Islamic Centre in Upton Park, East London. It's a mosque that doubles up as a *madrassa*. In March 2000, the Charity Commission began an investigation into its affairs. Its findings were damning. The charity trustees had failed to protect the charity's funds or act in the best interest of the charity by authorising £35,000 worth of building work without seeking the appropriate planning permission or independent professional advice. The contract for the building work had been awarded to a member of the management committee serving at that time. Closer scrutiny of the mosque's financial affairs revealed more deep-rooted problems that flew in the face of the requirements for transparency and accountability.

There appeared to be no properly appointed trustee body, as no elections had been held for thirteen years. This was in contravention of the charity's constitution, which provided for the election of a management committee every three years. The report also stated that the charity was late in filing its accounts, and those that were submitted had not been correctly audited.

Kurshid Ahmed, a member of the Commission for Racial Equality, with special responsibility for the Muslim community, agrees that financial self-regulation in mosques is failing. He advocates a more hands-on role by the Charity Commission.

Ahmed told the programme: "There is very little competence in many of these committees to regulate themselves in line with the charities legislation of this country, and therefore most of them fall foul of the regulations, and unless the Charity Commission intervene, you are not going to get a proper adherence to constitutions and regulations."

The programme then examined the issue of radical clerics preaching words of hate in mosques. Trouble, for example, broke out at the Shahjalal mosque in central Newcastle. It is one of a handful of mosques in the city, and was set up by the small Bangladeshi community. For many years peace reigned here – until the arrival in 2002 of a preacher, Omar Bakri, spiritual leader of the militant Islamic group al-Muhajiroun, who accepted an invitation to give a sermon by the then president of the mosque, Syed Ali. The imam at the mosque,

Hamidah Rahman, claimed that Syed Ali never consulted the congregation about Bakri's visit, which they strongly objected to.

Said Malik: "According to Syed Ali's Islamic beliefs, there is no distinction between a moderate and a militant Muslim."

Asked whether he supported al-Muhajiroun, Ali replied "No, I don't. I don't support them, but I like them."

Malik: "So you agree with their version of Islam?"

Ali: "I agree what they're calling for is right."

The arrival of Omar Bakri sparked a power struggle between Syed Ali and the committee members. As the two jostled for control of the mosque, allegations of fraud and child abuse were thrown around. In an attempt to stop the mud-slinging and placate the situation, mediators were appointed. Their first step was to suspend the committee, including Syed Ali, and call for elections. But it was a move that just added to the conflict. Verbal abuse escalated into serious threats, at which stage the police, under DI Max Black, were called in.

Said Black: "There had been a lot of tension in the mosque, and immediately outside the mosque, and on one or two occasions we had uniform officers policing the area quite close to the mosque to provide reassurance to members that we were available to calm anything down."

The situation came to a head when the very person brought in to resolve the dispute – the

mediator Afsaur Khan – became a target. On June 6, 2003, he blocked plans by Syed Ali to hold a meeting at the mosque, stating that it could not be used for political purposes. Later that day, on a busy road just around the corner from the mosque, Khan and his son were attacked by a group of around 20 men. Khan was stabbed three times, and his son struck with an iron bar. The police arrested a number of men, including Syed Ali. Although initially charged with wounding, he was convicted of affray. Syed Ali no longer prays at the Shahjalal mosque. He is trying to set up a new mosque in Newcastle with funding from Saudi Arabia.

The failure of mosques to regulate themselves when an internal dispute arises can sometimes have devastating consequences.

In 2002 Salik Choudhury was stabbed to death on his doorstep in Forest Gate, East London, in front of his seven-year old daughter. He was one of the main founders of a mosque in Forest Gate. For years the mosque was governed peacefully. But in the summer of 2002 a power struggle developed when a group of outsiders tried to take control.

Over the next few months the mosque was vandalised and property belonging to the committee members was damaged. The incidents were reported to the police, but worse was yet to come. Committee members, including Choudhury, began receiving death

threats in the mail. Then, on November 3 2002, Salik Choudhury was stabbed as he answered a knock at his door.

His murder led to a climate of fear at the mosque, and worshippers stopped attending. To date, no-one has been charged with his murder.

Kurshid Ahmed from the Commission for Racial Equality has had first-hand experience of trying to mediate in internal disputes in mosques. He's adamant that these disputes cannot be resolved through the current method of self-regulation, and that it's time to introduce a more centralised and formal system.

"From my own experience in Birmingham and elsewhere, I don't think that problems that arise can be sorted out internally. I wish they could be."



Students at the Haqqania madrassa in Pakistan – one of the largest in that country. It has traditionally been a breeding ground for militants who supported the Taliban in Afghanistan

Saudi Arabia spends billions to spread Wahhabism in the West

What the *File on 4* programme neglected to investigate – and to my mind this was a serious omission – was the extent of Saudi Arabia's funding of *madrassas* in Britain.

Reza F Safa, author of *Inside Islam*, estimates that since 1973, the Saudi government has spent an unbelievable \$87-billion to promote the fanatical strand of Islam known as Wahhabism in the United States, Africa, Southeast Asia and Europe. According to official Saudi information, Saudi funds have been used to build and maintain over 1,500 mosques, 202 colleges, 210 Islamic Centres wholly or partly financed by Saudi Arabia, and almost 2,000 schools for educating Muslim children in non-Islamic countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Asia. The Kingdom has fully or partially financed Islamic Centres in many large American cities, as well as in Austria, Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Russia, Turkey, and even in some Muslim countries such as

Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia and Djibuti. Saudi aid to Muslims abroad, however, comes with strings attached, and most of the recipient institutions end up promoting the Wahhabi version of Islam.

In late 2002, The Centre for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP) undertook a survey of Saudi Arabian (Wahhabi) textbooks. The survey included the Saudi Arabian (Wahhabi) outlook on Christianity and the West as well as Saudi notions of government, women's status and children's rights as taught in schools. The results of the survey provide some insight into the message the Saudis wish to instill in the minds of their students both in their country and throughout the world. The message, simply stated, is that Wahhabism either must dominate or be dominated. In terms of the democratisation and modernisation of the Arab world, Wahhabism stands as a monument to Arab stagnation and decline.

The Report analyzes 93 school textbooks

taught in grades 1-10, mostly from the years 1999-2002, and presents a "unique" religious and political worldview to which school students between the ages 6 and 16 are exposed through their textbooks.

In these Wahhabi texts, Islam is presented as the only true religion while all other religions are presented as false. "Islam is the only religion leading its followers to Paradise, whereas all other religions destroy their believers in Hell. The Muslims are, consequently, superior to followers of all other religions, in both this world and the next."

Christians and Jews in particular are denounced as infidels. Jews especially are presented as enemies of Islam and of Muslims. "Muslims may not befriend them, nor emulate them in any way, lest that lead to love and friendship which is forbidden". In a broader context, the textbooks make clear that the West, in particular, is the source of all misfortunes of the Muslim world – it's most danger-

ous effect on Muslim society being "its cultural and intellectual influence in various fields including the spread of Western practices and habits – from Western democracy to Western influence in the fields of literature, art, music, the media, fashion, education and research – including Christian missionary work, Western humanitarian and medical aid, and even Western-invented computer games."

According to the Wahhabi world perspective, "the Jews are a wicked nation, characterised by bribery, slyness, deception, betrayal, aggressiveness and haughtiness." As such, they have been "a harmful element in world history," and are responsible, *inter alia*, for "the French and Bolshevik revolutions and for the outbreak of World War I". One textbook mentions that "perdition is the desired fate for Jews".

Peace between Muslims and non-Muslims is not advocated. Instead, the Saudi textbooks, even grammar books, are full of phrases exalting war, Jihad, and martyrdom. The Saudi textbooks reject Western democracy, and praise the type of regime Saudi Arabia has embraced.

America, perhaps due to the inherent openness of its society, is the only country outside Saudi Arabia where the Islamic establishment is actually under Wahhabi control. For American Muslim moderates, the harsh reality of having their religion hijacked by Wahhabi radicals is something they have yet to confront. "Radical Islamic groups have now taken over leadership of the 'mainstream' Islamic institutions in the United States and anyone who pretends otherwise is deliberately engaging in self-deception," said the late Seif Ashmawi, an Egyptian-American newspaper publisher. The Saudis have funded more than 80 percent of the Wahhabi-influenced mosques built in the United States within the last 20 years. Moreover, the majority of Muslim Student Associations at US colleges are dominated by Islamic and anti-American agendas, as are most of the numerous Islamic Centres and schools financed by the Saudis. And the most malleable minds belong to Muslim children. An estimated 30,000 Muslim children attend Saudi-funded Wahhabi day schools in America. Intolerance and outright rejection of American values and democratic ideals – classical Wahhabism – are often taught.

As a rule, Wahhabi worshippers do not embrace the American religious community's spirit of inter-faith cooperation. They are distinctly isolationist. This attitude came to light as early as the 1990s, when Wahhabi mosques in America refused to accept help from local churches wanting to donate food to Bosnian Muslims.

The Saudis have also directed considerable funding to the American Black Muslim community. In one effort to showcase the bounties

of Wahhabism to this target audience, the Saudis pledged \$8 million for a lavish mosque in shabby South Central Los Angeles. The Saudis' Islamic Development Bank pledged an additional \$295,000 for a school attached to the mosque. From the Saudi perspective, this and other similar contributions are less an expense than an investment. According to Reza Safa, an authority on the manner in which Wahhabism is spread throughout the world, "as many as 90 percent of American converts to Islam are black." According to some estimates, if the conversion rate continues, Islam could emerge as the dominant religion among urban blacks.

The Saudis also have a special program aimed at converting blacks in prison. In a well-documented June 2002 article in the *Washington Times*, Cal Thomas noted that the programme is funded by Saudi Arabian money through the National Islamic Prison Foundation, which underwrites a "prison outreach" programme designed to convert large numbers of African-American inmates not only to Wahhabism, but to its political objectives including virulent anti-Americanism. *The Wall Street Journal* (February 5, 2003) also confirmed that Wahhabism is making serious inroads into the black population of American prisons. It quoted a New York-based Wahhabi imam, Warith Deen Umar (who until his retire-

ment in 2000 helped run New York's growing Islamic prison programme by recruiting and training dozens of chaplains and ministering to thousands of inmates himself) as saying: "The 9/11 hijackers should be honoured as martyrs. The US risks further terrorism attacks because it oppresses Muslims around the world. Without justice, there will be warfare, and it can come to this country too."

The natural candidates to help press such an attack, in his view, are African-Americans who embraced Islam in prison. Prison dawa, or the spreading of the faith, has become a priority for the Saudi Arabian government. The Islamic Affairs Department of the Saudi Embassy in Washington disseminates hundreds of copies of the Quran each month, as well as religious pamphlets and videos to prison chaplains and Islamic groups who then pass them along to inmates.

The Saudi government also pays for prison chaplains, along with many other American Muslims, to travel to Saudi Arabia for worship and study during the hajj, the traditional winter pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are required to make at least once in their lives.

The trips, courtesy of the Saudi government, typically cost \$3,000 a person and last several weeks.

Firebrand Muslim cleric faces serious charges

MUSLIM cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri has been charged with 16 offences including soliciting to murder and possession of a terrorist document. He appeared at the magistrates' court at Belmarsh prison, where he has been held since May at the request of the US, who hope to have him extradited.

Abu Hamza is accused of encouraging people at public meetings to murder Jews and other non-believers in Islam. The Egyptian-born cleric has always denied any involvement in terrorism.

Hamza now faces 10 charges of soliciting to murder under section four of the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861. Four charges were brought of using threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour with intent to stir up racial hatred.

Just one of the charges he faces is under anti-terrorism legislation. He is accused under section 58 of the Terrorism Act of possessing a document which contained information "of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism".

Lastly, Mr Abu Hamza faces one count of having made threatening, abusive or insulting audio and video recordings.

The complexity of the case means it is unlikely to come to trial before next year.



The UK charges mean Mr Abu Hamza's US extradition hearing – which was due to start last month – has been put on hold.

Hugo Keith, the lawyer representing the US authorities, asked the court to adjourn the extradition case until the domestic charges were dealt with. Mr Keith said US officials would ask for the extradition case to be resumed as soon as the British proceedings were over.

The former preacher at the Finsbury Park Mosque, in north London, came to the UK in 1979. He received British citizenship after marrying a Western woman.

Snakes and shake dumbest Christian

Snakes have a prominent role in the Bible. The most famous snake shows up in Genesis. According to Judeo-Christian mythology, Satan, disguised as a snake, tempted Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. This original sin led the first people to be expelled from the Garden of Eden, and became central to much of Christian theology. God also punished the snake: "And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Genesis 3:14-15, KJV).

But God, ever-vengeful, and constantly on the look-out for new ways of tormenting humankind, found the snake particularly useful when the Israelites, wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt, began whining that God brought them out of Egypt only to allow them to starve in the desert. Not a little miffed that he should be so criticised, the short-tempered deity sent serpents among them, which bit the people and caused many to die.

When they prayed for help, God told Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a rod. Everyone who looked at the serpent was healed, and the serpent on the rod remains a symbol of physicians today.

Another snake reference occurs in the New Testament:

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. — Mark 16:17-18.

It is this reference that forms the basis of one of the most bizarre of Christian practices: the handling of deadly snakes by devout believers. Speaking in tongues, and swaying and shaking in a frenzied manner, crazed members of snake-handling churches deliberately place themselves in danger – and are frequently bitten, on occasions fatally. Those who survive snake-bites are sometimes left dreadfully maimed; fingers often have to be amputated.

The latest fatality occurred in April, 2004, when the Rev Dwayne Long picked up a rattlesnake in his church in Virginia to demonstrate his faith in God. In doing so, he was breaking a state law that makes it a misdemeanour to handle dangerous snakes. A conviction could have cost him a fine of \$250.00. But, as this was one of God's tetchier snakes, the preacher's devotion cost him his life.

Long, 45, died the next day of the bite inflicted by the snake during an Easter service at a Lee County church, and, not for the first

time, the American media put snake-handlers in the spotlight.

Long, who did not seek medical attention, was the son of a snake-handling preacher and the father of five children. None of his family would comment on the incident. Nor would members of the congregation.

Thomas Burton, professor emeritus of English at East Tennessee State University, and the author of the book *Serpent Handling Believers*, said: "They believe the Bible is the inspired word of God that should be taken literally." By handling poisonous snakes during their often-frenzied religious services, "they believe they're verifying the word of God for the rest of us. They're saying that if it's not possible to take up serpents, then maybe it's not possible that Jesus rose from the dead."

Followers of the fundamentalist movement, who usually gather in small, rural churches scattered throughout Appalachia, accept the words of Mark 16:17-18 as literal truth.

So fervent is the belief that Lee County Sheriff Gary Parsons claims that a misdemeanour citation and a fine does nothing to stop snake handlers from endangering their lives. And, as Parsons sees it, what happened to the preacher is no concern of the law.

"I don't feel I'm in a position to question what they believe," said Parsons. "If they make a conscious decision to go into that church and worship in that manner, it's their own business. If it was in a public place, it might be different."

Although statistics are hard to come by, it's estimated that between 70 and 80 people have died from snakebites suffered during a church service since the practice began in the early 1900s.

It has Pentecostal origins and can also involve drinking poison, applying fire to skin and speaking in tongues. It is believed to have about 2,000 followers – although that number, too, is only an estimate.

Although other people prominently figure in the history of this religious

movement, George Went Hensley is commonly considered the "father of contemporary serpent-handling". Born around 1880 in Tennessee, he died of a snake bite in 1955. As church lore has it, snake-handling started sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century while Hensley was preaching at the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee.

During Hensley's sermon about Mark 16 some men dumped a box full of rattlesnakes in front of him. Without hesitation, Hensley reached down, picked up the snakes and continued preaching.

Snake-handlers are more generally known as the Church of God with Signs Following. Under this umbrella term falls the loosely-organised "Pentecostal churches, ministers and itinerent preachers popularly known as snake-handlers". The practice itself developed out of the Pentecostal-Holiness movement which flourished in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

By 1914 the practice had spread throughout the Church of God. But the actual act of snake-handling was only practised by a small portion of the members.

When commonsense began overtaking superstition, snake-handling gradually diminished, and by 1928 snake-handling became the activity of only a few independent churches nestled in the Appalachian Mountains where it stayed until the 1940s when commonsense was once again relegated to the back-burner.



Signs: Meet the the Signs on the planet

Snake-handling saw a resurgence led by Raymond Harris and Tom Harden. These men went on to start the Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following in Grasshopper Valley, Lewis Ford, a member of the Dolly Pond congregation, died from snake-handling in 1945. His death led to the official banning of snake-handling in Tennessee. Hensley, still alive and practising, was arrested in Chattanooga under the new statute in 1948. North Carolina followed suit, banned snake-handling and shut down the Interstate Convention of believers in Durham in 1947.

Thus began a series of battles with the government over the right to handle snakes.

Snake-handling diminished again in the early 1950s – only to be thrust into the spotlight again in 1971, after three people died in Tennessee and Georgia from either snake bites or strychnine poisoning.

In the decade between 1940 and 1950 six

southern states (Kentucky, 1940, Georgia, 1941, Tennessee, 1947, Virginia, 1947, North Carolina 1949, and Alabama, 1950) banned the practice of snake-handling. Each state

'They believe they're verifying the word of God for the rest of us. They are saying that if it is not possible to take up serpents, then maybe it is not possible that Jesus rose from the dead'

based their legislation on the premise that the First Amendment right to the free practice of religion was superseded by the potential danger to non-participants. In Alabama and Georgia it was ruled to be a felony charge while the other four states deemed the infraction only a misdemeanour. The logic for a felony charge was that if someone violated this law and a death occurred then capital punishment was the reasonable punishment. Alabama and Georgia later repealed their laws.

While snake-handlers in North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia all trace their heritage back to George Hensley, the sign followers in Alabama and Georgia claim a different origin.

Evidently a man named James Miller "took up the serpents" entirely on his own after deep reflection over holy scripture. He first brought the practice to Sand Mountain, Alabama, around 1912. By 1920 he had spread the practice into southern Georgia.

As part of leading a "godly life", sign followers must adhere to a strict moral code. Members of this sect must dress very plainly. In fact, jewellery is kept to a minimum. Some groups go so far as to consider wedding bands and watches as too extravagant. Women, moreover, generally wear their hair long without any artificial curling, straightening or colouring, and men must keep their hair short. Standards of dress for both men and women are very plain. Men wear

open-necked, long-sleeved shirts and slacks, although jeans and bib-overalls are generally accepted as well. Women must wear dresses of solid or flowered print.

Aside from issues of dress and grooming, sign followers do not use tobacco or alcohol, or, depending on the church, caffeine. In addition, the belief in the healing power of the Lord proscribes any professional medical treatment or even over-the-counter medications. A break with the belief in healing exhibits "a sure sign of lack of faith in God's ability to cure the sick". In some extreme cases churches have been known to ban spectacles.

Another practice unique to sign followers is that of the "Holy Kiss". When members meet they give each other a kiss on the lips. But only men may kiss men, and women other females. Different groups have different reasons for the practice. Some churches cite Romans 16:16 "Salute another with a Holy Kiss". Others use 2 Corinthians 13:12-13 "Greet one another with a Holy Kiss".



St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is shown in this 19th-century engraving driving snakes out of Ireland. Though it is true that there are no snakes in Ireland, it wasn't St Patrick who drove them out. Any Irish snakes were killed during the Ice Age, when an enormous sheet of ice covered the entire island. By the time things warmed up enough for snakes to survive, the Irish Sea – the channel that separates Ireland from Britain – had formed. The Irish Sea is too wide and cold for snakes to cross on their own.

Snake-handling preacher briefly escapes prison

A FORMER snake-handling preacher, serving a 99-year sentence for trying to kill his wife with rattlesnakes, escaped briefly from a prison work detail in Alabama earlier this year.

Prison officials said Glenn Summerford, who had served about 11 years of his sentence, slipped away from the work detail for about 45 minutes before being returned to custody. He then was moved from the work centre at

Childersburg to the state prison in St Clair County.

Summerford, 58, was convicted of attempted murder in 1992 after his wife, Darlene, testified that he grabbed her by the hair and forced her to put her hand in a cage full of rattlesnakes. He first banged the cage with a metal pipe to enrage the snakes. She was bitten twice but survived.

Summerford at the time handled snakes as pastor of the Church of Jesus With Signs Following near Scottsboro.

Faith-based education

AT first sight, faith-based schooling is based on a system of brain-washing. In this sense, there appears to be little difference between Christian or Islamic or Buddhist schools or communist or fascist ones. If the educational process brings young people to a conviction that one particular view of the world is right and therefore all the others are more or less wrong, it has trained a circus animal to perform predictably. It has not persuaded an intelligent human animal to look for evidence before becoming convinced.

My own schooling, and this probably includes most of those schools that are members of the "Headmaster's Conference", gave me quite a strong impression that the worldly wise product of this schooling realised that there could be advantages in avoiding criticising the Anglican or Catholic traditions, because at least it symbolised desirable physical and moral disciplines. Some would not have gone as far as that, but realised that duplicity was the key. Appearance was everything, and anything else could be done privately. The excitement of avoiding being found out was a large part of the fun of behaving badly. Cheating was part of the game, which is true for many of those who loaf about in prison longing to get back to their exciting anti-social game. There are plenty of well-paid executives there too, equally excited at the prospect of getting out to cheat their neighbours again.

Brain-washing allows the brain-washed to behave anti-socially, because it makes it unnecessary for them to decide according to reason and conscience but only according to irrational beliefs. This could underlie Israeli-Palestinian problems. The same sort of rejection of rationality and conscience allowed intelligent people to become Nazis. Is there any difference between suicide bombing and targeting of "extremists" by helicopter gunship? Superficially there is, but this seems to be because brain-washed citizens can commit crimes with a clear conscience. What is in the mind of the person commanding the bomber and the gunner? Probably just symbols like "terrorist" or "suicide-bomber" or just "enemy", not fellow humans.

The only "faith" worthy of being the base for education systems is in fact the opposite, it is the ability and willingness to remain in doubt, the courage and confidence to remain uncertain. This is true of scientific discipline. Scientific "fact" is no more than a high level of probability. At a particular atmospheric pressure water will begin to vaporise at a particular temperature when you say cheerfully and inaccurately "The kettle is boiling", but there might be a condition in which this does not happen. However, water in a kettle has a high

level of probability of reaching a satisfactory temperature for making tea. Scientific facts are reliable and observable. Some are mathematically predictable. Generally speaking, the "laws" of physics are reliable, so we rely on them. In a sense we believe them. Some would say that the beliefs of religions are equally reliable, but whereas scientists do their best to disprove their beliefs, religious authorities will die to defend theirs. Why? What are they afraid of? Are they perhaps afraid that their authority will be questioned?

Do faith-based schools encourage the questioning of beliefs? If not, for the sake of morality, honesty, truth and independent-minded citizens, they should be made illegal.

PETER ARNOLD
Alderney

Bisexuality

IN September's *Points of View*, G Steff's second paragraph stated "I was also pleased to see the term bisexual included in the piece, *as most humans are bisexual*" (my italics). Would Mr Steff care to provide verifiable data to prove this assertion?

T E FRANKS
Hastings

Asexuality

NEW Scientist (October 16) reports on the little-known fact that a significant percentage of the human population is asexual (having no sexual desire whatsoever), and on the problems these individuals face in society.

The report comments that "an article entitled 'Eight Myths of Religious Life' which appeared in *Vision 2002* (an annual magazine from the National Religious Vocation Conference in the US) poses the question: 'What do you call a person who is asexual? Answer: Not a person. Asexual people do not exist. Sexuality is a gift from God and thus a fundamental part of our human identity'."

So, the religionists have found another group of people to hate. Nothing new there, then.

TIM BOYCE
Hampshire

Socialism and Religion

YOUR report regarding the Socialist Party of Great Britain's opposition to religion, and its pamphlet *Socialism and Religion*, is of interest as, to the best of my knowledge, the Socialist Party here in the United Kingdom is the only political party opposed to religion, and refuses to permit known believers to join.

It first published *Socialism and Religion* in 1910, and it was so popular that a new edition was published the following year. It was written by F C Watts, a founder-member of the Socialist Party, a wood-carver who worked, among other things on the coronation chair of King George V, as well as the ill-fated Titanic.

A third impression was printed in 1925.

Socialism and Religion was a best-seller, not only in Britain, but elsewhere and particularly in North America. The pamphlet was favourably reviewed in the *Western Clarion*, journal of the Socialist Party of Canada, of October 1, 1910. It was again reprinted in the *Western Clarion* on September 11, 1911. And in 1915, the Socialist party of Canada adopted it as their official policy. From that date, the SPC officially opposed religion, and its speakers attacked religious beliefs from its platforms. In 1929, the Workers Socialist Party of the United States, a companion party of the SPC and the SPGB, republished *Socialism and Religion*, and also refused to permit believers to become members, as did the Socialist Party Of Australia, founded in 1924.

As far as I know, *Socialism and Religion* was not published again until August, 1997, by Common Ownership Publications, supporters of the World Socialist Party of New Zealand, a party which is militantly opposed to religious beliefs and practices and which refuses to admit to membership a number of sympathisers who retain such beliefs.

Inevitably, some of *Socialism and Religion* is somewhat dated, but like John Keracher's *How the Gods Were Made* and Frank Ridley's pamphlet on the subject, is worth reading.

PETER E NEWELL
Colchester

Ditching gods

WITH reference to the September issue of the *Freethinker*, and Joan Simkins' article. I have long thought all ideas of "gods" should be ditched, since there is no evidence for any of them, as compared to the demonstrable truths of science. And any "god" can make whatever "rules" his fiction-creator chooses to claim for him. It seems that at last the appalling cruelty of the "gods", should we displease them, is beginning to be generally recognised, and some "powerful" representatives of such teachings are having to admit that it is reasonable to question these dictates, so brutally taught and enforced in my schooldays. (I am 69). Regarding the very intelligent letter by Charles Hanson about prison chaplains. I have previously mentioned the similar vulnerability of people in long-stay institutions, such as mental hospitals and care homes, and children's homes, and that any "fair and just" government should legislate to try to ensure their freedom to choose what to believe, and be presented with, or have available, alternatives in beliefs, to minimise the effects of any dictatorial religious regime they may be subject to, and any discrimination where they choose to follow beliefs not harmful to others. I include animal cruelty in this, as many animals are subject to totally unnecessary cruelty, for either the greed or pleasure of some people. I



don't think I'd even bother to ask the Conservatives, but this Labour government baffles me, with the apparent support of some of its leaders for religion. Is Tony Blair proud that under his government, and after two terms in office, the totally unnecessary "battery cage" system of egg-production is still apparently widespread in this country?

Your publication is fair common sense to me, and I only wish it was more widely known and distributed.

MR D DAWSON
York

Responding to critics

I FEEL strongly that I must reply to A Non and Graham Noble's criticism of my article in the August issue of the *Freethinker*. In attacking me for what I have observed as an animal rights campaigner, they have overlooked the real threat of Islam.

A friend who lives in Luton tells me that they are expecting to have their third mosque soon. It seems that Muslims buy up property around the mosques and form a closed community. They never get to learn how we are accustomed to living in this country.

In a programme on Britishness on BBC1, while shrouded Muslim women were walking in the background, a black prospective parliamentary candidate for the Midlands said that she thought those who come here from abroad should follow British laws and realise that the people of this country are following a lifestyle they have enjoyed for centuries and must be allowed to continue. The programme mentioned that by 2010 the English in Leicester would be a minority group.

I have no objection to anyone taking over this country if they can give everyone a better living and exercise compassion to all. I'd be happy to be ruled by blacks, Chinese or any non-Muslim Asians. But even the mildest Muslims phoning in to radio stations would not condemn the terrorist attack on the school at Beslan. They protested that Islam is a peaceful religion and say that they want to see Britain as an Islamic state.

Well I don't!

When the ban on headscarves started in French schools, black students said in an interview that those who wear the scarf do so just to provoke trouble. A British Muslim woman said on TV that they are now going to fight back against criticism of Islam and are wearing the scarf as a political statement.

I don't see anything about Islam that is merely "daft"; I believe it is sinister and should be challenged unless we are prepared to be outnumbered and ruled by it. There are enough warnings from those who have fled and written their harrowing stories.

BARBARA BARRETT
Berkshire

Islam and racism

I WAS surprised that Barry Duke (*Freethinking Allowed*, October) thinks Barbara Barrett's article is a handy illustration of critics of Islam being unfairly labelled racist. The article freely interchanged Muslims, Asians, and foreigners, indignantly cited the credit-card fraud of apparently secular individuals who were identified, not as 'Muslim fanatics' (or even as Muslims), but as 'Asians': objected to "large groups of foreigners" blocking the Westminster pavements; questioned why anyone who does not buy into "western values" is in this country; and cited the cricket test for good foreigners (whom she seems to encounter primarily in their restaurant habitats).

These things are emphatically not criticisms of Islam – nor did the correspondents who objected to the piece object, as Barry Duke implies they did, to criticism of Islam. Nor can they be slips of the pen that can be casually dismissed as victims of "political correctness".

Religion must indeed be questioned, in part precisely because of the reason it is commonly assumed to be unquestionable: because it is adopted and ingrained so uncritically into the daily lives of so many people (and thereby nurtures oppression and respect for authority as well as hostility to others). Yet its questioning is no disrespect to ordinary believers. A major factor sustaining humanist conviction is surely the fact that the majority of ordinary Christians, Muslims, and Jews are, in spite of the immoral directives of their god and the violent history of their religious leaderships, actually good, decent people like anyone else.

It is perhaps frustrating that most believers are not "theological", and believe more in the very ideas of belief and duty, but then again many if not most nominal believers neither practise nor believe. The notion, vigorously sponsored by religious leaders, that criticism of Islam is intended as a grave offence to all Muslims, is totalitarian as well as absurd, leading as it does to demands that "defamation" of the prophet be made illegal. The central defamation is denial of his prophethood: if this is outlawed, then all law-abiding citizens will effectively be believers.

Fortunately I cannot recall a freethought article quite like Barbara Barrett's before, but as someone who wrote earlier *Freethinker* guest columns in the 90s criticising both Islam and the then relative silence in the freethinking press about it – I felt that the article and its publication seriously undermined the rationalist cause, giving support to apologists for Islam and Islamism who claim that critics are motivated by a distaste for entire groups of people. The BNP are no more interested in secular criticism of Islam than they are in preventing cruelty to animals: secularists should be completely clear about

where they stand in relation to attacks on "Asians" and "foreigners".

PETER MCKENNA
Liverpool

David Hume

IN response to Stuart Campbell's letter ("Wrong David", October *Freethinker*), I would like to explain that the information about David Hume and his connection with Edinburgh was drawn from a book entitled *The Story of Philosophy* by Bryan Magee (Dorling Kindersley, London, 1998, p112). As Bryan Magee is a distinguished Oxford-educated professor and an acclaimed BBC presenter of such television series as *The Great Philosophers*, I assumed that the source was a reliable one. If this book is mistaken then I apologise for repeating the error.

PETER RICHARDS
Southampton

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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, December 1, 7.30pm. Frank Pidgeon: *Our Pagan Christmas*.

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. The library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, November 9, 8pm. Bill Moore: *The Role of RE in Schools*.

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.

Fens and King's Lynn. New group being formed. Information: Edwin Salter on 01553 771917.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450. Annual lunch, central London, Saturday, November 13. Speaker: Michael Cashman, MEP.

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

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI 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, December 2, 8pm. Illustrated talk by Norman Dannett: *The German Carnival Scene*.

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 McLaree, 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, November 11, 7.30pm. Andy Lloyd: *Youth Crime – What can we do about it?*

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, November 25, 8pm. Denis Cobell: *Fed up with Christmas?*

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. Information and bookings 0114 2309754. Wednesday, December 1. Annual Dinner. Wednesday, January 5, 8pm. Frank Abel: *That was the year that was*.

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

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

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

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. Email: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

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

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

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

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

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