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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881
Butchered in the name of Allah!

Dutch film-maker and writer Theo van Gogh is shot, stabbed and partially decapitated for daring to expose the truth about Islam

– see report on
p6



Ona May Moffatt laments the loss of soul she probably never had to begin with

Why is this woman so distraught? She has just been told of a Christian study which proves that women don't have souls – see p11

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THE one thing I learned in school was that I would never be a mathematician or scientist. I struggled with basic math, and fell apart completely when it came to subjects like algebra, geometry, trigonometry and chemistry. But instinct told me that, however bad my grasp was of, say, basic molecular science, there was no way I would ever be able to rearrange my atomic structure in order to pass unimpeded through walls. Not even with the aid of LSD, prodigious inhalations of marijuana, or copious quantities of booze. Sure, any or all of these might cause me to crash into solid objects – and I frequently did – but pass straight through them? *Never!*

No such doubt ever clouded the mind of Major General Albert Stubblebine III. Despite sounding like a character out of a Kurt Vonnegut novel, Stubblebine III is no fictional character. In fact, 20 years ago he was the US army's chief of intelligence, with 16,000 soldiers under his command. He controlled numerous covert counter-intelligence and spying units, scattered throughout the world. He would have been in charge of prisoner-of-war interrogations, too, except that, during this period, the war was cold, not hot.

Sitting behind his desk in Arlington, Virginia, in the summer of 1983, this top military man is staring at his wall, upon which hangs his numerous military awards. They detail a long and distinguished career.

Jon Ronson, author of the recently-published book, *The Men who Stare at Goats*, takes up the story:

He looks past his awards to the wall itself. There is something he feels he needs to do even though the thought of it frightens him. He thinks about the choice he has to make. He can stay in his office or he can go into the next office. He has made his decision. He is going into the next office. He stands up, moves out from behind his desk and begins to walk. He thinks to himself, what is the atom mostly made up of anyway? Space!

He quickens his pace.

What am I mostly made up of? Atoms!

He is almost at a jog now.

What is the wall mostly made up of, he thinks. Atoms! All I have to do is merge the spaces. The wall is an illusion.

Then General Stubblebine bangs his nose hard on the wall of his office.

He is confounded by his continual failure to walk through his wall. There is no doubt in his mind that the ability to pass through objects will one day be a common tool in the intelligence-gathering arsenal. And when that happens, well, is it too naive to believe it would herald the dawning of a world without war? Who would want to screw around with an army that could do that?

These powers are attainable, so the only question is, by whom? Who in the military is already geared towards this kind of thing? And then the answer comes to him. Special Forces! This is why, in the late summer of 1983, General Stubblebine flies down to Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE casts a sceptical eye on goat-staring and psychic warfare



Fort Bragg is vast – a town guarded by armed soldiers, with a mall, a cinema, restaurants, golf courses, and accommodation for 45,000 soldiers and their families. The general's meeting is in the Special Forces Command Centre. "I'm coming down here with an idea," he begins. The commanders nod.

"If you have a unit operating outside the protection of mainline units, what happens if somebody gets wounded?" He surveys the blank faces around the room. "Psychic healing!" he says. "If you use your mind to heal, you can probably come out with your whole team alive and intact."

The Special Forces commanders don't look particularly interested in psychic healing.

Well, what about psychic harm? He then suggests the possibility of staring at animals with such intensity that their hearts burst. The same technique could, of course, be used to kill the enemy.

General Stubblebine's trip to Fort Bragg was a disaster and he ended up taking early retirement in 1984. But, he told, Ronson, "I really thought they were great ideas. I still do."

What the general didn't know, as he proposed his clandestine animal heart-bursting programme, was that Special Forces were *already* conducting experiments on goats at Fort Bragg, at a top-secret location called Goat Lab. Goat Lab was originally created as a laboratory to provide surgical training for Special Forces soldiers. During this more conventional phase of the goats' lives, each one was taken through a soundproofed door into a bunker and shot in the leg using a bolt gun. Then the Special Forces trainees would rush the goat into an operating theatre, anaesthetise it, dress the wound and nurse it back to health. "Goat Lab," Ronson reveals "used to be called Dog Lab, but it turned out that nobody wanted to do all that to dogs, so they switched to goats. It was apparently determined within Special Forces that it was just about impossible to form an emotional bond with a goat."

From this followed experiments to see

whether goats could be stared to death. Ronson was told by a reliable source: "We had a master sergeant who could stop the heart of a goat ... just by willing the goat's heart to stop. He did it at least once." Ronson also learned of a failed experiment. A goat being stared at remained stubbornly resistant to efforts made to kill it, but one standing next to it keeled over. "I suppose", quipped Ronson, "one might call that collateral damage."

Assuming there is some truth in this tale, a logical explanation would surely be that a goat that had been de-bleated, shot, roughly mended then stared at in a hostile manner by an American sergeant would simply lose the will to live.

The idea of goat-staring was that of Lieutenant Colonel Jim Channon (a Vietnam war veteran now retired).

In 1979 he produced what he called the First Earth Battalion Operations Manual. First Earth Battalion trainees would "attain the power to pass through objects such as walls, bend metal with their minds, walk on fire, calculate faster than a computer, stop their own hearts with no ill effects, see into the future, be able to hear and see other people's thoughts".

He presented his great plan to his commanders at the officers' club in Fort Knox in the spring of 1979 – four-star generals and major generals and brigadier generals and colonels – and he had them captivated. Which demonstrates why the words "military intelligence" is the most over-worked oxymoron in the English language.

Channon's ideas – which sound like a distillation of Bruce Lee kung-fu extravaganzas, action hero comics, and the belief that T Lobsang Rampa and his third eye was for real – were put to the military top brass in the post-Vietnam "draw down" days. At that time the Pentagon wanted their soldiers to achieve more with less money. "Learning how to walk through walls and the like was an ambitious but inexpensive enterprise," says Ronson. "And so it was that Jim Channon's madcap vision, triggered by his post-combat depression, found its way into the highest levels of the US military."

Ronson also reveals that elements of Channon's programme have been put into practice against detainees at Guantanamo Bay and the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Ronson's research for *The Men who Stare at Goats* was made into a three-part Channel 4 series called *Crazy Rulers of the World* – and Channel 4, with exquisite timing, chose to launch it at the precise moment that the world learned, with a heavy heart, that the American people had tragically chosen a deranged Jesus junkie to do another four-year stint as the World's Policeman.

• *The Men Who Stare at Goats* is published in hardback by Pan MacMillan, 0330375474. Price £16.99.

Buttiglione embarks on a Christian crusade

ROCCO Buttiglione, the Italian who was forced to step down as a candidate for the European Commission after making controversial statements about homosexuality and the role of women, is about to embark on a Europe-wide campaign to promote Christian values in public life. Buttiglione will lead what he called a "battle for the freedom of Christians" against the "creeping totalitarianism" of those not in agreement with his beliefs.

Buttiglione is a strong Catholic and a friend of the Pope. He removed himself as a candidate for European Commissioner to avert a political crisis and is now in the less high-profile role of Italy's Europe Minister.

In an interview with the BBC, Buttiglione

welcomed the re-election of President Bush, and said he believed that the Christian conservatism that returned Bush to power would be exported to Europe "by the most powerful country in the world", and that the trend towards secularism in Europe would soon be reversed.

There's a rocky road ahead for Buttiglione. In the same week that he announced his crusade, the strongest signal yet that the Vatican is losing its grip on Europe came from Spain – once a bastion of Catholicism, now a nation increasingly moving towards secularism.

To the horror of the Vatican authorities, Spain's new Socialist government announced plans to liberalise divorce and abortion, reform religious education and introduce gay marriage.

In response, the Catholic Church is organising a mass rally in December in Madrid, and a nationwide letter-writing campaign to protest against the plans, which it fears will undermine the role of the church and family in Spanish society.

The move places the Catholic network at the centre of opposition to the six-month-old centre-left Government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

Moves to legalise gay marriage will make Spain the third European nation to recognise same-sex unions.

The Vatican has warned of a growing anti-Catholic bias in Spain and France and EU countries. Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Vatican's Council for Justice and Peace, complained that an anti-Catholic "inquisition" was happening in Europe.

The cardinal has dismissed claims that the church interfered in politics, especially social issues. "The church, which is accused of interfering, is really the one that defends the secular nature of the state, urging all to render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's," he told reporters in Rome.

The church's attendances, and its influence, have been on the wane in western Europe for decades and the Spanish reforms, coupled with moves to ban religious symbols in French schools, have increased anxiety among senior church members.

Police called in to investigate child beatings in mosques

AROUND 40 Muslim schoolchildren are to be interviewed over claims that they have been subjected to violence and punishment by elders at two West Midlands mosques.

The investigation by police and child welfare officers began in October when the mother of an eight-year-old boy complained to the police that a mullah [teacher] had slapped her son on the back and made him lie face down before putting his right foot on the boy's back, leaving him with chest pains for more than 24 hours. Under pressure, she has withdrawn the complaint.

However, as soon as word spread of the complaint, many other children in the area came forward to complain of abuse, including being hit, slapped and even beaten with a hockey stick.

As the number of allegations grew, officers from West Midlands police called in the NSPCC to help deal with child protection and other welfare issues. Police have been restrained in their investigations as elders and mullahs at mosques are among the most influential people in the community.

The culture forbids people doing anything that will bring "disgrace" on the community, and therefore people are reluctant to talk. A police spokesman said that people are often ostracised if they speak out critically about their religious leaders. He said "Some parents find it acceptable for the mullahs to chastise children physically, while others who don't are too fearful to speak out. Community leaders close ranks and are not slow to claim persecution or racism by the authorities. They have a great deal of control over children and adults, especially the men. But it is the duty of the police to act if there are allegations that children are being routinely beaten."

The majority of Muslim children attend the mosques for two hours every day after school to learn the Koran.

Last month a "morality teacher" at a mosque in Peterborough was jailed for four months for beating one of his pupils with a stick (See *Freethinker*, November). Mohammed Abdullah, 44, flew into a rage after finding a picture of a caveman in the boy's exercise book on which someone had pencilled in a penis.

Belgian woman senator receives death threat for 'maligning' Islam

RELIGIOUS and racial tensions are rising in Belgium after a woman politician of Moroccan origin, who has repeatedly criticised Islam, has had to be put under police protection after being threatened with "ritual killing".

The case of Mimount Bousakla, a Socialist senator in Antwerp, whose parents are Muslims from Morocco, has echoes of that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali refugee to the Netherlands and former Muslim who became an MP and is now in hiding after criticising the oppression of women in Islam.

The threats to Ms Bousakla, thought to be from Islamic radicals, are also likely to inflame tensions in Antwerp, the power base of the far-right anti-immigrant Vlaams Blok party, which attracts a quarter of the vote in the multicultural city.

Ms Bousakla, who does not discuss her religious beliefs publicly but is thought to have rejected Islam, had dismissed earlier death threats as inconsequential, but in the light of recent events in Holland she contacted the police for the first time.

A Socialist party official said: "She again received threats and now has round-the-clock police protection and has gone into hiding." However, she is still working as normal inside the Flemish parliament. Ms Bousakla criticised Muslim groups in Belgium for failing to condemn the murder of Theo van Gogh (see page 6). This is thought to have prompted the latest death threats.

She has also been critical of conservative and radical elements of Islam. In her book, *Couscous with Belgian Fries*, about the problems of being brought up between the Moroccan and Belgian cultures, she criticised forced marriages, the place of women in society and the role of men within the family. She has openly opposed fundamentalist influences in Belgian mosques. She has also attacked Dyab Abou Jahjah, the fiery Lebanese-born leader of the Arab European League, who has been dubbed the "Belgian Malcolm X". Ms Bousakla said last year: "He is just a guy from the Middle East who wants to fight the conflict they have there in the streets of Antwerp."



Christian Voice makes a joke of anti-gay violence

IN THE same week that a website was launched by an evangelical Christian organisation rubbing the police for their efforts to combat anti-gay crime, one man was murdered and another seriously injured in separate homophobic attacks in London.

The True Vision website was devised by Christian Voice and posted in October "to send up the latest police pro-homosexual initiative, True Vision, and David Blunkett's identification back in July of 'far-right evangelical Christians' as terrorists."

Described by Christian Voice's National Director Stephen Green as "a spoof", the site, www.true-vision.org.uk uses the same typeface as the real police site (www.report-it.org) and has a design of an eye with a rainbow iris just like the LGBT diversity eye on the police site. But there the similarity ends.

The site quotes from the police Hate Crime manual and lists police initiatives "which show how far the police have gone as a politically-correct agent of social revolution. The Queen has even given the head of the 'Gay Police Association' an MBE for 'services to diversity'", according to a press release issued by Green.

In it, Green says "I was astonished by the money that has gone in to the True Vision initiative, and amazed that the police had failed to register True Vision as a website name. I saw the opportunity to point out to the police how ridiculous their 'pro-gay' posturing looks, to show evangelicals in particular how anti-Christian the police and the Government have become, and to spread the good news of the Gospel. On top of that, I think ours is actually the more professional-looking site!

"I am asking Christians to pray for their local police and their Chief Constable. Ordinary officers cannot stand the way 'PC' now stands for 'politically correct' as well as for 'Police Constable', and Christian police officers are under pressure from all angles, from the racist 'canteen culture' to the censorship of God's truth. They aren't say a thing. But Christian Voice will not stop proclaiming the Gospel, even if the Bible itself is banned by Mr Blunkett as 'hate speech'."

The man who died after being attacked on the South Bank by the Thames in the first week of November was David Morley, 37. He suffered 40 bruises, a ruptured spleen, and fractured ribs. Ironically, Morley survived the horrific bombing of the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho in 1999, in which three people died. He was working in the Admiral Duncan when nail bomber, David Copeland, planted an explosive device in the gay bar.

In the same week that Morey was killed, a

25-year-old returning by bus from a night out with his partner was stabbed by a fellow passenger four times in a homophobic attack

A visitor from abroad visiting the capital, was knifed in the neck, shoulders, abdomen and leg. His injuries were not life-threatening, but officers are treating the attack as attempted murder.

Unhealthy obsession

A visit to Stephen Green's Christian Voice website exposes a distinctly unhealthy obsession with homosexuality. In one article he attacks the increasing liberality of Bournemouth, which he regards as "sex-obsessed". "Why else are there four sex-shops in Holdenhurst Road, and a further three in The Triangle, more than any other UK town outside London's Soho?"

He adds: "One of the sex-shops in The Triangle is the homosexual Clone Zone shop, recently licensed to sell R18 pornographic videos. Why is homosexuality now such a big part of Bournemouth life, to the extent that our preaching here today contravenes the Borough's 'sexual orientation policy'? The Borough Council seems to want to complete Bournemouth's transformation from family holiday resort to 'gay mecca'. Again, up in The Triangle, there are two homosexual clubs and a gay sauna is due to open."

In October this year Christian Voice co-ordi-

'Anti-Christian UK youth groups' identified on evangelical website

WHILE searching the internet for information on homophobic hate crime for a project he was recently engaged in, *Freethinker* reader Stuart Hartill stumbled across a US cable TV organisation called Christian Music TV.

Stuart said: "I suspect they are not as innocent as they sound. They seem to be looking for a UK youth audience. They recently posted a guide to 'anti-Christian youth groups' in the UK, which seems to be an open invitation for bigots to harass them."

Keen to discover what these groups could possibly be, the *Freethinker* entered www.christianmusic.tv, and discovered, under the heading "Anti-Christian groups poisoning the worlds children" (sic), a long list of gay and lesbian helplines.

"If you are located in the UK we encourage (sic) you – NOT to support THESE ANTI-CHRISTIAN YOUTH groups, trumpeted the creators of this ridiculous web page, who are not only illiterate but are so stupid and filled with paranoia that they are incapable of distinguishing helplines from genuine anti-Christian youth groups, which exist only in the wastelands of their imagination.

nated a day of preaching in Bournemouth, in honour of the late Harry Hammond. Hammond, according to Christian Voice, "was beaten up by homosexuals for preaching the Gospel in 2001, and was then arrested by the police, charged and convicted of a public order offence. He appealed, but sadly died in 2002. His executors are continuing to appeal on his behalf."

"Why should a British seaside town be a no-go area for the Gospel? Why should Christian preachers be intimidated by Bournemouth's large homosexual population which objects to hearing about its sin and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Why should the police bring charges against an elderly preacher who was himself assaulted? Just earlier this month, a Christian minister, Mr David Carson, was attacked as he witnessed at the London 'Gay Pride' homosexual march.

"Harry Hammond Day will be a public demonstration that Christians will not be scared off any part of the United Kingdom by evil men. It is a day to show that we are not afraid to stand up and be counted for the name of Christ. But above all it is an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. We want sinners in Bournemouth to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, both in public declaration and in one-to-one encounters, of which there could be many. Homosexuals in particular must know that they do not have to 'stay gay', and that in Jesus there is an escape route from the lifestyle which is destroying them. We cannot stand by and wave them goodbye as they sail away into hell."

Editor's note: Christian Voice's attempt at portraying street preachers as innocent victims is touching, but is as far from the truth as it's possible to get.

I was in Bournemouth four years ago during the town's annual Gay Pride event, and heard a group of street preachers belabouring inflammatory anti-gay remarks at people gathered for the event.

The preachers, who clearly believed they had a divine right to malign people they dislike, and incite violence against them, were clearly inviting retaliation. But, to the credit of those attending the celebration, no-one responded to the provocation, apart from one incensed lesbian who doused a preacher with a can of lager – a woeful waste of beer, I thought. Everyone else was content to treat the evangelists for what they were: a pathetic rag-tag of half-witted god-spotters, with far too much time on their hands.

Incidentally, Christian Voice seriously needs to rethink its website logo, an amateurishly drawn, upward curving horn superimposed on a map of the British Isles. A phallic symbol of this sort is hardly appropriate for such a sex-hating organisation.

Christian Institute accused of wasting charity funds

THE right-wing Christian Institute is under increasing pressure after it spent £20,000 of its charitable money on a full-page advertisement in *The Times* last month attacking the Civil Partnership Bill, which is currently being considered by Parliament.

The advert supported a Conservative amendment to the Civil Partnership Bill that was defeated in the Commons on Tuesday by a ratio of 7:1. It claimed that the majority of people support extending the Civil Partnership Bill to siblings and carers. However, the amendment is widely seen by gay rights groups as a "wrecking" tactic, while legal groups have claimed it would make the Bill unworkable.

The advert also claimed that 84 percent of people backed the amendment for "ordinary families", despite figures in *The Times* suggesting that the overwhelming majority of the general public backed the Bill in its original form. In a parliamentary debate last month, the advert was discussed, and MPs noted that it could be a breach of the Institute's remit of the "promotion and furtherance of Christianity".

Alistair Carmichael, Lib Dem MP, said that he was stunned by the advert from the Institute,

I lived with my sister for 15 years. When she died I had to sell our home to pay the inheritance tax.

Why should I have less house-sharing rights than a gay couple?

HouseSellersPlc
SOLD
www.sellyourhouse.co.uk

84% of people think two sisters who have lived together for 12 years or more should get the same house-sharing rights as homosexual couples.

The Civil Partnership Bill should be fairer to ordinary families

www.christian.or

which could well go against Charity Commission regulations.

He told the House of Commons said that the Christian Institute has acted well outside its remit in terms of charitable purposes, adding that the "government should consider that through the appropriate body".

Standing firm against calls of "free speech", Carmichael added that the advert could well go against the guidelines given to charities, which they adhere to in order to receive tax benefits. His stance was supported by Conservative MP John Bercow, who suggested the funds would have been better used to help solve other more religious-based problems.

"Given that the approximate £20,000 cost of that full-page advertisement on page 31 of *The Times* by the Christian Institute would have sufficed to feed approximately 5,000 people in Sudan for up to a month, does [Mr Carmichael] share my astonishment that a supposedly charitable institution should choose to deploy its resources in that way?" he told the Commons.

Australia's religious hatred case takes a new turn

AUSTRALIA'S farcical religious hatred case, instigated by a group of Muslims who claim to have been maligned by an evangelical Christian organisation, has taken an hilarious new turn.

A separate complaint has now been made against one of the Muslims involved in this, Victoria's first religious hatred case. Bilal Cleland, human rights co-ordinator for the Islamic Council of Victoria, is said to have linked the right-wing Christian Family First party with "bigots" and "neo-Nazis", and made comments about "fundamentalist Taliban-style Christianity".

The original case began at the beginning of the year when Pastor Danny Nalliah, along with Catch the Fire Ministries and Daniel Scot, were accused by the Islamic Council of vilifying Muslims at a seminar in 2002. Judge Michael Higgins has reserved his judgement.

Now Roger Birch, a Canberra Christian, has lodged a complaint with the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission against Mr Cleland. The complaint, under the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act, says that to equate Christians with the Taliban "is not only factually inaccurate, it is also offensive and divisive". It says that linking Christianity with such terms as "bigot" and "neo-Nazis" is designed to stir up religious hatred and potentially violence. Mr Birch said the remarks were the height of hypocrisy when the council was suing Christian pastors.

"I'm testing the integrity of the legislation -

I want to see how even-handed the Equal Opportunity Commission is," Mr Birch said.

Mr Cleland claims the complaint is mischievous. But Islamic Council president Yasser Soliman said: "If he's been quoted accurately, and there are legitimate grounds for the complaint, I'd be happy and he (Mr Cleland) would be happy to say sorry to fix up any damage or any hurt. That's what the legislation allows ..."

Mr Cleland gave Melbourne newspaper *The Age* a copy of his speech. In it, he said that conservatives were creating "stooge parties like the Family First with its fundamentalist Taliban-style Christianity" to win Senate seats. It said that five pages of Pastor Nalliah's 13-page election manifesto denigrated Islam and Muslims. "Islamophobia, the new racism used by bigots and neo-Nazis ... is part of this Family First candidate's world view."

Meanwhile, Family First chairman Peter Harris wants schools to teach the biblical creation story alongside evolutionary theory.

While his fledgling political party - arising out of the Assemblies of God Church - had no formal policy on school curriculums, Mr Harris said his personal view was that children should be taught both perspectives.

"If you teach only half the story, people haven't got all the information to make a judgement about what they believe," he told *The Age* last month. "It's giving students half the picture, and, in relation to creationism, that could be the case."

There was diverse support for Mr Harris's

call for a "balanced approach" to teaching the origins of life.

Australian National University anthropologist Alan Thorne said there was nothing wrong with putting both views to students.

"A balanced view is better than an extreme view in education," he said. "From a scientific perspective, it would be very silly indeed to claim God went around poking fossils into rocks, (but) the two can be quite compatible. There's no reasons why they can't address different aspects of our development."

Labour's federal education spokeswoman, Jenny Macklin, offered tacit support. "All young people should have an understanding of a range of religious beliefs," she said.

But acting Australian Education Union Victorian president [the acting president of the AEU's Victorian branch] Ann Taylor warned that schools should distinguish carefully between established scientific fact and philosophical or religious belief. "We should teach them facts, encourage them to inquire, and teach them values against which they make up their minds," she said.

A Bahraini woman disguised herself as a bearded Muslim sheikh in a failed bid to lead Friday prayers, something forbidden by Islamic law. Sheikh Adnan al-Qattan, of al-Fatch Grand Mosque, said the 40-year-old woman, identified only as Fatima, donned a fake beard and robe and "raced to the stand before I called guard to stop her".

What on earth is happening

IT began as a series of low-grade verbal skirmishes between disaffected Muslim extremists on the one hand and Holland's freewheeling, freethinking, ultra-tolerant indigenous population on the other. Then the first blood was drawn. On May 6, 2002, just nine days before a general election, the flamboyant, anti-immigration politician, Pim Fortuyn, was assassinated.

The man who shot and killed Fortuyn was Dutch animal-rights activist Volkert van der Graaf, who later claimed he shot the anti-immigration campaigner to protect "the weaker elements in society".

Though van der Graaf was not a Muslim, Fortuyn's assassination resulted in an escalation of hostilities between the two cultures, with Muslims becoming more aggressive in their denigration of what they regarded as Dutch decadence, and the Dutch complaining that their country was being over-run with intolerant, Islamic zealots bent on destroying their secular values. (The Netherlands has a Muslim population of one million.)

Among those who were most vocal in suggesting that Holland's liberal immigration policies had resulted in the incubation of a dangerous fifth-column were Somalian-born politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the well-known film-maker and writer Theo van Gogh, whose often inflammatory views were aired in newspaper columns and on his website, now shut, called *De Gezonde Roker* (The Healthy Smoker).

Van Gogh was born in The Hague. His great-grandfather was art dealer Theo van Gogh, brother of Vincent van Gogh. He directed his first film, *Luger*, in 1981. He received a Gouden Kalf ("Golden Calf", the Dutch equivalent of the Oscar) for his movie, *Blind Date*.

His last book (in 2003) was *Allah weet het beter* ("Allah Knows Best") in which he – in a cynical, mocking tone – aired his views on Islam. He was a well-known critic of the religion, especially after the September 11, 2001

terrorist attacks. He supported the nomination of Hirsi Ali for the Dutch parliament. This year she became a Liberal Party (VVD) MP.

Together with Hirsi Ali, van Gogh created *Submission* – a short film about violence against women in Islamic societies, which focused especially on female circumcision. It showed four abused women, naked under see-through dresses, with koranic verses in Arabic, unfavourable to women, painted on their bodies. After the movie was released, both van Gogh and Hirsi Ali received death threats. Van Gogh did not take these very seriously and refused any protection.

But within weeks of the film's broadcast, van Gogh was lying butchered in an Amsterdam street, knifed, shot and partially-decapitated. He was murdered in the early morning of November 2, 2004. He was shot seven times, and died instantly. His throat was cut, and he was then stabbed in the chest. Two knives were left in his body, one securing a five-page letter to the corpse.

Ironically, until his death, Van Gogh was working on a film about the assassination of Pim Fortuyn.

Van Gogh's horrific killing sent the country into a state of shock and revulsion. And, when it was learned *what* the killer had written in the letter pinned to his body, the mood against



Photo: De Telegraaf

Van Gogh lies slain in an Amsterdam Street

Muslims turned distinctly ugly. Attacks on more than 20 Islamic sites in the Netherlands, including a mosque which was gutted by fire, occurred in the days following the ritual killing.

The Dutch government, despite misgivings voiced by the public prosecutor's office, decided to publish the contents of the letter in full, saying it was "exceptionally disturbing", containing as it did "unmistakably" echoes of the philosophy of violent Jihad.

The letter begins by addressing Hirsi Ali in the name of "Allah the merciful" and says "since you took your place in the political arena in the Netherlands you have been busy constantly terrorising Muslims and Islam by your statements. You are not the first and you shall also not be the last of those who join the crusade against Islam".

The letter accused the MP of not only turning her back on the truth but also aligning herself with the forces of evil.

The letter goes on to accuse Hirsi Ali of serving her "Jewish masters" and being part of a government that supports a State whose ideology advocates genocide.

The punchline appears to be: "Desire death if you are really convinced of your beliefs".

The letter ends with chilling convictions of its own, by paraphrasing Prophet



Pim Fortuyn



Van der Graaf

Pim Fortuyn is voted 'the greatest ever Dutch person'

A day after assassinated Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn was named in a national poll as "the greatest ever Dutch person", his killer was named as the worst of all time.

Volkert van der Graaf is serving an 18-year prison sentence for the crime.

In the poll, conducted last month, Fortuyn attracted 115,000 votes from the Dutch public - 4,000 more than William of Orange (1533-1584), who is known as the "father of the Dutch fatherland".

Coming to Holland?

Mohammed's warning to a foe:

I know for sure that you, O America, are going to meet with disaster.

I know for sure that you, O Europe, are going to meet with disaster.

I know for sure that you, O Netherlands, are going to meet with disaster.

I know for sure that you, O Hirshi Ali, are going to meet with disaster.

I know for sure that you, O non-believer fundamentalist, are going to meet with disaster.

Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner and Johan Remkes of the Interior Ministry said the government had decided to publish the letter because of the "societal implications of the murder and the contents of the document".

"But what are we supposed to make of this letter?" asks Cormac Mac Ruairi in an article published in the on-line magazine *Expatica*.

He asserts: "The rambling letter is abusing Islam to justify the unjustifiable, but does the author speak for himself alone or for a larger group of people? Are we to assume the author is speaking on behalf of all Muslims who were stung by Hirsi Ali's criticism of their faith and by Van Gogh who likened Muslims to "goat fuckers".

"Although the investigation into the brutal murder is far from over, the government is tending towards the notion that the author of the letter was speaking for a group.

"The move seems to have been the opening salvo in the Dutch government's 'War on Terror' in the Netherlands, but it has yet to clearly identify who the enemy is, and has instead broadly identified it as Islamic extremism. Can such a war ever be won?"

The man now awaiting trial for the murder is



Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali pictured during a debate a few days before his murder

Mohammed Bouyeri, a 26-year-old who holds dual-nationality – Dutch and Moroccan. He was apprehended by the police after being shot in the leg. Bouyeri is a Muslim extremist with alleged terrorist ties. He is also charged with attempted murder of a police officer and a bystander; illegal possession of a firearm; and conspiring to murder others, including Hirsi Ali. At the time of his arrest Bouyeri had a will in his pocket saying he was prepared to die for the Islamic jihad, or holy war.

At an early age he was known to the police as a member of a group of Moroccan "problem-jongeren" (problem youth). After he began living his life by strict Islamic rules he could perform fewer and fewer tasks. He refused, for instance, to serve alcohol, and did not want to be present at activities where women and men were both present. His radicalisation occurred in 2003, when he grew a beard and began to wear a djellaba. He visited the El Tawheed mosque, identified as a hotbed of radicalism from which anti-gay and anti-semitic literature was freely distributed, and he came in contact with other radical Muslims.

Immediately after van Gogh's murder, 13 young Muslims were arrested on terrorism charges. They are members of a radical Islamic group with international links and a Syrian-born spiritual leader.

Dutch intelligence named the group as the Hofstad Network, and a Justice Ministry official said 43-year-old Syrian Redouan al-Issar, its leader, had disappeared without a trace.

Dutch Interior Minister Johan Remkes, who oversees the secret service, told parliament last month that the Hofstad Network comprised mostly young Dutch Muslims of North African descent; that it had links to networks in Spain and Belgium; that several members of the group had travelled to Pakistan for training; and that its members had been under the influence of al-Issar for many years.

"The number of people and networks in the Netherlands that thinks and acts in terms of actual violence is, in our opinion, limited," he said. But the feeding ground from which they spring, is broader ... it's better to think in terms of thousands than hundreds," he said.

Dick Leurlijk, an expert on Islamic fundamentalism at the Netherlands Institute of Foreign Relations, said he had been afraid that there would be an attack like the one that killed Van Gogh.

"We cannot exclude these things happening in the Netherlands," he said. "We are certainly a target in this Jihad."

Dutch debate the future of their blasphemy law

A SPLIT over whether the Netherlands' blasphemy law should be scrapped or strengthened has emerged among the Dutch government's coalition partners.

The small liberal D66 party has risked the wrath of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's Christian Democrats (CDA) by tabling a motion to re-evaluate the prohibition on blasphemy. The motion was scheduled for debate as the *Freethinker* was going to press.

The Netherlands is governed by a coalition made up of the CDA, D66 and Liberal Party (VVD).

Ministers of all three parties say that abolishing the blasphemy law now would send the wrong signals. But D66 and VVD MPs seem set to push the motion through.

Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner, a member of the CDA, sparked the debate when he suggested last month that the law should be strengthened.

The question of how far one can go to insult another's religious beliefs in the Netherlands has been a big issue in the weeks following Theo van Gogh's murder.

Politicians rallied to the cause of freedom of speech after the assassination, and government ministers emphasised that citizens should be allowed to speak freely, even when attacking strongly-held beliefs.

Responding to Donner's attempts to beef up the law, D66 parliamentarian Louisewies van der Laan has tabled a motion in the Lower House of Parliament, or Tweede Kamer, asking for the law to be reformed.

"The intention is to scrap it. But because scrapping isn't a legal term, my motion calls for the law to be reformed," she said.

She argued that it was wrong that articles 147 and 147a of the criminal law outlawed blasphemy but did not ban insulting the ideas and principles of non-believers.

The blasphemy law has rarely been used in Holland since it was introduced in 1932 by the present justice minister's grandfather, Jan Donner, Holland's Right-wing justice minister in 1932, to silence a communist newspaper which had suggested banning Christmas.

The law has not been invoked since 1968, when a Dutch novelist, Gerard Kornells van het Reve, was prosecuted for depicting God as a randy donkey. He was acquitted by Holland's top court on the grounds that his intent was not "scornful".

Blasphemy, which carries a three-month prison sentence in the Netherlands, covers insults against God but is ambiguous about saints and religious figures.

There are a growing number of converts to Eastern religions in this country, especially among the young. Although largely peace-loving in a "New-Age" kind of way, and I have to say I've not yet met a nasty Buddhist, it is nevertheless sad to see so many young people giving up not only their rationality and capacity for independent thought but, in some cases, their money and possessions as well.

Meanwhile, in traditional Hindu societies the potential for fundamentalist bigotry is just as great as in any religion. Witness the violent conflict between Hindus and Muslims, or Hindus and Sikhs in recent years in India.

Yet compared with the critical analyses of Christianity and Islam, there is precious little on the religions of the East. (There are, however, hundreds of explanatory and sympathetic books and articles.)

For the moment, I will stay with Hinduism. It is impossible to do justice to so varied and complex a religion in a short article, and so I'll confine myself to a browse through some of their universally revered scriptures, in particular the Upanishads, including the most famous one, the Bhagavad Gita. Hinduism has a huge range of sacred texts known as the Vedas or the Vedic scriptures. The Upanishads are believed by Hindus to be the final and climactic part of the Vedic revelation. All the Vedas are considered to be not of human origin - ie to have divine authorship. They date from approximately 700 BCE, with the most recent one possibly as late as the second century CE. (The Upanishads are also referred to as the Vedanta which means "end of the Vedas").

As with most holy books, the Hindu ones are packed with contradictions and absurdities, with a small sprinkling of cruel punishments and nastiness. There are some words of wisdom too, but you have to wade through much nonsense in order to find them.

The Bhagavad Gita (BG) consists of a dialogue between Krishna, the supreme deity in human form, and Arjuna, a member of the warrior class, just before a big battle is about to begin. Arjuna is refusing to fight because he does not want to kill the



Krishna, Hinduism's supreme deity

whom are his kin. Krishna (God) persuades Arjuna that it is his duty to fight, but some of the reasons he gives are strangely human: "...people will recount your limitless disgrace, and disgrace is worse than death for the man who has once been honoured." (2.35) And: "The great warriors will suppose that you withdrew from the battle out of fear. And you

Hinduism: a maze of m

will fade from their high regard into insignificance." (2.35) Yet elsewhere Krishna says that we should regard honour and dishonour as the same. (12.18-19) Another reason given is that "...there is nothing better for a warrior than a duty-bound war. It is a door to heaven opened fortuitously" (2.32) - an invitation to the zealous, if ever there was one, not unlike the promise of paradise for the Muslim who dies during holy jihad. If only Krishna had said that it is occasionally necessary to fight in order to defeat evil. But who are we to improve on the words of God?

There is a great deal of silly superstition in the Upanishads. In the BG, for example, we are told that we should sacrifice a cow to nourish the gods: "You should nourish the gods with this so that the gods may nourish you: nourishing each other you shall achieve the highest good." (3.11) And a few lines later we are told that sacrifice is necessary to bring rain (3.14).

The voodoo-like practices described in detail throughout the Upanishads are too numerous to mention, but here's a sample from the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (BU), just for a laugh: "If someone desires to achieve greatness, then in the northward passage of the sun, on a lucky day of the waxing fortnight, he takes an *upasad* vow lasting twelve days. Then he puts together all the herbs in a ...dish made of pipal wood. He sweeps up and smears around, builds a fire...prepares the clarified butter...then, under a masculine constellation he prepares the stirred mixture and makes an offering." There follow two whole pages of mumbo-jumbo invoking a long list of personified parts of the body and parts of the universe (Br.U VI.3).

And if any one is short of a new year's resolution, here are two from the Chandogya Upanishad (CU): "One should not sip water or spit facing a fire: that should be the vow" (II.12.2), and "One should not reject any women: that should be the vow". (II.13.2)

The notorious caste system, with the brahmins at the top and serfs and labourers at the bottom, also finds sanction in the BG. "The four estates were created by me (i.e. Krishna)I alone am the one who did this". (4.13) Membership of a particular estate or caste accords with natural law, and anyone who causes an "intermingling of the four estates" will certainly find a place in hell. (1.41-44) The brahmins have, as part of their nature, "serenity, self-restraint, purity, patience, honesty, knowledge, religious faith etc.", and although the BG does not refer specifically to the "unclean" or "untouchables", the implications are clear.

The bizarre account of the creation of the universe easily matches the absurdity of the

biblical version: "In the beginning there was nothing here: this was covered by Death, by Hunger, for Hunger is Death. Death made up his mind: 'If only I could have a self (atman)!' Shining, he moved about, and as he shone, the waters were born of him....The foam of the waters was compacted together. It became the earth...as he toiled and grew hot, his brightness, his essence, became fire. He divided himself into three, one third being the sun and one third being the air..." and so on.(BU I.2.1-7) Death next eats his own offspring, then turns himself into a horse, then sacrifices it to *himself* etc, etc. This unadulterated nonsense goes on for pages. Please read the original, just for entertainment. I cannot do it justice here.

As with most holy books, the Hindu ones are packed with contradictions and absurdities, with a small sprinkling of cruel punishments and nastiness. There are some words of wisdom too, but you have to wade through much nonsense in order to find them, says DAVID SIMMONDS

The account of the origin of the sexes in chapter 4 of Bk I is also worth a read.

The ancient culture in Northern India may have been way ahead of its time in many ways (language and writing for example), and of course we should not be surprised at their ignorance about the size and nature of the universe, anatomical function, the elements etc, given the historical period. But these texts are supposed to have divine authorship. Didn't God know that there is more to the elements than earth, fire, water, air and ether? The ancient Greeks were similarly misinformed by their gods.

The scriptural view of women is contradictory, though overwhelmingly from a male perspective. The great reverence expressed for women, for example, is contradicted by the following extract: "...having taken off her...clothes, the man should approach and invite her. If she does not give him his desire, he should bribe her. If she still does not give him his desire, he should strike her with a stick or with his hand, saying, 'With my potency, my glory, I take away your glory!' and she becomes inglorious." (BU. VI.4.6-7)

I could not find any specific reference to

Mythology and mysticism

support the practice of the virtuous woman (sati or "suttee") throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre – quite common in Northern India until well into the 19th century, mainly among the brahmins. (A recent case occurred in 1987.) However, indirect scriptural support for the practice can be found in references to the lower status of women, the beliefs about the afterlife, and the importance of sacrifice.

Here's an interesting method of birth control: "If (a man) desires a woman, wishing 'may she not become pregnant', then he should place his sex-organ in her, join mouth with mouth, breath out into her, and breath in, saying, 'with my potency, my seed, I take the seed from you', and she becomes without seed." (BU. VI.4.10). (But please go easy on the garlic if you want to try this method.) If, however, he wishes her to become pregnant (never mind what she wants), the ritual varies slightly, but I won't bore you with it here! In the next few paragraphs there is also a wonderful method of putting a curse on your wife's lover, to make him impotent. There are also, depending on your wishes, four elaborate rituals and incantations for ensuring the complexion, fame or longevity of your son, and another, I was relieved to see, to ensure that you have a "learned daughter...[who will]...live a full span." (VI.4.14-18) And I thought "designer babies" were a modern invention! There are many references to the importance of having sons.

A central belief is that your actions in this life (your karma) affect your fortunes in the next, although the concept is interpreted in different ways by modern Hindus. Here are a couple of examples from the sacred texts: "The lowest of men [who are] hating, vicious and polluted; in the realms of rebirth I (Krishna) hurl them incessantly into truly demonic wombs" (BG 16.19) or into the "wombs of the doltish." (BG 14.15). In another revered Upanishad those who "are of foul conduct will quickly attain...a dog's womb, a pig's womb, or a Candala womb." (Chandogya Upanishad (CU) V.10.7). (Candala = lowest caste, ie "untouchable".) If I were a member of a low caste I would be very offended at this particular aspect of the holy texts.

Unlike the Koran, the Upanishads do not often spell out particular punishments here on earth for those who transgress. Thieves should watch out, however: "Good lad, suppose they bring a man with his hands bound, saying, 'He has stolen! He has committed a theft! Heat up an axe for him.' If he is the culprit he makes himself false ... when he seizes the heated axe he is burnt, and then he is executed. But if he is not the culprit he makes himself true ...

when he seizes the heated axe he is not burnt, and then is set free." This method of trial is about as fair as the witches' trial by drowning.

In the Upanishads, and especially the BG, there are frequent references to the importance of asceticism, self-denial, and the eschewing of all desire and attachment (including to children and family), if one wants to advance spiritually. He "should always [be]...remaining solitary...desireless and possessionless." (BG 6.10) Thus "the endless supreme secret...[is]...never [revealed to] the one who is all ablaze, pierced by passion and darkness, attached to children, wife and family." (Maitri U. VI.28). Indeed, the holy man sometimes comes over as so boring, almost callous, that he seems closer to a plank of wood than a human. I could find no reference to the importance of good relationships between parents and children for the sake of healthy emotional development. (Needless to say, the Hindus I have met make very good parents! Fortunately, as with most Christians, Muslims, etc, I think they have read their scriptures very selectively.)

I once went to a Hindu ceremony and was puzzled by the chanting of the syllable OM. It is in fact a sacred sound, rich in symbolism and with remarkable properties: "When one receives a *rc* verse, one sounds OM...it is immortal, fearless. By entering it the gods become immortal, fearless. The one who, knowing this, reverberates the syllable [and] enters into the syllable, the sound, the immortal, the fearless...he becomes immortal as the gods are immortal." (CU I.4.4-5) So now we

know. Oh, and "the sun moves with the sound of OM" (I.5.1) which is something I couldn't possibly disprove.

Sometimes the outpourings give the distinct impression of an intoxicated mind – perhaps high on "soma" (a sacred hallucinogenic drink pressed from plants, popular at the time). At times they become delirious ramblings reminiscent of some of the bizarre images in the Revelation of the New Testament. (see for example Taittiriya U. III.10.5 and Kausitaki U. II.9).

Where does all this leave the poor non-believer like me? I'll probably come back as a reptile or a mosquito in my next life, but in this life my fate, though bleak, is uncertain: "The faithless and ignorant man, whose nature it is to doubt, perishes. Not this world, nor the one beyond, nor happiness exists for the doubter." (BG 4.40)

Space is running out – and I never even got to the talking dogs (CU I.12.2) or the wise fig tree (BG 15.1), or the stump which sprouts when you talk to it (CU V.2.3). So that's where Prince Charles gets it!

Critics may accuse me of taking quotes out of context, of misinterpreting them, of taking the "nonsense" too literally and therefore missing the rich symbolism. I *must* have missed something, with my Western bias. I can only urge the interested reader to refer to the passages in question. For my part I found that the surrounding passages were only more of the same, and shed little further light on the extracts.

Refs: *The Upanishads* (translated & ed. by Valerie Roebuck) London, Penguin Classics, 2003, and *The Bhagavad Gita* (translated by W.J. Johnson) Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Top Hindu cleric on murder charge

A PROMINENT Hindu religious leader in India was arrested last month on connection with the killing of a temple official. Jayendra Saraswathi was arrested near the southern city of Hyderabad and charged with killing a man who worked at the 2,500-year-old temple he heads.

The arrest caused a sensation as Mr Saraswathi, 71, is a revered figure among Hindus in southern India. The Hindu leader appeared in court in the "holy" town of Kanchipuram in neighbouring Tamil Nadu state and was jailed for 15 days while police carried out an investigation.

The court rejected an appeal for Mr Saraswathi to be placed under house arrest.

The dead man was a former accountant who was killed inside the ancient Hindu temple in Kanchipuram on 3 September.

Mr Saraswathi has been charged with murder and criminal conspiracy, but his lawyer described the charges as baseless.

The BBC's Sampath Kumar in Madras reported that the dead former employee, Sankararaman, was a strong critic of the religious leader. He had gone to the courts to oppose a planned visit to China by Mr Saraswathi, saying it was against the traditions of the temple.

Mr Saraswathi is an influential head of a sect of India's Hindu Brahmin community and the leader of the Kanchi Shankara Mutt, a religious establishment.

The hardline Hindu group, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, demanded Mr Saraswathi's release and threatened nationwide protests. "This is politics of revenge to muffle the voice of Hindus in India," said general secretary Praveen Togadia. With the arrest of the great pontiff the authorities have declared open war on the Hindu religion.

Mr Saraswathi is one of Hinduism's holiest priests and was close to India's former BJP-led government in Delhi. Nepal's royal family count among Mr Saraswathi's followers and the leader is a frequent visitor to the Himalayan kingdom.

eBay reinstates cheesy Virgin Mary

A 10-year-old grilled cheese toastie a Florida woman says bears the image of the Virgin Mary has sold on eBay, the internet auction house, for \$28,000.

Owner of the only slightly-nibbled vintage snack, Diana Duyser, 52, insists the "miraculously" mould-free snack was not a scam, but the widespread media attention given to the cheesy listing brought on bids and other offerings that smelled a little off.

When Duyser first listed the item last month, it was bid up to \$22,000. Then eBay pulled the plug on the auction, saying it did not allow jokes like this on their site.

But the item was reinstated with a photo of the grilled cheese on bread bearing what appears to be the image of a woman's face. Duyser, describing the item, said: "I made this sandwich ten years ago. When I took a bite out of it, I saw a face looking up at me; it was Virgin Mary starring (sic) back at me. I was in total shock; I would like to point out there is no mold or disintegration."

"I would like all people to know that this is the Virgin Mary Mother of God", she said, but failed to explain how she she could be certain of the fact.

Late last month, the eBay page for the sandwich - item 5535890757 - showed a frivolous bid of \$99,999,999.00, but when the *Freethinker* checked the auction two days before bidding was to end, the top bid had dropped back to a more reasonable \$7,600.00.

The screenshot shows the eBay interface for an auction. At the top, there are navigation links: home, pay, register, sign out, services, site map. Below that are buttons for Buy, Sell, My eBay, Community, and Help. The auction title is "Virgin Mary In Grilled Cheese NOT A HOAX ! LOOK & SEE !". The current bid is US \$7,600.00. The time left is 2 days 14 hours. The seller is dltdesigns2002, with a feedback score of 47. The item is listed in the category "Everything Else > Metaphysical > Psychic, Paranormal".

Her auction also gave rise to listings such as the "Virgin Mary condom" (starting price \$2.69), the "cheese sandwich sans Virgin Mary - a sin-free sandwich" (\$0.01) and the "Elvis - NOT Virgin Mary - better grilled cheese sandwich" (\$13.00).

Duyser insists her offering has miracle qualities. She said the snack, preserved in a plastic box, has brought her "blessings."

"I have won \$70,000 on different occasions at the casino nearby my house; I can show the receipts to the high bidder," she said.

"The last time this was listed, there were over 80,000 viewers," her message says, adding that the auction had attracted many e-

mails, some of them "downright cruel".

eBay spokesman Hani Durzy admitted the item was a little unusual. "In the grand scheme of things, it's probably one of the more unusual things up on the site right now," he said.

Terry Sanderson of the National Secular Society, who has closely studied photographs of the "holy toastie", said: "I'd say the likeness on the sarny is more akin to Betty Boop than the holy virgin, but I may be wrong. Both are cartoon characters, aren't they?"

Freethinker editor Barry Duke has also studied the image and is convinced that it is that of Maisie Trollette, a well-known Brighton drag artist.

Freethinker caption competition

OUR November caption contest has proved popular, and we have decided to extend the entry date to January 15, 2004 to give overseas readers who receive their *Freethinker* later than UK subscribers, a chance to enter the competition.

The photo shows two Christians in a portable baptism font, the latest thing to come out of the United States. But what can these be saying or thinking as they stand immersed in water for the product shot?

The top prize is 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 January 15, 2004.



Landover Baptists prove that Americans cannot distinguish parody from reality

Apart from being a tad more literate than most of his colleagues, there is very little to separate Baptist pastor Rev Harry Hardwick from such better-known, bigoted American preachers as Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson.

Here, for example, is his take on veganism, contained in an excerpt from a recent sermon posted on the internet.

"One needn't look any further than Christ's words to see that so-called 'vegans' are nothing more than sorcerers and demons, mocking God while spitting on His Son's final supper. They know God loves meat and has ordered us to eat as much of it as we can. So they poke fun at the Lord with slogans like 'Meat is murder' and by insisting their members abstain from consuming anything that comes from an animal. Jesus warned us about these diabolical cretins. Turn your Bibles to First Timothy, chapter 4, verses 1 through 3 and recite along with me:

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

"I don't know how Jesus could have warned us any more directly about these devils. They try to hide behind phrases like 'animal lover' and 'animal rights advocate'. That is devil-speak if I ever heard it! The Bible makes clear that God created animals for one purpose only – our nutritional and intestinal satisfaction. Just as God created woman solely to be the servant of man, meaning women are to obey their husbands at all times, keep their mouths shut in church and never teach (1 Timothy 2:11-15; Ephesians 5:22-24), so, too, God created animals so we would have something to fill our stomachs with after a hard day's work. God told us long before He used Mary to incubate His son: 'Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you' (Genesis 9:3). Every moving thing – not just the ugly ones, not just the dumb ones, like chickens and fish. Every living thing. The most beautiful fawn, the most prized heifer, the most graceful swan,

the cutest bunny rabbit. According to God, they're all nothing more than sausage fodder!

"When the apostle, Peter, woke up hungry, what did God give him to eat? Not a pansy platter of carrot sticks, lettuce leaves and orange slices. He gave him every type of four-footed beast on the earth and every fowl of the air, telling him, 'Rise, Peter, kill, and eat' (Acts 10:9-13).

JOHN McINTYRE takes a look at an hilarious 'Baptist' website, 'where the worthwhile worship and the unsaved are unwelcome'

"When Cain and Abel offered gifts to the Lord, Abel gave the Lord the fat he cut off the hides of his flock whereas Cain gave the Lord a fruit and vegetable tray. The Lord loved Abel's offering of something that would stick to His holy ribs and despised Cain's lesser offering of mere produce. Cain became jealous and murdered the brother with the superior gift-giving eye (Genesis 4:3-8). This was the first, but by no means the last, human murder committed by these vegans, aka witches, aka wiccans.

"But add another aka to that list – homos. You see, veganism offers a place of solace for sodomites every bit as attractive as a Catholic confessional. Fruits and vegetables are what housewives and sissies on Weight Watchers eat, whereas meat, cheese and butter are what real men eat. If every meal you eat doesn't contain something that lives in, or comes out of something that lives in, a barn, you aren't a real man. Jesus warned us that the men who would one day call themselves 'vegans' are nothing more than nancy-boys looking for refuge somewhere. 'For one believeth that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eateth herbs' (Romans 14:2). Just take a look at these losers – thin as a rail, pale as a ghost. The kind of men we used to beat up every day at school. If you asked any one of them, he would probably admit he supports feminism. The only pro-

tein these marys consume was created for a completely different purpose, the misuse of which is precisely what got Onan struck dead by God. Watch out for these witches and fairies, my friends, for in today's world of ailing morality, they are everywhere. They protest outside leather shops. They ruin other people's valuable winter coats by hurling buckets of blood on unsuspecting ladies. And they try to destroy the cattle industry with their left-wing talk shows. If you spot one of these demons, detain it and, when you're through roasting that side of beef you're having for dinner, replace that meat on the skewer with the heathen, and help restore a long-missed moral tradition."

Those of you with even halfway-tuned bullshit detectors will have realised that Hardwick's sermon is pure spoof. Indeed, it will come as no surprise that the pastor does not exist at all – he is a creation of **Landoverbaptists.org**, a highly-sophisticated website set up to parody Christians the world over.



Pastor Harry Hardwick

Herein lies a problem: the vast majority of Americans who enter the site utterly fail to recognise it as an elaborate hoax, and post voluminous messages condemning it for its "messages of hate".

Others, however, write in to agree with Harry Hardwick's rants. In one sermon he condemned mixed-race marriage, declaring that the parties concerned would be doomed to spend eternity in the pit. "Needless to say, they're both going to Hell. They will be in separate parts of Hell, of course, but both parts will be unpleasant, nonetheless." He then referred readers to the Bible verses prohibiting race-mixing: Deuteronomy 7:3; Numbers 36:3-9; First Kings 11:2; Nehemiah 13:25-27.

His sermon drew this response from Dr J Valentine, DPA, MBA:

I am a Jew, and a highly-educated Jew. I totally agree with you and respect your opinions on race mixing. If G-d, both yours and ours, had wanted this, he'd have created one "race"... All blacks are not bad people, but it seems to me that the vast majorities are... I am a VERY conservative person and conservative Jew. I value the morals, ethics, and good conservative values that Judaism and the Judeo/Christian system have provided."

Another Landover Baptist commentator is Creation Scientist, Dr Fred Neiman, who recently announced findings related to his research into the female soul.

"The absence of either salvation or condemnation for women finds extensive support in the Word of God," he reported. "Jesus said that the sole reason God created women in the first place was to provide company and service to men (1 Corinthians 11:9). God determined that men would be lonely living alone, so he created women purely to keep men company and serve their needs (Genesis 2:18-22). Women are therefore completely subordinate to men (1 Corinthians 11:3). It stands to reason, though, that once men enter the Kingdom of Heaven, they will be one with God, and will no longer be lonely and in need of mortal companionship. Thus, the reason behind having women will no longer exist. Women, like the members of the animal kingdom, will fall by the wayside."

Dr Neiman went on to say that "once men reunite with their maker, they will no longer be burdened with the care of women. After all, women were inferior creations from the start. Women are fond of self-indulgence (Isaiah 32:9-11). They are silly and easily led into error (2 Timothy 3:6). They are subtle and deceitful (Proverbs 7:10; Ecclesiastes 7:26). They are zealous in promoting superstition and idolatry (Jeremiah 7:18; Ezekiel 13:17, 23). And they are active in instigating to iniquity (Numbers 31:15-16; 1 Kings 21:25; Nehemiah 13:26). It was the inherent weakness of women that led them to be deceived by Satan (Genesis 3:1-6; 2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:14). Consequently, women were cursed from the start (Genesis 3:16). There is simply no room in heaven for such flawed and inadequate beings."

Commenting on these findings, another Landover Baptist creation, Pastor Deacon Fred said that there was no reason to be alarmed. "Dr. Neiman's conclusions still need to be formalized," he assured. "I am certain that our team of religious experts will find some way around these Scriptures." Some of the women present were visibly shaken by the report. A teary eyed Sister Taffy Crockett said through choked sobs, "I've heard of coloured women not having souls... but me? NO! This is outrageous!"

Head Pastor, Rev. Ebenezer Smith, had some comforting words for the ladies of Landover. "I personally want to assure all female members of this church that until we examine Dr Neiman's research to our complete satisfaction, consider yourselves saved."

There is nothing imaginary about Ellen

Stone, who stumbled accidentally into the site, and fell for it hook, line and sinker. She responded thus: "You fucking shovansist! how dare you talk that way about women. they are people, not a meere vagina and pair of legs to service us and get us a sandwich. i would NEVER disrespect my girlfriend by doing that to her! you probably think its a sin if the womans on top too? fuck you guys. how do you live with your selves you self important littel pricks. come over to see me some time, i will kick your little bigot ass.(Original spelling retained.)"

Stone's response was almost as funny as the piece she complained about, but what really had me in stitches was a item concerning Ab-Toners - pulsating electronic belts designed to remove midriff flab.

Under the headline "American Children Are Trying To Masturbate With Electronic Abdominal Exercise Machines!" was this report:

"The Landover Baptist Board of Directors approved a \$2.5 million budget for Creation Scientists to open a four-year investigation into an abdominal exercise tool called the 'Ab-Toner'. The budget was approved last month after several Christian children were hospitalized in the space of a week. Each suffered similar injuries on and/or around their buttocks and penises. Church investigators found the youngsters used their parent's credit cards to purchase the Ab-Toner from a 4 am info-mercial broadcast through a secular television station in Des Moines.

"It took under one minute of viewing the commercial before Satan entered the boys' minds and they began thinking of a way they could wrap the device around their penises," said one Christian psychologist. "You can't really blame the boys. In reality, turning on a secular television station in a Christian home is like sending Lucifer a personal invitation to hold a picnic in your living-room."

"We'll get to finding out what a secular television station was doing 'on' in a Christian home, later," said Pastor Deacon Fred. "For now, we're just concerned about performing our Godly duty in getting an action alert out to every True Christian® in America." Aside from subliminal messages and sexually suggestive photos placed in the Ab-Toner's instruction booklet, preliminary findings indicate that the Ab-Toner device produces gentle

electronic pulses that are regulated by intensity and frequency."

"What really disturbs us most," said Creation Scientist, Dr Jonathan Edwards, "is that at the very beginning of the instruction booklet it states, 'Read this manual thoroughly before you begin.' There is no question that that statement is both malicious and deliberate." Edwards noted that pornographic pictures of females and males with Ab-Toners placed on revealing parts of their bodies throughout the manual direct innocent children to participate in something called, *Targeted Toning*. "As Christians, we know that the target the perverts who created this disgusting device are ultimately trying to tone is the *human penis*," said Edwards. "It's just sad that three wonderful young Christian boys had to have theirs hacked off at the stem before we got our budget approved.

"During this Sunday's service, Landover Baptist Pastor, Deacon Fred, informed a shocked congregation that the Ab-Toner caused muscles in the boys' private areas to harden and grow at such an accelerated rate that one of the youngsters nearly poked out his eye with the tip of his penis."

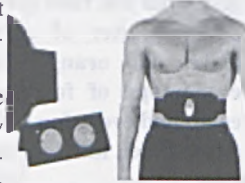
"I was there by Timmy Huxton's hospital bed and saw it for my own eyes," said the pastor. "The great length of his genitals was such that the skin itself could not take the strain and was tearing away even as we stood there with our jaws agape. There was naught they could do to relieve the boy's suffering but to remove it altogether."

One reader who took this seriously was Danna Arant, who wrote: "The article on the Ab-Toner is completely false and you people should be sued off your asses for posting such a stupid article. you think anything secular sinful. FUCK YOU."

A recent article on the site that drew a huge number of protests was entitled "Is My Little Baby Going to Go Gay?" Sub-titled "Handy Homo Prevention Tips For Concerned Parents With Suspect Toddlers", it declared:

"A parent can never act too soon in taking precautionary measures to ensure that their child will never become intoxicated with mommy's perfume and choose to devote his life to being a prancing homo. By being both proactive and willing to inflict welts for Jesus, you can beat Satan at his own sick game and prevent him from turning your impressionable child into an ugly, rotting twig in the family tree crying out for brutal pruning.

"Christian Doctors at Landover Baptist Hospital's Homosexual Reporative Extreme-Psycho-Stabilization Ward have put together



Billing itself as an "exercise tool" the "Ab-Toner" is simply a New Age masturbation toy that damages Christian penises, says Landover Baptist



a handy list of preventative tips for concerned parents with newborns or toddlers. Please print out these Godly reminders and pop them in your purse the moment your water breaks for handy reference."

**Early Child Development
Homo Prevention Tips**

1. A boy must not sit on a toilet unless he is having a bowel movement. Standing straight up, not hunched over while urinating, is a sign of manliness. Squatting on a toilet seat (especially if he hovers to avoid the urine of others or prissily wipes the seat with a square of toilet tissue) to pee is not only effeminate but a sign of shame! It is a secret hobby that homosexuals use in their daily lives. It is a scientific fact that when needing to use the restroom, a male is called upon to engage in the unpleasant undertaking of extruding a pooppy in only 1 out of every 3 visits. But homosexuals use all three visits to practice squatting, to limber the cheeks of their bottom in preparation for even the most enormous (Negro) penises. Such calisthenics are neither necessary nor advisable for men who have no intention of squatting over an engorged penis. As soon as your child is able to walk on two feet, you must make that sure he is taught to stand proudly in front of a private or public toilet seat, and to speak not a word, especially in response to the coy whispers of Catholic priests in the next stall.

2. A boy must eat everything on his plate. But if your son pesters you to serve corn on the cob, hot dogs or sausages, that is your signal to change his diet. Try serving meals that more effectively evoke a hankering for the fragrant delights of the female genitalia. An artichoke stuffed with tuna fish will usually do the trick.

3. A boy must always wear socks, except while swimming. So-called "flip-flops" and "sandals," where the toes and ankles are exposed, are products that were created during the (homo)sexual revolution. Creation research indicates that these types of provocative "shoes" were invented by homosexuals in San Fransissycio during the late 1960's with fetishes for little boy ankles. Thwart the perverted delight of these pedo-pedophiles with a thick pair of tube socks!

4. A boy must not be allowed to watch cartoons of any kind. He should spend Saturday mornings sitting quietly by his Father's side (with a respectful 3" between the male bodies), watching sports that don't involved male leotards. He must watch Football, Basketball, Baseball and Boxing. Soccer is not a sport for civilized people and often results in alarmingly long, uncut penises escaping from very alluring satin

shorts. Soccer appeals only to poor, uneducated halflings from underdeveloped countries where the women grow mustaches twice as fast as the men. Make your child aware of this. When there are no sports on TV, take your boy out in the backyard and throw the football or play catch with a very hard baseball. Under no circumstances: wrestle in shorts, especially if your son is strapping, handsome and sporting a noticeably turgid crotch.

5. A boy must not play with dolls. If your boy has a young sister, forbid him from entering her room except for the purposes of the type of ordinary heterosexual experimentation that occurs in any Christian household. If you catch your male child playing with dolls, Landover Baptist Child Psychologists recommend that you shave his head, and sit him out at the end of the driveway with a sign around his neck that says, "I'm a Sissy Boy Who Plays With Dolls - Mailman: Why don't you just go ahead and stick something in my mouth?" This method of prevention has a 99.5 percent success rate (unless your particular mailman is young and attractive).

6. A boy must not refer to his parents as "Mommy" or "Daddy." As soon as your boy is old enough to speak, he must be taught to call his Mother, "Ma," or "Momma" or "Mommie Dearest." When addressing his Father, he should refer to him as, "Sir," "Dad," or "Commander." "Mommy" and "Daddy" are what fey, spoiled boys weaned on effeminacy coo, embarrassing you in front of the neighbors by never keeping the palms of their hands below their waists.

7. A boy must always wear thick, white underwear. White boxers, and/or briefs are acceptable. Your child must be taught that men who wear colored underwear or undergarments that are cut within one inch of the outer periphery of their pubic region or the trough of the valley between the cheeks of their bottom are either European or Homosexual - and in America there is no difference between the two.

8. A boy must never cry or pout. Crying, pouting or showing feelings are weak and feminine traits. After the natural tears of infancy, brought on by a child's traumatic exit from the spiritual realm of Heaven to the horrible shock every young man experiences in seeing his very own mother's hairy, dilated vagina, and into this Devil run world we call "Earth," your boy must be taught to stop crying. It usually takes a normal child several weeks to get over its birth - even when using daily submersions in ice-water. If your child is still crying after three weeks, please drop him off at the Creation Science Laboratory for the

remainder of the year and for a determination of whether he is worth having back.

9. A boy must not use brightly colored crayons or any crayons from any colors of the rainbow. Christian parents should remove and destroy any suspiciously colored crayons from their boy's box of Crayolas. This needs no explanation, as we here at Landover Baptist are all familiar with Mr Crayola's so-called "alternate lifestyle," and his reason for putting "Pansy Pink" and "Engorged Penis Head Purple" into his boxes are quite obvious. A boy must also draw in straight lines. Some curves are fine, but if you suspect your child of "doodling," and see that he is using more curves than straight lines, please call your Pastor immediately.

10. A boy must not skip or prance. You must not allow your boy to attend any school where they teach the children to "skip" or play "hopscotch" in Physical Education class. Creation Scientists have proved that such activities are the precursor to cross-dressing, appreciation for poetry, a sardonic display of irony and the rampant shoplifting of skin-care products.

This satirical piece also went way over the heads of readers, some of them fairly intelligent and literate.

Michael Lefkowitz was one of these dupes. He wrote: "All of the articles on homosexuality on this site are shocking and completely fallacious. I am a gay man myself, and I know that none of this is true. *It took me a while to figure out that your site wasn't just a big joke, and that you were actually serious about what you were saying.*" (My italics).

"Homosexuals for the most part are not feminine, do not lisp, are not immoral, do not prance or put on make-up or perfume: that stereotype is ridiculous. I know very masculine men who are homosexual.

"The article I found the most shocking, and yes, satanic in its cruelty, was the one encouraging parents to cut off parts of their little boys' tongues if they lisped. How could you do such a terrible thing to a child? Lispering is a medical disorder and has nothing to do with homosexuality. Your site disgusts me. Do some research. Talk to some gay people. Find out what you're talking about before you talk about it."

The fact that people like Lefkowitz can be so easily duped by what most people this side of the Atlantic would instantly spot as heavy-handed satire is deeply depressing.

But it is understandable. The US is awash with very real preachers whose messages, on TV and radio, are so close to those of Harry Hardwick's that it is extremely difficult to sift reality from parody. Damn it - they even have a president who sounds and thinks like Harry Hardwick.

Bigoted responses

THE two "responses" in the September *Freethinker* savaging Barbara Barrett were about the most blatantly bigoted unpleasantnesses I have ever encountered. Barbara's article, while recounting serious issues we should all be concerned about, was laced with the humour and restraint these two correspondents obviously did not appreciate.

Incapable of reasoned discussion, they resorted to all the dirtiest tricks of character assassination to rubbish her valid arguments and practically ignored her real message – religious privilege. Barbara reasonably wondered why Muslims proclaiming "Muslims against Western values" are here and is promptly condemned as a racist. Her many examples of incredible leniency towards Muslim extremists, and even religious privileges for Muslims are dismissed as racist too.

Barbara refers to the astonishingly different and hostile police treatment of peaceful animal rights protesters – not extremists – and is identified and reviled as an extremist herself.

These correspondents come across as intolerant bullies. One of them even reproaches Barry Duke for printing Barbara's articles while seeing nothing wrong in his own inflammatory nonsense being published too.

All the Muslim law-breakers are here of their own free will. No-one ever begged them to come and they should not abuse our hospitality.

Extremism of any sort is always self-defeating but it often arises, as in this instance, from sheer desperation at the Government's obsession with promoting the huge profits of the pharmaceutical industry (aka the medical research industry) rather than animal welfare. The activities of extremists are probably wildly exaggerated anyway to divert public attention from the hideous barbarities on animals in pseudo-scientific experiments. The valuable results claimed are largely illusory because human and animal metabolism are widely different. *Opren* and *thalidomide* tell us that the actual results of relying only on animal testing before using drugs on humans can be utterly disastrous.

Barbara deserves enormous credit for her sobering revelations which emphasise the urgent need to decouple simply being British from automatically being racist.

Either by logic or ridicule we must somehow free our society from what Barbara has rightly termed creeping lunacy. I for one am proud to associate myself with everything she said, and I hope many other readers will write in to show their support for simple commonsense.

JACK WILSON
Altrincham

Stop knocking faith schools

THOUGH not a subscriber, I am a regular

reader of the *Freethinker*, and feel I must write to oppose your constant carping at the current proliferation of excellent faith schools at the primary level and the recent introduction of gently-guided Christian meditation (denounced by you as "brain-washing") in the state primary schools in Kent.

Anything impressed upon the mind of a young child by trusted adults is naturally accepted with an unquestioning faith, to weave a strong mystic web. If then reinforced by vivid ritual and church togetherness, it can withstand the onset of a critical intellect, which generally develops from the age of about seven – "the age of reason" to use the traditional Catholic terminology. This is so even in cases of very high intelligence.

Psychologists agree that there is little chance of a person ever experiencing the unique emotion of religious uplift unless the relevant creed of his or her inheritance is inculcated before the age of seven. Otherwise, lifelong deprivation of this experience is likely – and not only personally; it could mean the total loss of the rich diversity of religious cultures in our society.

Take, as an example, the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation – the belief that words spoken by a priest actually change a wafer of bread (wine is optional) into the living body and blood of the Saviour. Just imagine the overwhelming effect on the worshipper when the divine "host" is taken into the mouth and swallowed! No sexual act can ever match the concomitant ecstasy.

Yet it can work only if belief in it is firm enough to overcome the fact that the appearance and taste are unchanged from those of unleavened bread. How many people would accept as actuality the undetectable transformation if coming cold to the idea in adulthood? So we must let the little children of Catholic parentage be imbued with it – for the sake of the emotional fulfilment of their future selves. And similarly with the children of other religious traditions.

K SOMBER
Kent

Editor's note: I was momentarily fooled by this letter, but then recognised the anagrammed signature.

Nigeria, Religion and Fraud

MOST of the points regarding religion and fraud in Nigeria, raised by Leo Igwe, Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, in his article in the November issue, are eminently arguable. However, what is beyond argument is the fallacy that the Nigerian Humanist Movement, or anyone for that matter, can replace the false hope offered by religion to Nigerians, with the high-falutin' labels proposed by Igwe in the article, without first resolving the problems that attract Nigerians to religion in the first place.

Obviously Igwe did not fully get the drift of the argument in my article in the September issue, otherwise he would not have mischaracterised some of my comments. He wrote, and I quote, "As Belo rightly stated, religiosity promises Nigerians some hope, false hope in all cases...and by saying that what Nigeria has to show for its piety is 'false hope'..."

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

The dilemma facing Nigerians today is not one of choice between "no hope", "false hope" and what Igwe calls "genuine hope". It is how to come out of the "no hope" situation in which they are. The reasons adduced by Igwe for the high religiosity in Nigeria will put the best amongst us worldwide in the same state of complete "hopelessness". In some societies, people commit suicide for lesser reasons. Those of us in comfortable affluent societies, and those in Nigeria with the wherewithal for comfort, are not in any position to assess whether escape from a "no hope" situation into the fantasyland of religiosity is worthwhile or not.

It is rather naïve to say one would remove religion from the lives of Nigerians, and 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". It is simple commonsense that unless you remove the cause, the effect will not go away. If, as Igwe correctly noted, Nigerians are religious because of "poverty, hardship, insecurity of life and property", their way out of religion, as has happened in other societies, is to remove these causes first.

No human society has ever made a "one-step" progression from "religiosity" to "rationality", from a situation of "no hope" to one of "genuine hope". It has always been a multi-step progression, starting with conscious and concerted efforts to remove all the reasons that push impoverished and vulnerable people to religion. This would be followed by the establishment of institutions that would ensure

social order, and after these two steps society in general would be able to "harness the mental rigour and discipline needed for rationality, scientific thinking, technological intelligence and affluence" as Igwe puts it.

Most parts of Europe took several centuries to move from their early Christian age through the reformation, the age of reason, and the ascent of liberalism to their present post-Christian era. What finally made the transition effective was the introduction of the "welfare state", which decisively eradicated all the problems similar to those constituting the reasons for religiosity in Nigeria. As I pointed out earlier, to remove religion from the pinnacle it occupies in the lives of Nigerians, it is necessary to start by removing the reasons that draw Nigerians to it, and one can safely assume that, if Nigerians would easily accept "reason, critical thinking etc" as ways out of their innumerable problems, they would not be turning in droves to the "false hopes" offered by religions, and the Nigerian Humanist Movement will not be known only on the pages of the *Freethinker*, published in the UK and not even in circulation inside Nigeria!

Igwe seems to disagree with my contention that "cultural relativism is important in assessing the gains of religion", and he would even go on to say "cultural relativism has this tendency of creating a situation of cultural anomie". Assuming our terms are not in dispute here, "cultural relativism" is an idiomatic nuance, which explains why to a semi-literate Afrikaner farmer, Nelson Mandela is a terrorist, while to Igwe, myself and other black Africans, he is a freedom fighter; why to most Israelis, Yasser Arafat was a terrorist while to the Palestinians he was a statesman; why to us in Britain, some isolated islands on the other side of the world are Falkland Islands while to the Argentinians they are Malvinas.

The reasons Nigerians turn to religion are hardly the same as the reason George Bush and the American Moral Majority turn to religion. What Nigerians gain from religion is therefore bound to be different from what Americans gain from it, and there is bound to be a strong dose of "cultural relativism" in assessing the two nations *vis a vis* the gains of religion. Igwe says "If we follow the persuasions of cultural relativists, there will be no basis for condemning or criticising obnoxious beliefs..."

This is rather presumptuous and must beg the question, who is or are the "we" referred to by Igwe that decides what is "obnoxious" and what is not? What about the good old saying that "one man's meat is another man's poison"? Besides that, cultures are not static. They change with time and so do the morals that go with them. There are certain things which we all, as members of the human race, hold dear, and we collectively have institutions to protect and preserve such things. There are other things, which

we all, as members of our individual groups, also hold dear. No group should use its own parameters to judge what others hold dear. That is the essence of "cultural relativism". It is not a vehicle for condoning genocide, which all humanity abhors, but a means for understanding circumcision, which we Yorubas, the Jews, and some others practise.

It is playing to the gallery to equate cultural relativism with such things as witch-hunting, ritual killings, human sacrifice, etc, which are primordial, and to refer to "circumcision" as genital mutilation. For instance, human sacrifice takes different forms in different cultures. Which and whose is obnoxious? For instance, in my part of Africa, whenever a high tide from the Atlantic threatened their existence, my people usually put it down to the "goddess of the sea" feeling lonely and abandoned and requiring male company. A sacrifice of appeasement was done by throwing into the sea a live, strong and healthy male. Is that any more or less obnoxious than when thousands are killed in wars to "preserve our way of life"?

M ADEBAYO BELO
London

Fundamentalists

I DO wish that your paper of all would refrain from calling religious fanatics or extremists by the epithet "fundamentalists".

That is just what they are not! The nearest to a fundamental Xtian sect is the Coptic Church which did not sign up to the Roman spin of the Council of Nicea in 325.

Coptic texts have not been doctored in the same way as the "Authorised" version. I had the opportunity to re-do the translation of several chapters of the Gospel Of Thomas from the original Coptic.

The result is very revealing as to the extent of Romano-Greek reworking to fill the power vacuum that was building up in the Empire at that time. Thomas tells a different story about the crucifixion (my spelling and meaning) and the last supper, at which he was supposed to be an expert eye witness. He simply does not mention either. Were they of no importance at the time and greatly exaggerated for effect by the Romans? He convinces me, but like all disciples and prophets offers no EVIDENCE of the existence of either a deity of an afterlife.

STEVE OXBROW
Ycovil

Socialism and religion

Those who want to follow up Peter E Newell's suggestion in the November issue might like to know that the 1910 SPGB pamphlet "Socialism and Religion" he mentions is available on the internet at: <http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/pdf/sar.pdf>

ADAM BUICK
Richmond

Questioning beliefs

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

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

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

R G SILSON
Herts

The Free thinker

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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 7, 7.30pm. Frank Pidgeon: *Our pagan Christmas*. January 4, 7.30pm. Bill McLroy: *Don't knock the sixties!*

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Friends' Meeting House, High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, December 14, 2pm. Claire Rayner: *Questions and answers on humanism*.

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. Friends' Meeting House, Chelmsford. Sunday, December 12, 6.30pm. Winter solstice social.

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.

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

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

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

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

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

Glasgow Group: Information: Alan Hennes. 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, December 14, 7.30pm. Jeff Tee: *Ethical issues in mental illness*.

Isle of Wight Humanist Group. Information: David Broughton on 01983 740421 or email davidb67@clara.co.uk

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. Winter solstice party.

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, December 16. 8pm. Winter solstice party.

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: Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, January 5, 8pm. Frank Abel: *That was the year that was*. Wednesday, February 3, 8pm. public meeting.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Sunday, December 12, 3pm. Peter Valches: *One dimensional humans - Herbert Marcuse's critique of modern industrial society*.

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@ukgate-way.net.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. Email: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd 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:
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Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.
Notices must be received by the 15th of the month
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