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Freethinker

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America's 'sex police' on the rampage

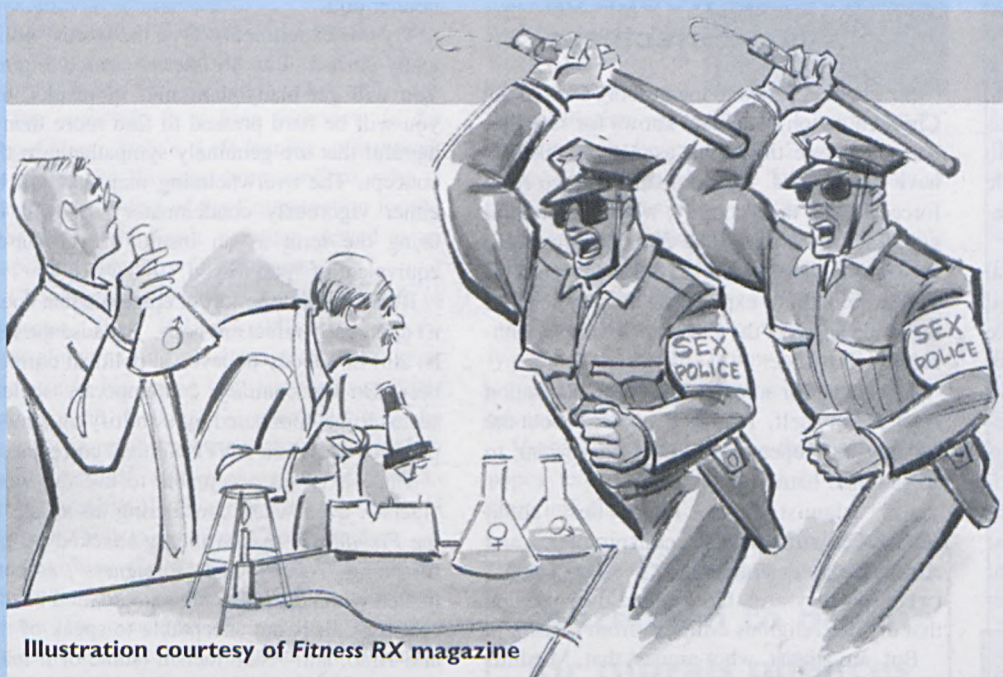
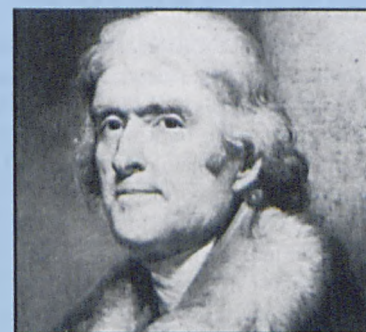


Illustration courtesy of Fitness RX magazine

Censorship and intimidation by the Christian Right plays havoc with the work of bodies established to protect the nation's sexual health – see report on p13

What would Thomas Jefferson have made of President Bush's antics? Gary Sloan thinks he may have the answer

– see p4



Thomas Jefferson, third US Preident, who once declared: "The clergy, by getting themselves established by law and engrafted into the machine of government, have been a very formidable engine against the civil and religious rights of man"

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National Secular Society has another busy and challenging year – centre pages

Muslim sectarianism manifests itself in enmity and violence – p11

RELIGIOUS believers build walls of self-deception around themselves to protect their favoured set of lies from incursions by the truth. They see and hear only those things that reinforce their faith, and they make themselves blind and deaf to anything that may undermine it.

Freethinkers are supposed to be different. We are supposed to welcome in the truth, whatever its face.

But the techniques of self-deception may be more ingrained than we think. Without realising it, it is easy to replace one set of defences against reality with another. So, just as a religious believer, in order to avoid having to confront the truth about the motives of others, will ascribe all bad things they do to "the Devil's work", so, it seems to me, some freethinkers ascribe all the bad things that religious people do to religion. The logic seems to be: X is religious... X has done something bad... therefore religion is to blame. This reasoning is no more defensible than: Y is an unbeliever... Y has done something bad... therefore atheism is to blame.

The religious are people, not mechanical monsters. Behind their wall of nonsensical rhetoric, they have complex motivations, like the rest of us. If we are to speak out effectively and credibly against their delusions, we must acknowledge this, and resist the temptation to dehumanise them. That temptation is strong, however, partly because we are constantly subjected to the dehumanising propaganda of one religion against another. We must avoid taking sides in that propaganda war: all religions are equally false, and we should resist

them all equally.

Take Beslan, for instance. This has been portrayed in the Judeo-Christian controlled media as an Islamist atrocity in a vacuum.

Chechen Muslims apparently launched into an inexplicable spontaneous frenzy of murder and mayhem, under the influence of their uniquely wicked religion. (So much more wicked than Christianity or Judaism!)

But consider this. In 1993, just before the Russians invaded, the population of Chechnya was two million. Today, it is around 800,000.

Guest columnist GRAHAM NOBLE on political correctness

So what happened to the missing 60% of the Chechen nation? Nobody knows for sure, but some sources estimate that as many as 200,000 have been killed. The remainder have been forced to flee their country, where torture and gang rape by some of the 300,000 occupying Russian soldiers is rife. You don't need to invoke religion to explain the desperation and fearsome anger of the Chechens. Simple arithmetic will suffice.

Of course, for some people, dehumanisation is an end in itself. Racists don't care about the tyranny of superstition; they just want to spread their hatred.

An Islamist who touts lies about Jewish/Christian/atheist conspiracies, and advocates the destruction of "Western values" (whatever they are), has stepped over the line that divides religious criticism from racism.

But an atheist who argues that Muslims "abuse 'our' hospitality" by exercising freedom of speech, and suggests that they should not even be here, has also stepped over that line. British Muslims have as much right to their opinions, and as much right to be here, as any other Britons.

Freethinkers aim to drive out religion, not to drive out the religious.

We seek to spread rationality, not to create an apartheid state for rationalists.

There is a debate to be had about the desirability or otherwise of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Britain, but this is not the place for it.

In a sense, it is unfortunate that racists are legally constrained from identifying themselves as such and expressing their honestly held opinions in public. But we must not allow them to pose as secular humanists in order to get their message across. Allowing our movement to be hijacked in this way will weaken our cause, and give ammunition to those who would deny freedom of speech to us, too. With secularism threatened from all sides, we need to be strong, united and vocal in its defence. The last thing we need is to have to deal with a divisive campaign of infiltration by racists. That is just simple common sense.

I've used the trigger word "racist" five times now (and there's a couple more on their way!), so I expect a hostile reaction. The use of that word is, apparently, a sign of political correctness. And we all know (because the popular press are always telling us) that we are currently suffering an epidemic of political correctness that threatens the very fabric of our society.

Since it is such a widespread problem, we must be surrounded by devoutly politically-correct people all the time. So, where are they all? How many people do you know who support and practise political correctness?

You don't know any? Well, that's funny – neither do I.

Try this experiment. Type the words "politically correct" into an internet search engine. You will get many thousands of results, but you will be hard pressed to find more than a handful that are genuinely sympathetic to the concept. The overwhelming majority will be either vigorously condemnatory, or will be using the term as an insult, the grown-up equivalent of "poo to you!"

It's a very strange sort of epidemic that doesn't apparently infect anybody. Because the fact is, almost nobody believes in political correctness. On the contrary, contemporary society seems to be dominated by a stultifying atmosphere of dogmatic ANTI-political correctness.

Thus, it is not acceptable to use the word "racist", even when considering an article in the *Freethinker* that explicitly attacked people for being "Asians" and "foreigners", as contrasted with "the indigenous population of this country". It is not acceptable to speak of the anti-Arab, anti-Asian racism (some of it masquerading as religious criticism) that sours so much public discourse. If you try to do so, your arguments and opinions will be dismissed out of hand. You will have committed a thought crime, for which you can expect to be denounced as a "politically correct enemy of freedom of expression".

What a fine, ringing phrase that is! What power and magic is carried by those words! Just mouth them quietly: "politically correct" (or, even better, if the context allows, "political correctness gone mad!"), and you have an instant rebuttal for any argument. If you truly believe in the mythic threat posed by the massed forces of political correctness, then you have a marvellous excuse for ignoring everybody's opinion but your own. Anybody who says things that don't conform to your prejudices is part of an evil conspiracy. To protect yourself against this evil, you must never consider what they say, and must never reflect, or examine your own beliefs, even for a moment.

To have such a compelling reason not to think makes for an easy life.

It must be a great comfort.

Now, what does that remind me of?

Oh yes. It's a lot like religion.

Atheists condemn decatalogue robe

ATHEISTS across the US state of Alabama have reacted angrily to news that a Circuit Court Judge in Andalusia had taken to wearing a robe bearing the Ten Commandments.

Blair Scott, the Alabama State Director for American Atheists, said the move by Circuit Judge Ashley McKathan to embroider the decatalogue on judicial robes would make citizens feel that Christian defendants would stand a better chance, or that the jury would be swayed by the presence of the decatalogue.

"The Ten Commandments on the judicial robes sends a clear message that preference is given to Christian defendants, even if the judge does not have that intention. The appearance of preference in a court is unacceptable. A judge is supposed to be unbiased in his or her rulings and the decatalogue prevents that from happening," Blair said.

"Judge McKathan is required to rule fairly and judiciously without bias. The Judge is a representative of the state and as such cannot endorse or promote any specific religion."



'Aggressive' Secularism in Europe is 'driving religion to the margins'

A LEADING contender to become the next Pope launched a fierce attack on the forces of secularism yesterday, arguing that they were fostering intolerance in Europe and forcing Christianity underground.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 77, one of the Vatican's most powerful figures, issued a rallying cry to the faithful, saying that the liberal consensus had now evolved into a "worrying and aggressive" ideology.

As a result, "Catholic and Christian religion" had been pushed out of the public debate and was being "driven into the margins".

The warning, in a long interview in *La Repubblica*, Italy's Left-leaning newspaper, comes as the Bavarian-born cardinal, who is the Pope's Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is being viewed as an important late entry for the papacy.

Coming shortly after MEPs refused to approve the Italian politician Rocco Buttiglione as European justice commissioner because of his strong Catholic views on gays and women, Ratzinger's statements may be seen by some as something of a manifesto.

The cardinal was speaking against a backdrop of rapidly declining priestly vocations in Europe which is worrying Church leaders.

Describing the development of a "secular ideological aggression" across the continent as "cause for concern," the cardinal said: "In Sweden, a Protestant minister who preached about homosexuality on the basis of an excerpt from the scriptures was put in jail for a month.

"Secularism is no longer that element of neutrality, which opens up space for freedom for all. It is beginning to change into an ideology which, through politics, is being imposed.

"It concedes no public space to the Catholic and Christian vision, which as a result runs the risk of turning into a purely private matter, so that deep down it is no longer the same.

"In this sense a struggle exists and so we must defend religious freedom against an ideology which is held up as if it were the only voice of rationality, when instead it is only an expression of a 'certain' rationalism."

In contemporary society, said the cardinal, God had been pushed "very much into the margins".

"In politics, it seems to be almost indecent to speak about God, almost as it were an attack on the freedom of someone who doesn't believe," he said.

The cardinal added: "A secularism which is just, is a freedom of religion. The state does not impose a religion, but rather provides free space to those religions with a responsibility to civil society."

The society in which we now lived was one where there was a great deal of transformation.

"Negative birth rates and immigration are changing Europe's ethnic make-up. Above all we've gone from being a Christian culture to one of aggressive secularism which at times is intolerant."

He said that even though "churches were emptying" and people were "no longer able to believe," Christian faith was "not dead".

He said he remained convinced of hope's inner strength, even if the future of the Church lay more in "other continents" than Europe.

Cardinal Ratzinger, once viewed as the likely papal "kingmaker", is now believed to stand a good chance himself precisely because of his advanced years.

Vatican watchers maintain that long-serving popes tend to be succeeded by short-lived "interim" papacies.



Young Iranian woman sentenced to death for morals offences

A 19-year-old Iranian girl with a mental age of eight who was forced into prostitution by her mother has been sentenced to be flogged and executed for "morality-related" offences, Amnesty International revealed last month.

The human rights pressure group has asked Iran's supreme court to stay the execution. The girl, named only as Leyla M, had suffered a "litany of abuse", it said.

"Sold into prostitution at the age of eight, she has experienced horrific sexual violence.

"We will not stand by mutely and let Leyla become the fourth child to be executed in Iran this year." Leyla, who was born in the central Iranian city of Arak, was sold by her family to an Afghan man to become his "temporary wife", aged 12. The man's mother became her new pimp, according to an Iranian newspaper report.

Two years later, Leyla became pregnant and received 100 lashes before being sold on to a 55-year-old man who continued to force her into prostitution. The sentence was passed on the basis of a confession from Leyla despite her mental age.

Kilroy-Silk covered in slurry 'in the name of Islam'

EURO MP Robert Kilroy-Silk had a bucket of farm slurry thrown over him last month by an enraged Muslim in Manchester.

The UK Independence Party member was arriving for a BBC radio show when the attacker emerged from behind a bush.

Fellow guest Ruth Kelly MP was also hit by the slurry. Mr Kilroy-Silk said the man, who later disappeared, claimed he was "doing it in the name of Islam". In January, Mr Kilroy-Silk quit his BBC One show for remarks he made about Arabs, whom he called "suicide bombers", "limb-amputators" and "women oppressors".

Mr Kilroy-Silk had already been taken off air by BBC bosses for the comments. The remarks prompted outrage among Muslim groups. The slurry attack took place as Mr Kilroy-Silk and Ms Kelly, a Cabinet Office minister and Bolton West MP, arrived at Manchester High School for Girls for the recording of BBC Radio 4's *Any Questions*.

The police were called but the attacker had disappeared by the time officers arrived. They are treating the incident as assault.

The programme's host, Jonathan Dimbleby, later told the audience the MEP had been covered from "head to toe". But Kilroy-Silk was still able to appear on the show after being loaned a change of clothes.

Financial Secretary and Bolton West MP Ruth Kelly was also hit. Kilroy-Silk told reporters he was "very angry" and planned to press charges if his attacker was caught. He said the man shouted: "You've offended my religion, I'm doing this in the name of Islam."

'Stank to high heaven'

"As I started to turn round a guy tipped a bucket of farmyard muck over me and then threw the rest of it over me and the car," Kilroy-Silk said. "I was totally covered, it was all through my clothes, and it stank to high heaven. It went all inside the car and splattered Ruth Kelly."

The assailant escaped not entirely unscathed. Kilroy-Silk, according to one news report, managed to smear a handful of slurry into his attacker's face and hair, saying as he did so: "If you like shit so much, have some of this."

Greater Manchester Police said people near Mr Kilroy-Silk had also been hit by the waste.

Officers took statements at the scene, but no arrests have been made.

The suspect is described as white, aged 30 to 40, with a ginger beard.

THROUGH the vagaries of cyberspace, a curious message recently materialised in the inbox of my e-mail programme. From the contents, I infer that the wraith of Thomas Jefferson attended a National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC. After the prandial affair, Jefferson apparently e-mailed John Adams, a favourite correspondent in their twilight years.

What on earth would Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, have made of the antics of G W Bush?
GARY SLOAN
ponders the question

Unfortunately, Jefferson's message may have bounced. Here is what it says.

Dear Sir:

I accede to your superior powers of prognostication. Science has not, as I had predicted it would, liberated the minds of men from rank superstition and ecclesiastical imposition. In the 21st century, I discover to my chagrin that priestly dogma infects the highest levels of American government. The president, one George W. Bush, masquerades as *ex officio* priest-in-chief of a Holy American Empire.

At a "prayer breakfast" attended by foreign dignitaries, congressmen, and prominent clerics, Mr Bush bade the populace turn to prayer in the wake of foreign and domestic perils precipitated by enclaves of Mohammedan saboteurs.

To prayer, I say! The ubiquitous terrors had put him, he said, "on bended knee." Might you think, sir, he was petitioning a despot swayed by servility, a Potentate who rewards the obsequious, an omnipotent Creator actuated by vanity?

Our priest-president extolled religious faith. Faith, it appears, is an absolute Johannes Factotum. Faith strengthens, faith abides, faith surmounts every obstacle. Regrettably, Mr Bush neglected to clarify the operant mechanism by which faith effects its preternatural wonders. "Faith," he said, "shows one the way to self-giving, to love our neighbours as we would want to be loved."

The federal fiscal policy, it seems, eludes the reach of faith. Mr Bush purports to follow the moral counsel of Jesus Christ. One would therefore expect Mr Bush to conform schemes of taxation to Jesuine ethical standards. The historical Jesus, sifted from the mythic figure of triune humbuggery, threatened mammon with eternal damnation. He unremittingly condemned Dives, the exemplar of unbridled

wealth. The Galilean, sir, as you know, was a paladin for the poor, the destitute, the down-trodden.

Does our people's president, then, fetter plutocrats in leaden chains of taxation? "Indeed, he must," you will think. Otherwise, he would be impugned as deficient in rectitude, a shameless Pharisee. Well, sir, hear and perpend. This meek and lowly president proposed a \$2 trillion tax cut (yes, trillion), 43 percent of which was to go to the wealthiest 1 percent of the population. Do not imagine, sir, I have succumbed to a newfangled delirium. My mental faculties, though wrapped in spectral shroud, perform their wonted function.

Our presidential disciple of the Prince of Peace has sent his puissant armies to a remote lump of earth called Iraq, a hapless remnant of the Ottoman Empire, inhabited by a poor and backward people. There, under the pretext of sowing democracy and strengthening international security, the armies lay waste to city and

countryside, not punctilious in distinguishing friend and foe. Thousands of innocents die. While Mr Bush purports to be a saviour of the Iraqi masses and a defender of his own people, his real intent undoubtedly lies elsewhere. As is usual in such cases, one may suppose he aims to open new foreign markets and resources to Western investors and profiteers. You may surmise, sir, that the lion's share of the profits will accrue to the plutocrats (called stockholders and corporate executives), not to the hoi polloi. As you know, democracy is incompatible with capitalism. When the two joust, the demos usually lose.

And yet, sir, so has the popular mind of the 21st century prostituted itself to mummeries of piety and equality that George W Bush, confidant of plutocrats, passes for friend of the commoner. *Mirabile dictu.*

With kindly regards and best wishes, as ever your humble ...etc.,

Thomas Jefferson.

Controversial nativity scene damaged by vandal

WAXWORK nativity figures of footballer David Beckham and his wife Victoria dressed as Mary and Joseph were damaged in an attack by a vandal just before Christmas.

The controversial figures were removed and the nativity scene closed off.

A spokeswoman for Madame Tussauds, which mounted the display, said: "There was some damage caused to the figures of David and Victoria by a member of the public.

She could not confirm the extent of the damage, or say how it happened.

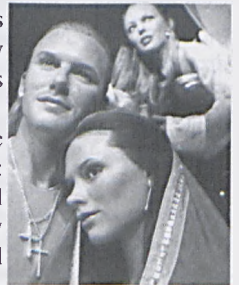
A Scotland Yard spokesman said that there were no records of police being contacted in connection with the vandalism. According to the *Sim* newspaper, a man in his 20s queued behind other visitors before repeatedly punching the waxwork figures and escaping into the street.

Senior church leaders have criticised the nativity scene.

The head of the R C Catholic Church in

England and Wales blasted the nativity scene, describing it as "disrespectful".

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor said: "To have a very special part of Christianity depicted in this way and its most precious symbol, which is the coming of God into the world in Jesus Christ, seems to me to be not just disrespectful to Christians, it is also disrespectful to the heritage of Britain and also does damage to the culture of this country."



David and Victoria Beckham as Joseph and Mary, with Kylie Minogue as the angel. Note the amusing gangster-style "bling" around Joseph's neck: a pair of gold crucifixes!

Lesbian minister defrocked

IN THE second ecclesiastical trial of a gay Methodist minister in less than a year, a jury of 13 clergy members in eastern Pennsylvania convicted a fellow pastor of violating church law by living in a lesbian relationship.

At the trial in Pughtown, Pa, the jury voted 12 to 1 against the Rev Irene Elizabeth Stroud, 34, associate pastor at Philadelphia's First United Methodist Church of Germantown. It then voted 7 to 6 to remove her from the ministry.

Late Freethinker

APOLOGIES to readers for the late despatch of the *Freethinker* in December. The reason for the delay is that, a day before the magazine was due to be printed, we received a request from the BBC to film the magazine coming off the presses. The footage was needed for a programme going out later this year which charts the history of disbelief in Britain. To accommodate the BBC, it was decided to delay the printing for a week. Details of the programme will be given in a future issue.

Australia's religious hatred case ends in victory for 'vilified' Muslims

FUNDAMENTALIST Christian groups in Australia have vowed to fight for the repeal of Victoria's religious hatred legislation following an historic court victory for Muslims after a protracted religious vilification hearing which resulted in Judge Michael Higgins ruling that Catch the Fire Ministries, Pastor Danny Nalliah and speaker Daniel Scot vilified Muslims at a seminar in 2002, in a newsletter and an article on a website.

He said that in the seminar, Mr Scot made fun of Muslim beliefs and conduct in a way that was "hostile, demeaning and derogatory of all Muslim people, their god, Allah, the prophet Mohammed and in general Muslim religious beliefs and practices".

In the first big test of the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act, he ruled that Mr Scot's conduct was not reasonable and in good faith for any genuinely religious purpose or in the public interest (which the act makes exempt). He found Mr Scot's evidence evasive and twice lacking credibility. Judge Higgins said the newsletter, by Mr Nalliah, sought to create fear of Muslims and was likely to incite hatred, while the website article by an American was an example of the type of conduct the Act intended to prohibit.

Yasser Soliman, the president of the Islamic Council of Victoria, which brought the complaint, hugged both Christian defendants after the case. "I said to Danny (Nalliah), it's time to move forward and I hope we can talk to each other directly and try to develop understanding. He smiled and said he had nothing against me personally. Daniel Scot said he had to be free to say what he needed to say. I've given them my card," he said.

Mr Scot said he was disappointed but not surprised by the decision. "There was no mention of freedom of speech there. I believe this isn't the end of the matter," he said.

Before the hearing yesterday, Mr Nalliah told *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne that the church had won, whatever the verdict. "Since the court case, 150 Christians stood for election, including 25 pastors. The Christian community woke up, and the main cause was this case. We can't stand back; our freedom is at stake."

Afterwards, outside the court, he brandished his Bible and encouraged dozens of Christians who chanted "Jesus" and sang Christian songs. "We may have lost the battle, but the war is not over. The law has to be removed, there is no question," he said. The case was originally listed at the Victorian Civil and Administrative

Tribunal for three days. It will go into its third year next month, when both parties make submissions on what remedy the Islamic Council should receive.

Although the act provides for prison sentences, Judge Higgins said earlier in the case that jail was not an option. Mr Soliman said yesterday he would not seek a big fine. "As far as the Muslim community is concerned, it's not about the money," he said.

The case has divided Christian churches, with the Catholic and Uniting churches supporting the Islamic Council and Pentecostal and evangelical groups saying the law inhibits free speech.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria has called for its repeal, and the conservative Christian lobby group Salt Shakers called the verdict an attack on the notion of freedom of speech.

Uniting Church social justice state director Mark Zirncak said those who opposed the legislation "have extreme views and want to tear the social fabric".

Catholic Interfaith Committee chairman Father John Dupuche said the case enabled many Christian and Jewish groups to support Muslims.

Equal Opportunity Commission chief executive Helen Szoke said the decision showed

where the line was drawn between legitimate public debate and behaviour that incited hatred.

A letter published in *The Age* after the verdict, and signed by nine religious leaders, including a rabbi, applauded the tribunal's finding, saying: "It will send a warning to far-right anti-Semitic groups and extremist groups from the Christian and Muslim communities. They have argued that the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 caused disharmony in the religious community. However, we argue the reverse. The legislation has brought together representatives of Anglican, Catholic, Unitarian and Uniting churches, the Islamic Council of Victoria, Quakers and the Jewish community into an anti-vilification network to work for harmonious and respectful relationships.

"The legislation has started to expose activities of religious extremist and race-hate groups. They would prefer to scuttle about in private misuse of the right to religious freedom, and to prey on fears that exist in parts of Victorian religious communities, inciting hatred and hostility to those of other faiths or races. It would be a mistake to repeal legislation that holds extremist groups to account, limiting by law the extent to which they can pursue activities that undermine social harmony by promoting conflict."

Falwell wants an army of Christian lawyers to return the US 'to her religious heritage'

NOT content with their attempts to meddle with sexual health programmes (see report on page 13), members of the Christian right are now turning their attention to the justice system in America – or Jesusland, as more and more people are now calling it.

Spearheading a campaign to "return America to her religious heritage", televangelist Jerry Falwell is on a new mission: to create an army of lawyers and judges who will reshape law in America. These lawyers will be trained at a fundamentalist Christian law school which enrolled its first class of 61 students last August. In an interview with the *Dallas Morning News*, Falwell said: "We are hoping to train lawyers who can turn the legal profession back to the right ... we want to infiltrate the culture with men and women of God ... we will be as far to the right as Harvard is to the left."

Falwell was again in the news at the end of December when he attacked the decision by school officials in Rossford, Ohio, for cancelling a concert by a Christian rock band that was to be part of an anti-drug education programme for students. Parents had complained that the planned event violated the separation of church and state, and placed the school in the illegal position of promoting sectarian religion.

Falwell claimed that the incident was another example of "Christian students in the crosshairs."

American Atheists Inc responded by saying: "Falwell is skewing the facts of this case and trying to scare people, including his own followers, into believing that religion is "under siege" from evil secularists. Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, declared: "The truth is that this concert belongs on private property like a church, not in a public school. School authorities acted properly, and they are to be commended for teaching students an important civic lesson in how our Constitution prevents government from promoting sectarian religion, even under the guise of combating drug use.

"The message is clear – no public funding or facilitating of religion, and no religious activities on taxpayer-funded public property!"

As an atheist who happens to find churches beautiful and inspiring places, I am often drawn to wondering to what use these splendid buildings could be put in an ideal, God-free society of the future. I put the question in a recent issue of *The Skeptic* magazine, discounting a number of likely suggestions before deciding that rededicating churches to science would offer the best solution to the problem. This would not only save the splendid buildings themselves, but would retain the positive aspects of the religious outlook: that sense of humility, awe and respect for existence which properly understood is a rational sensation, but which has been hijacked by the world's religions. Sermons would be replaced with scientific readings on the great ideas of cosmology and evolutionary biology. Regular attendance at this establishment would leave the visitor spiritually enriched and truly enlightened, and all that would be lost would be the outdated, superstitious, dangerous and hate-filled nonsense. Well, we can all dream.

Needless to say, I don't move in the kinds of circles where those who read the piece would implore that I pray for forgiveness, or warn me of the very real dangers of Hell. Still, even among rational and enlightened colleagues and friends some of the responses I have received struck me as a little curious.

"Do you really think that will arrest the decline in church attendance?" asked one, as if that had been the aim. Another wondered how such churches would cover their costs, as if I seriously thought the idea had enough chance of taking root to worry about the practicalities. But by far the most popular objection – thanks, I fear, to the lingering influence of Stephen Jay Gould – went something like this: of course

What uses could splendid old churches be put to in an ideal, God-free society of the future? MATTHEW CONIAM has some interesting ideas

the factual content of religion – the origin stories, the cosmology and biology – is foolish and should be replaced with factual explanations, but what of the moral aspects of religious teaching? How can science possibly provide that kind of inspiration? You're always saying how one of the best things about science is that it is neutral as to values. How can it replace the church as a system of moral instruction?

Well, first of all – I must have been playing truant the day we all decided that the ethical teachings of the world's religions had positive

moral value. But let's pretend for the purposes of argument that religions do promote goodness (a bit like pretending for the purposes of argument that the earth is flat, but please try for the sake of the thought experiment). How can science possibly serve as a comparable force of responsibility, kindness, peace? Science – bringer of nuclear bombs, chemical weaponry, cancer-inducing overhead pylons, brain-zapping mobile phones, and GM crops, those triffls waiting to happen... A force for good? Well actually, yes – I think so.

As I expect you'll have guessed, I have another thought experiment for you. I'm writing this in what strikes me as a time of unparalleled barbarism. A time in which holy wars are again being fought, and individuals murdered on videotape after protracted, agonising periods of captivity during which they are shown pleading for their lives in the world media. What kind of ideal, what dream, what goal can possibly make this seem like acceptable, justified behaviour? And what should be done with those responsible?

On the latter count, the majority, along with many of the newspapers and fans of the Old Testament, will call for their execution. A few, more sensitive, will opt for incarceration, as killing people is wrong. But throw away the key, they'll probably add. My job here is not to comment on the correctness or otherwise of

Police injured and property damaged as Sikhs go on the rampage in Birmingham

FIVE police officers were hurt and two people arrested following an angry protest by Sikhs outside a Birmingham theatre last month.

The protestors were demanding the closure of *Behzti* – a play about sexual abuse and murder in a gurdwara, a Sikh place of worship.

Hundreds of Sikhs gathered outside Birmingham Repertory Theatre and a few tried to storm their way in, forcing the performance to stop.

Managers said they deplored "the illegal actions of some protesters".

The theatre had consulted with Sikh community members about the play prior to its opening and, as a result, several changes were made to the show before it went into production.

But this did not appease many Sikhs, who were incensed that the play, written by Sikh woman playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, was set inside a temple.

The theatre says it is a work of fiction and makes no comment about Sikhism as a faith, or its followers in general.

It said short of "blatant censorship" and can-

celling the production, it could not have done more to appease the Sikh community. The theatre also invited the Sikh community to write a statement expressing its views on the play and this has been given to every audience member, and also read out in the auditorium before each performance.

Sikh community leader Mohan Singh said that feelings were running high over the production. "When they're doing a play about a Sikh priest raping somebody inside a gurdwara, would any religion take it?"

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham, Vincent Nichols, said the play was offensive to people of all faiths.

"The right to freedom of expression has corresponding duties to the common good. Such a deliberate, even if fictional, violation of the sacred place of the Sikh religion demeans the sacred places of every religion."

The theatre said more than 800 people had to be evacuated, security guards were attacked and thousands of pounds' worth of damage was caused during the protest, which occurred on the night of December 18. A foyer door was

destroyed, windows were broken in a restaurant and demonstrators smashed equipment backstage.

As the *Freethinker* was going to press, the theatre announced that it was abandoning the play "to protect its staff and audience", and another Birmingham theatre which said it would stage it instead, has decided against putting it on.

Neal Foster of the Birmingham Stage Company, who originally described the cancellation of the play as "cowardly", said his theatre would not now take it on because of a request from Ms Bhatti, who has been forced into hiding after receiving death threats. She felt that any further performances would increase threats to her safety.

He said in an interview with the BBC that the violent reaction to the play by Sikhs might cause theatres to shy away in future from any plays written by members of ethnic minorities, and stick with plays by white writers.

This, he said, would serve only deepen divisions among the various race groups in Britain..

such reactions and views. I'm certainly not able to condemn anyone who believes that there is no punishment truly capable of righting such wrongs. But I just want to sew a seed in your mind: just think for a moment what a little science could do for these poor, corrupt-ed individuals (who almost certainly had their hatred taught to them in infancy).

Let us pretend that we had a legal system in which responsible judges, not juries, decide the fate of criminals and in which there are no fixed penalties but instead each case is decided on its own merits. (This is impossible, of course, but theoretically is obviously superior as a system, and – in that it would result in greater fairness and is based on scientific rather than commonsensical principles – already shows how a scientific outlook can have positive ethical effects. For a more workable vision of a scientifically-minded criminal justice system, see Richard Dawkins's essay "Trial by Jury" in his recent collection *A Devil's Chaplain*.)

There are good reasons for all of us why revenge-oriented punishment can be a bad idea. In that great, great film *Destry Rides Again* Jimmy Stewart's pacifist sheriff opines that "you hang a man and for some reason, I don't know why, they get to look like heroes. But you put 'em behind bars and they look little and cheap, the way they oughta look!" Sadly, however, only the first half of his assertion is correct. Execution does indeed produce martyrs, but prison is more than capable of doing the same. The prisoner, adopting a pose of resigned, ascetic sagacity, becomes a guru and role model, and the resentment felt over his confinement fuels and reinforces the very same views that led him to such a fate. (So what, you may well be yelling, but remember: this is only a thought experiment.)

Now imagine the following. We take the prisoner to some sort of secure but humane institution, a kind of high-security school. And there, we teach him. It would be compulsory, of course, a condition of his sentence, and he won't want it. But schools all over the country know what it is like to teach rebellious, aggressive, arrogant pupils. It's a challenge: you have to locate and ignite that spark of enthusiasm that catches their imagination. You need special, highly gifted teachers, but such people do exist. (My sister is one.)

The last thing you should try to give him is moral instruction, or outright dogma. You simply give him a dose of the truth (to which he may well have been denied all access in his past). Don't spell out where these enquiries will end up, *ie* with the utter refutation of every dismal, murderous tenet of his pathetic world view. Let him experience the joy of free enquiry for its own sake. Give him the truth

about the physical universe, and the Darwinian truth about ourselves. Carefully guide him step by step, let him discover key principles for himself and observe and prove them experimentally (can't do that with religion!).

By now, your scoffing is getting very loud, I fear. That would never work, you mad, idealistic buffoon! He would resist all such appeals to reason, even if you had Einstein and Darwin themselves instructing him. Once religion gets its talons into an unstable brain, he's lost for good. Perhaps you are right. But what if it did work? Can you imagine how useful the result?

In the first place, he would be well and truly punished. For he would realise for the first time the scale of his endeavour – the vast, epic, monumental monstrosity of what he had done, and had done furthermore out of sheer ignorance and folly, in the name of a brain-washed faith laughable in every aspect other than in the chilling potential for harm he himself embodies.

And what an advocate that crushing sense of guilt would make of him! Far from the gnomish obscurity of the phoney mystic guru, he would never shut up! His penance would be to spread the word until he dies.

He would want to talk and explain endlessly. Indeed, with irony fully intended, he would be a truly messianic force, an evangelist for truth, and for the decency and fairness that the truth promotes. The sheer novelty of his position would guarantee the world's attention, and would chip away at the walls of obscurity and intolerance all over the globe. Here would be a positive moral outcome, and all thanks to the liberating power of science, the new secular church. Religion could learn a lesson! What a parable! A soul saved! What light he would cast! What a sword he would carry!

Okay, okay. I'll shut up: I know when I'm beaten. But I also know which church I'd rather have at the end of my road, and it certainly isn't the one that's there at the moment.

US prime-time TV shows religion 'in a negative light', says Christian watchdog organisation

AMERICAN TV programmes now mention God more often than they did in the mid-1990s – but tend to show organised religion in a negative light, according to a study issued last month by The Parents Television Council.

The council watched every hour of prime-time TV on the US broadcast networks during the 2003-04 season and logged 2,344 mentions of religion. They judged 22 percent of the mentions positive, 24 percent negative and the rest neutral.

The conservative group's previous study, released in 1997, found far fewer mentions of the topic – an average of once per hour compared to three times per hour last season.

But any mention of a religious institution or member of the clergy was at least twice as likely to be negative than positive, the council said.

"Ninety percent of the American people believe in God," said Brent Bozell, the council's president. "It is an important issue to most people. Hollywood is attacking the very thing that they consider important in their own lives. Perhaps Hollywood ought to be changing its world view."

Negative examples varied widely: from comic Jimmy Kimmel joking on the American Music Awards that winners should resist thanking God, to a Catholic priest admitting on *The Practice* that he had had sex with a woman who was later murdered.

Well-publicised scandals about paedophile priests made Catholics particularly vulnerable, the council found.

"Catholicism is in the bulls-eye of the enter-

tainment medium," Bozell said.

His group singled out NBC, saying its mentions of religion were nearly ten times more likely to be negative than positive. *Law & Order* episodes, which tend to have stories ripped from the headlines, helped skew those numbers, the group said.

Bozell was particularly upset by a quip made by the character Karen in NBC's *Will and Grace*: "Let's go buy that historic church and turn it into a gay bar". "This reflected as poorly on the character as on religion," said Bozell.

Ousted US judge may enter politics

ROY Moore, who lost his job as Alabama's chief justice last year after defying a federal judge's order to remove his 5,280lb Ten Commandment monument from public display in



the state's judicial building, is said to be considering running for the post of Governor of Alabama in 2006.

He said he had received a lot of encouragement to enter the race. "I'll be praying about and considering it. Moore had appealed against his sacking, but lost his case. In February last year there was speculation that he might run for President.

Christianity is failing – and failing miserably – in the UK. To survive at all, it needs the sort of help that once would have come from a sympathetic population. That help has all but evaporated, leaving religion to turn for assistance to a higher authority: the government.

That such help is enthusiastically being offered by New Labour is a source of grave concern to the National Secular Society.

In his introduction to the Society's latest annual report, NSS President Denis Cobell referred to the BBC programme *What the World Thinks of God*. The programme producers concluded: "Overall, the results of our poll show that levels of belief and religious activity in the UK are consistently lower than in most of the other countries polled".

At the same time, statistics gathered by the Home Office showed that 80 percent of people in this country rated religion as the least important factor in their life in a list of ten.

And this is reinforced by official figures published by the Church of England earlier this year that showed that in 2002 the average number of people attending a C of E church at least once a week was 1.16 million, down 108,000 from 2000. The statistics also showed a 7 percent decline in formal church membership in 2002 compared with the last time the figure was revised in 1996.

"What these figures indicate is that Britain almost certainly takes the prize as the most irreligious country in the world," said Mr Cobell, adding: "And yet our secular principles are being eroded, perhaps most obviously in our education system. Last year we raised the alarm about the Church of England's plans to increase the number of its publicly-funded church schools. This year there has been an even more startling incursion into our schools by extremist evangelical groups that put creationism and hard-line religious teachings at the centre of the curriculum in 'academies'. And our Prime Minister not only explicitly approves of such extremism being taught at public expense, he actually opened one of the schools that are teaching creationism.

"While the sponsors of academies contribute only £2 million (and, even then, often only over several years), the taxpayers typically stump up a further £23 million plus the total of the running costs in perpetuity, which can even include payments to evangelical organisations for their 'efforts'.

"The Government intends to open 200 of these academies in the next ten years – and many of them will be under the control of religious sponsors with extremely dubious motives and an almost free hand to work the system for their own advantage. Another privilege is that academies, unlike other maintained schools, are freed from the constraints of the national curriculum.

NSS steps up its lenient religious privileges

"The NSS has been working hard over the year to oppose much of the new national framework for religious education, which we consider places far too much emphasis on Christianity at the expense of most other belief systems. Yet non-religious philosophies are optional. Our campaign on this continues.

"In a related area, we achieved some success on school transport. For years, the children of religious families have had school transport subsidies to ferry them to appropriate 'faith schools'. Atheist parents who wanted to avoid such schools had to pay their own transport costs. After much agitation by the NSS we managed to get a parliamentary education committee to accept that non-believers were being discriminated against by not having the same privileged access to transport subsidies to avoid 'faith schools'. The Government's intransigence in the face of repeated recommendations even earned it a rebuke from the Joint Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, which concluded: 'We were persuaded by the evidence of the National Secular Society'.

"An innovation this year for the NSS was the formation of a Scottish campaigning caucus, which we hope will increase our effectiveness north of the border, where religion hangs on to its unique privileges with grim determination.

"And because the UK is now part of the European Union, we have been reinforcing our alliances with our sister groups on the continent, co-operating with them in opposing the privileges being demanded by religious groups – particularly the Vatican – and look set to be perpetuated if the latest draft EU constitution is adopted by member states. We will be co-operating with our European partners in staging a demonstration against this outside the European Parliament in Brussels next year.

"On a more positive note, because of the NSS's campaigning, the Government has at last accepted that the views of atheists and non-believers of all kinds must also be taken into account when they consult with 'faith communities'. A statement on the Home Office website reads: 'A significant minority of the population have no religious affiliation (15.5% according to the 2001 Census). Some of these may subscribe to a non-religious belief system such as humanism; others may have no organised belief system at all. The Government has an obligation to ensure that those who do not hold any religious belief are

not disadvantaged in any way. The recent report of the Government's *Interface with the Faith Communities* highlighted this issue and made a series of recommendations to Government Departments. Some of these recommendations are designed to ensure that the views and interests of those with no religious belief are considered alongside the views and interests of those of the faith communities.'

"It seems that almost weekly there is some event that requires a comment or a reaction

Personally, I feel there is no place for faith schools in modern society, and I think we are getting near the time where we will have to move on. I want a secular system of education without any nod towards the direction of religion. We won't get that just now, because we have a minority that feel it has rights to which it is entitled. I'd far rather we address whether religion is a necessary part of the school curriculum

**– NSS honorary associate
Martin O'Neill MP**

from the NSS, and our team is always on hand to respond. We have had enormous media coverage over the past year, further raising the profile of the NSS and, at the same time, increasing the membership significantly.

"The coming year will be even busier – with a threat from the Home Secretary to reintroduce a law banning 'incitement to religious hatred' and the Labour Party promising even more privileges for religion in its manifesto, such as 'faith-based welfare'.

"All this has to be done on very limited resources. So much more could be achieved if those resources could be increased. And it is with this in mind that we look to you, our loyal members and supporters, to help us out. The Society is running at a substantial deficit, which we cannot sustain indefinitely. Please do what you can to help us keep going – it is important that we maintain our presence in the

lengthy battle against age and influence

political arena and continue to function as by far the most effective organisation looking to protect the rights of non-believers in the present climate of religious power-seeking."

During the year, the NSS was deeply involved – along with its European partner groups – in efforts to stop religion being given special privileges in the EU constitution in the run-up to the final negotiations on the charter. Efforts by the Vatican to have references to Europe's "Christian Heritage" mentioned in the preamble were vigorously opposed, and so was the inclusion of Article 51, which gave a specific right of consultation to religious groups in advance of legislation. The NSS signed a joint declaration with our French counterpart *Libre Pensee* calling for secularism in Europe to be protected. Our Honorary Associate A C Grayling gave a lecture on the Society's behalf at the European Humanist Federation's conference in Rome entitled "Secularism is Essential".

The then Home Secretary David Blunkett gave a speech which encouraged "faith communities" to engage more in the political arena. He said, "Religious faiths have a vital role to play in promoting citizenship" and praised the work of different faiths in community projects and in opening their facilities to local people.

Questions were asked in the House of Lords about the legitimacy and make-up of the Home Office's controversial "faith liaison committee" which is supposed to be advising the Government on policy-making.

The NSS launched an attack on the evangelising charity Samaritan's Purse after it was discovered it was putting Christian literature into shoeboxes that had been filled with gifts for disadvantaged children in the developing world. The campaign took off after NSS member Andy Armitage spoke for the Society on the Radio 4 *Sunday* programme, and this resulted in several high profile supporters – including the Co-operative Society – promising to withdraw from the scheme in future.

Other important events during the year included:

- Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood addressing a meeting in the European Parliament in Brussels about Article 51 of the EU Constitution.

- The NSS's participation in a conference in Paris, which it jointly organised with *Libre*

Pensee, to bring together Europe's secular and humanist groups in an effort to protect the continent's secular values from religious power seeking. Soon after the conference, the summit meeting to finalise the constitution ended in disarray and the document was put on hold.

- An attack by the NSS on Roman Catholic Archbishop Mario Conti of Scotland for trying to stop the BBC criticising his Church. The NSS's objections to the Archbishop's efforts at censorship were carried on the front page of *The Herald* newspaper and caused debate in the Scottish media about whether the BBC was anti-Catholic or whether the Catholic Church was trying to stifle investigation.

- The Society complained to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society after a pharmacist in an Asda supermarket refused to supply a woman with the "morning after" pill on religious grounds. Later in the year a pharmacist in Surrey refused to supply the "morning after pill" to a woman customer. The NSS again protested to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.

- The Society also complained about a *Thought for the Day* by Clifford Longley which he used to rally support for the Catholic Church's attack on the BBC. The NSS wrote to the acting Director of the BBC who told the Society that the BBC would not give in to pressure. The NSS also had its complaint read out on the Radio 4 *Feedback* programme. Alan Bookbinder, head of Religion and Ethics admitted on the programme that Clifford Longley had misused the slot, but that the NSS's complaint had no value because "I don't think that the secular mind can understand the distinction between a political message and spiritual message."

- NSS Honorary Associate Jonathan Miller walked out of the BBC programme *What the World Thinks of God*, appalled by its triviality and its insulting approach to atheists.

- Another Honorary Associate, Martin O'Neill MP, spoke out against religious schools in the Scottish Parliament's Holyrood magazine, saying: "Personally, I feel there is no place for faith schools in modern society, and I think we are getting near the time where we will have to move on. I want a secular system of education without any nod towards the direction of religion. We won't get that just now, because we have a minority that feel it has rights to which it is entitled. I'd far rather we address whether religion is a necessary part of the school curriculum."

- Member Melanie Osborne succeeded in hav-

ing a poster reading "He who does not believe is a fool" taken down from her local railway station. She asked what the reaction would be if she put up a poster saying all believers were idiots.

- Honorary associate Dr Evan Harris MP introduced a Bill into Parliament seeking to outlaw religious selection criteria in state schools. It was defeated after opposition from Labour MP Kevin McNamara, a practising Catholic, who said it was an "attack on religious belief".

- Honorary associate Paul Holmes MP represented the Society on Radio 4's education programme *The Learning Curve* about discrimination in school transport that also featured our member Ian Abbott and his daughter Laura. Keith Porteous Wood appeared with another honorary associate, Alice Mahon MP, on Radio 4's *Westminster Hour* talking about the government "faith liaison committee."

- Council member Dr Anna Behan wrote on behalf of the Society to Paul Bremer, an American ambassador in charge of the transition process in Iraq, asking that he ensure that Yanar Mohammed, head of the Association of Women's Freedom in Iraq, was given personal protection. Ms Mohammed had received many death threats for her efforts to protect women's rights in the country after the war. She also made a formal complaint to the Judicial Studies Board about a new publication *The Equal Treatment Bench Book*. She expressed concern that atheists and those with non-religious belief systems have been effectively overlooked in considerations about religious diversity and religious discrimination. The Board looks set to act on our concerns.

- NSS President Denis Cobell took part in a debate at the London School of Economics with the theme: "Islam or Secularism – which way forward?" Despite a largely Muslim audience, Denis was complimented on the effectiveness of his presentation – "masterful" and "powerful" being two compliments he received from audience members.

- The NSS launched an official complaint, prepared by council member Anna Behan, to the European Commission about the scope of religious exemptions from the new employment discrimination regulations.

- During the year the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority launched its recommended guidelines for a Framework for Religious Education. The framework was condemned by the NSS as being entirely biased towards Christianity, and to a lesser extent other religions, with only a passing acknowledgement of non-religious life-stances.

- In the same period the Government announced that it would not be requiring animals that were ritually slaughtered for religious purposes to be pre-stunned. This was despite being told by its own advisory body that halal and kosher slaughter methods were

cruel. The NSS had made an impassioned plea to the government to reform its slaughter practices, but as usual, concern not to offend the religious has prevailed.

- The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published a report entitled *Social Cohesion and the Divide Between Religious Groups in Britain* which warned that the growing number of "faith schools" risked worsening the divide between racial groups – the government's enthusiasm for "parental choice" was causing completely segregated schools in some cities, the report said. A poll in the *Daily Telegraph* showed 82 percent opposed "faith" (religious) schools while only 7 percent approved of them.

- NSS President Denis Cobell took part in an Oxford Union debate with the proposition "Religion has caused more problems than it has solved". Also taking part were Elaine Storkey, Lembit Opik MP and the Northern Ireland Secretary Paul Murphy.

- The NSS wrote to the Welsh Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Jane Davidson AM, to enquire whether the Welsh Assembly Government would examine the current legal requirement regarding collective daily worship in Welsh schools – with a view to abandoning it.

- The Government launched a consultation on its proposed new Commission for Human Rights and Equality that will bring religion and belief and sexual orientation for the first time under the same anti-discrimination umbrella. It

American student loses religious song lawsuit

A federal judge in Norfolk, Virginia, has dismissed a lawsuit filed by a former public school student who was not allowed to sing a song with religious references at her commencement.

US District Judge Raymond A Jackson ruled last month that Windsor High School principal William Owen and other school officials did not violate Anna Ashby's free-speech rights.

Owen refused to allow Ashby to sing "The Prayer," which mentions faith and God, because he thought the lyrics might violate the US Constitution's doctrine of separation of church and state.

Judge Jackson ruled that school officials had the right to control the content of its graduation ceremonies.

"Unlike a street corner or even a city council meeting, a school is a closed forum," said Robert MacFarland, a lawyer representing the school officials.

acknowledges – after pressure from the NSS – that non-believers have rights that must be taken into account, too.

- The Home Office published statistics showing that 80 percent of the population don't regard religion as being in any way important to the way they describe themselves.

- Baroness Uddin launched a report in the House of Lords calling on the government to "fast-track" 80 Muslim schools into the state system. The report created an enormous backlash opposing the idea.

- Following a request from the NSS, Honorary Associate Professor Richard Dawkins wrote a letter to the *Guardian* drawing attention to the campaign in Doncaster to resist the take-over of a local school by creationists. This kick-started what was to become a major campaign that rapidly mushroomed when Dawkins and the Bishop of Oxford wrote a scathing joint article for the *Sunday Times*.

- The heads of the 25 states of the European Union agreed the wording of the new Constitution. There is no reference to the Christian heritage of Europe in the preamble, but Article 51, which guarantees religious privileges, survived. The constitution must now be approved by the parliaments of all 25 member countries.

- Keith Porteous Wood made clear, at two separate meetings in Parliament, that the bishops' bench in the House of Lords is an anachronism long overdue for abolition, and that the disestablishment of the Church of England was an urgent priority in such a culturally diverse society.

- The Government announced its intention to open 200 new "academies" – many to be handed over to dubious religious bodies such as the Vardy Foundation, which promotes creationism. The NSS condemned the plans as "educational vandalism".

- Keith Porteous Wood met the Director in charge of personnel policy at the Ministry of Defence to discuss how the needs of the non-religious in the armed services can be better served. Following pressure from the NSS, the new draft diversity policy now says: "religious belief is a private matter and that due regard be given to those who have no religion or other belief".

- The NSS discovered that some Church of England schools were using brainwashing-type techniques in their religious education classes. Our protests put the C of E's education establishment in an embarrassing position.

- Keith Porteous Wood and council member Anna Behan met the Director of Public Prosecutions to raise concerns about the way that cases with a "religious aggravation" element were being dealt with by the Crown Prosecution Service. The DPP assured our representatives that the CPS is "a secular body".

- Journalist Nick Cohen wrote about the NSS's protests on religious slaughter in the *New Statesman*. He also wrote an article about the C of E's brainwashing tactics, which resulted in a confrontation between him and their education spokesperson, the Bishop of Portsmouth, on Radio 4's *Today* programme.

David Blunkett's announcement about a proposed new religious incitement law resulted in a busy time for the Executive Director who was a guest on Radio 5 Live, Channel 5 TV news and on BBC London's Drive Time, and featured on BBC Europe talking on the same issue. The NSS was quoted in a Reuters' news report, which appeared in newspapers throughout the world, and was also quoted in a story in the *Guardian*.

- The NSS launched a detailed response – prepared by Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood – to the government consultation on the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights. The NSS raised fears of the body becoming dominated by religious bodies and creating a "pecking order" of discrimination. The report also demanded that the rights of non-believers be fully accommodated along with those of the religious. The Response was widely commended.

- The NSS made a joint submission with the Italian Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics (UAAR) to a consultation on the Green Paper Equality and non-discrimination in an enlarged European Union. The NSS warned that "the EU's secular structure, that has served it so well, is under an unprecedented attack, through both overt and covert attempts to increase religious influence. This is anti-democratic and may well endanger social harmony."

- The NSS responded to a consultation on the proposed Programme Code of the media regulator Ofcom. We argued strongly that religion should not have privileges in broadcasting, that it should not be permitted to recruit directly on TV, nor should it be permitted to raise funds through TV programmes. We recommended that programmes about the paranormal that were not entertainment or investigation should be preceded and succeeded by a warning that charlatans may be at work.

- Another response – prepared by council member Anna Behan assisted by Keith Porteous Wood – was made to the Home Office consultation entitled "Strength and Diversity". The NSS made a renewed call for the emphasis to be taken off "faith communities" as the platform for trying to create community cohesion in society. We deplored the conflating of religion and race and asked once more that the largest minority group in the country – non-believers – be brought into the loop instead of being consistently excluded from committees and consultative groups.

Muslim sectarianism manifests itself in enmity and bloodshed

SINCE the September 11 attack on the twin towers in New York, there has been a huge escalation of media coverage regarding Islam. Millions of words have been written about "the clash of civilisations" and Islam's Holy War against the infidel – but little has been written about the divisions within Islam itself.

Before the invasion – or liberation, as some would have it – of Iraq by coalition forces, there were many news reports concerning two of the largest Muslim groups – the Sunnis and the Shias. There were reports that Saddam Hussein was a Sunni, but not a religious man. There were reports that, although the Shias were in the majority in Iraq, they had been oppressed for many years. There was speculation that – upon liberation – the Shias might seek their revenge against the Sunnis, who had suppressed them ever since the British gave control of Iraq to the Sunnis in 1921.

What the news reports didn't bother to tell us is what precisely is a Sunni? What is a Shia? Certainly, they are both Muslim, but what is it that differentiates them?

Like Christians, Muslims are divided into various sects. Among Christians, there are Catholics and Protestants; there are Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. Similarly, among Muslims, there are Sunnis and Shias; there are Ismailis, Yazidis, and Zaydis.

Like Christians, Muslims are united by their common beliefs; they are divided by details, their understanding of history, and their different interpretations of scriptures that are somewhat shy of being entirely consistent and free from ambiguity.

The major division among Muslims is between the Shias (the followers of Ali) and the Sunnis (the traditionalists). In Pakistan, as in most Islamic countries, the differences between Sunni and Shia were initially confined to academic debate, and violent incidents were extremely rare.

However, the situation took a dramatic turn in the early 1980s. The change in the regional environment, and the emergence of a political, albeit violent, Islam, introduced a new phenomenon of sectarianism to Pakistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought funding from the US and Saudi Arabia for (mostly Sunni) Islamic radical groups to fight against Kabul.

The Islamic revolution that ended the monarchy in Shia Iran ushered in a new wave of Shia radicalism in the region.

And when the then Pakistani military ruler, General Zia-ul-Haq tried to introduce his own concept of Sunni Islam to the country, a bloody conflict broke out.

Radical groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba and Tehrik-e-Jafria have their roots in the policies of those days.

MELANIE KHAN looks at the schisms that divide Muslims

Many believe that during this period, Pakistan became the battleground for a proxy war, a stage on which different countries and organisations belonging to various schools of extremist Islam supported members of their faith and belief.

The phenomenon of the Taliban also fuelled this violence, as a number of Sunni extremist groups found both a refuge and a training ground in Afghanistan. In the last few years, new, more radical groups have emerged, and they target each other with venom.

Between the era of General Zia and General Musharraf, successive Pakistani governments tried to tackle the problem, but without much success.

The events of September 11, 2001, changed the world – Pakistan dumped the Taliban and, in 2002, President Musharraf launched a major campaign against Islamic extremists, banning several groups.

But within weeks many had resurfaced, with new names but the same old intentions.

They were again outlawed in 2003. Yet recent history seems to suggest that declaring radical groups illegal does nothing to solve the problem.

In fact, according to a recent report by Zaffar Abbas, the BBC's Islamabad correspondent, "some Sunni extremist groups have been refining their agenda, joining hands with suspected Al-Qaeda groups in a so-called global jihad".

At least two groups have been found to be involved in attacks against other minorities, particularly Christians.

And yet another group was found to be involved in the two attempts on President Musharraf's life in December 2003. The group's leader, Amjad Farooqui, was recently killed in a gun-battle with security forces.

Senior officials, Abbas reported, believe the present cycle of violence is partly sectarian,

and partly linked to the campaign by the extremist groups to destabilise the Pakistani government.

After a brief lull in violence in 2003, there was a terrible resurgence of blood-letting in 2004.

Since 1980, more than 4,000 people have been killed in Shia-Sunni violence.

"And with new and more ferocious groups emerging with an ever-wider and more violent agenda, it is nearly impossible to say what form it may take in the coming months and years," Abbas said.

Last month, at least 61 people died and 120 were injured when bombs exploded in the Iraqi Shia towns of Najaf and Karbala. According to the BBC's Caroline Hawley, the aim of the bombers – believed to be Sunni insurgents – was to kill as many Shias as possible and to stir up sectarian trouble before elections are held in Iraq at the end of January.

The division between the two main Muslim groups came soon after the death of Mohammed ibn Abdillah, the founder of Islam. The Shia believe that after the Prophet's death, his son-in-law, Ali, should have been given the reins of administration, and they still regard him as the first imam or spiritual leader.

The Sunni, however, believe that the appointment of one of the Prophet's companions, Abu Bakr, as the first Caliph was correct. The Sunnis simply respect Ali as the fourth Caliph of Islam.

In AD661, Ali was murdered and his chief opponent, Muawiya, became Caliph. It was the death of Ali that led to the great schism



The Prophet Mohammed, as depicted in a Turkish painting

between Sunnis and Shias.

Muawiya laid the foundation of family rule in Islam and he was later succeeded by his son, Yazid. But Ali's son Hussein refused to accept his legitimacy, and fighting followed.

Hussein and his followers were massacred in battle near Karbala in AD680.

The deaths of both Ali and Hussein gave rise to the Shia characteristics of martyrdom and a sense of betrayal. But the Sunnis believe a much different story. They believe that the women and children were treated well after the battle, and that Yazid's army simply put down a rebellion by an envious rival.

After the US/UK coalition's invasion of Iraq, the Shias were free to stage a huge commemoration of the battle of Karbala – something they were forbidden to do under Saddam Hussein's regime. Shia Islam has always been the rigid faith of the poor and oppressed, of those waiting for deliverance. Today, the Shia make up about 15 percent of the total worldwide Muslim population.

It is not just the significance of that battle and the role of the Imam that separate the

Shias and the Sunnis. It is also their belief in what is to come. One might ask, if there always was, and will always be, an Imam, then who is he now? That would be the hidden Imam: Mohammed al Mahdi.

The largest sect of the Shias, called the Twelvers, believe there were twelve Imams after Mohammed and that the last, Imam Mahdi, still lives, but he cannot be seen, not until Allah determines it is time to prepare the faithful for Judgement Day.

The Twelvers believe that Imam Mahdi will return to lead the forces of righteousness against the forces of evil in a final, apocalyptic battle. Imam Mahdi will rule the world for several years, and all the people of the world will live in harmony. Then, Jesus will return, along with all the other Imams, and all the believers will be able to enter Paradise.

When Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, many Shias believed that he was Imam Mahdi. Rather than dissuade them from their belief, he assumed the title of Imam. Events since then would suggest that Imam Mahdi he was not.

FOR Shia Muslims, the Ashura is marked as the most important day of the longer Muharram festival. Their Ashura festival commemorates the death of Hussein in AD680.

The Ashura is a day of great mourning, and strong emotions are expressed in the many rituals and activities. The most visual of these rituals is flagellation – sometimes extremely bloody – performed by male Shias, some extremely young.

The ritual is carried out to demonstrate that only physical pain can truly reflect the pain of the Muslim world when Hussein died.

Ashura is not limited to Shias alone. Sunni Muslims mark it too – but for very different reasons.

It is commendable, but not compulsory, for Sunnis to fast on Ashura, and all the devout will do so. The day is considered to be the cel-



celebration of different "historical" events, like the day that Noah left the Ark.

Muslims target Christians in Iraq

CHRISTIANS in Northern Iraq are increasingly being targeted by fanatical Muslim groups, according to a statement issued by the Barnabas Fund, a charity set up to protect Christian minorities in various parts of the world.

The charity says that, since the beginning of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan last October, "the situation has escalated, with the apparent aim of forcing the Christians out of their homeland. Tens of thousands are fleeing".

The first incident occurred on October 16, when five churches were attacked with explosives in Baghdad. The incident was widely covered in the media. But other threats and attacks on Christians go largely unreported, says the charity.

"Photographs of three senior bishops in Mosul are being circulated, with the message that they are agents of the USA, infidels, and that action must be taken against them. Church leaders serving the Christian community in Mosul have received two letters from Islamic militants. The first ordered them to allow Christian women to marry Muslim men (which means the women effectively converting to Islam). This, said the letter, would enable the women to be 'blessed' and 'purified' by their marriages.

"The second letter to church leaders announced the militants' intention of killing one person in every Christian family, as a punishment for the women not covering their heads. This follows pressure and threats from extremists against all women in Mosul, requiring them to cover their head with the hijab (Islamic headscarf). A Christian woman was killed in October for having her head uncovered. Two other Christian women who were seen bareheaded in a market had nitric acid squirted in their faces.

"Specific threats about the clothing of female students at Mosul University have so frightened Christians that an estimated 1,500 Christian women have stopped attending their classes. Christians make up about five percent of the Iraqi population.

Militants are knocking on the doors of Christian homes in Mosul, demanding money. They argue that since the Christians do not contribute weapons and do not fight, they must make a financial donation instead. This follows the model of classical Islam, whereby Christians and Jews were excluded from fighting for the Islamic state but instead required to pay a special tax – *jizya* – to cover the costs of their protection. Leaflets are also being distributed with the message: "Christians go; leave Iraq". Word is being passed around in the mosques, telling Muslims not to buy anything from Christians. Not only are they infidels, it is said, but also they will soon be leaving.

Dutch to act against 'extremist' mosques

The Dutch government has committed itself to a plan of action against the 10 to 25 mosques in the Netherlands where "extremist sermons" are delivered, Interior Minister Johan Remkes has said. Remkes told Parliament that if the criminal law cannot be used against these mosques, the government will consider withdrawing subsidies and residence permits for the Muslim clerics preaching at the mosques. He made his remarks during a parliamentary debate about terrorism last month.

The minister's Liberal VVD colleagues and MPs of the populist LPF have led calls for a crack-down on mosques that are seen as a breeding ground of radicalism. Criticising the coalition government for what she claimed was its inaction to date, Liberal MP Laetitia Griffith said "no single mosque has been disbanded nor an imam deported".

Remkes said the government was not trying to censor mosque sermons. But he said the government planned to bring about "course corrections" in mosques where anti-Western hate or anti-female sermons were being preached.

He said that extremist sermons were being preached in about 10 to 25 mosques.

Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner said his officials were working on ways to identify "hate-sites" on the internet and to track down the people responsible for hosting them.

WHEN I picked up a copy of *Fitness RX* in my local gym, it was purely to find out whether this American bodybuilding magazine had any useful tips on how I might one day soon acquire a washboard midriff with the minimum of effort.

No such luck, but what I did discover – and it amazed me to find a report of this nature in such a magazine (it sat alongside a full page ad for Pro-Plus pills which guarantee a bigger penis) – was an article lambasting the Bush administration for putting the frighteners on US organisations working to promote sexual health among young people.

Accompanied by a powerful illustration (reproduced on the cover), the article revealed that the American government, driven by an increasingly confident coalition of Christian crackpots, is diverting funds away from organisations devoted to preventing unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, and is, instead, funding an increasing number of loony, "faith-based" outfits whose mantra is "abstinence, abstinence and more abstinence."

Worse, these organisations, according to *Fitness RX*, are deliberately embarking on a programme of misinformation. "Critics charge that the government incorrectly asserts that condoms are ineffective, and omits or revises information about contraception and HIV transmission on government websites".

Further investigation into this official "ignorance is bliss" policy turned up a chilling report in the *New York Times* of July 11, 2004. Reporter Mireya Navarro revealed that "for years, Advocates for Youth, a Washington-based organisation devoted to adolescent sexual health, received government grants without much trouble. Then last year it was subjected to three federal reviews".

Its President, James Wagoner, said the reviews were prompted by concerns among some members of Congress that his group was using public funds to lobby against programmes that promoted sexual abstinence before marriage.

"For 20 years, it was about health and science, and now we have a political ideological approach," he said. "Never have we experienced such a climate of intimidation and censorship as we have today."

Wagoner, who insisted there was no reliable evidence that abstinence-only programmes work, said his Advocates for Youth organisation were forced to cut programmes, designed to prevent HIV infections and other sexually-transmitted diseases, as well as suicide, among students at black colleges, and among gay, lesbian and transgender young people.

Wagoner is among the professionals in sex-related fields who have started speaking out against what they say is growing interference

from conservatives in and out of government with their work in research, education and disease prevention.

A result, these professionals say, has been reduced financing for some programmes, and the inducement of self-censorship, with college professors avoiding certain topics in their human sexuality classes, and researchers steering clear of terms like "sex workers" in the title of grant applications for fear of drawing attention to themselves.

Organisations in the US dealing with sexual health matters are coming under increasing pressure from the religious right.

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE examines a deeply disturbing trend

"Programmes almost have to hide what they do," said Richard Parker, a professor at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. "We have a major challenge ahead of ourselves."

Professor Parker is also a co-chairman of the International Working Group on Sexuality and Social Policy, an association of researchers and other professionals, which released a report last summer citing examples of what it called "sex policing" under the Bush administration.

Conservative members of Congress and groups defend the new scrutiny, saying some research on sexuality is frivolous and a waste of taxpayers' money.

Spending on such programmes had also been vigorously opposed by the Traditional Values Coalition, a group that represents mainly churches.

Though many professionals in the field of sex education are reluctant to speak out for fear their government financing will be affected, some have started denouncing what they regard as attacks on science and public health.

In May, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counsellors and Therapists called the Bush administration's increased financing of abstinence-only programmes at the expense of comprehensive sex education "a violation of children's human rights".

"Over 40 percent of 15-year-olds are sexually active and they're not getting information on how to protect themselves from pregnancy and diseases," Barnaby B Barratt, the Association's president, said.

And, last June, Nils Daulaire, the president of the Global Health Council, an international group of health care professionals, denounced the Bush administration's decision to withdraw \$367,000 in financing for the council's annual conference – the first time the federal government had withheld

sponsorship in more than 30 years.

Daulaire said: "It's time to say to those who would stifle debate and dialogue, and to those in power who would allow them to prevail, 'Have you no shame?'"

As far back as February, 2003, a stinging critique of the administration's use of scientific information by the Union of Concerned Scientists included evidence from Margaret Scarlett, an epidemiologist who left the federal Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in 2001 after 15 years with the agency because of what she called "an unheard-of level of micromanagement in the programmatic and scientific activities of the CDC".

In an interview, Ms Scarlett, who now works as a private health consultant in Atlanta, said she was disturbed by the trends in the agency to promote condoms as ineffective in preventing disease, to omit information about contraception on websites and to oppose new financing for comprehensive sex education programmes.

Another development which has left the abstinence lobby choking on their pretzels are two vaccines produced by GlaxoSmithKline and Merck which are designed to protect women against cervical cancer. According to a study in the British medical journal, the *Lancet*, both vaccines target human papillomavirus, or HPV, which causes cervical cancer. Spread through intimate skin-to-skin contact, HPV can also cause genital warts.

It is estimated that the vaccines could save the lives of almost a quarter of a million women each year.

HPV is sexually-transmitted, and what has set alarm bells ringing in the abstinence camp is that studies have shown that the best strategy to protect the largest number of women is to administer the vaccine to 12-year-old girls. It is at around this age that the vaccine is thought to be most effective in combating possible infection when the child becomes sexually active.

Most cases of HPV occur between the ages of 15 and 25, with a large increase beginning around the age of 19.

Not surprisingly, organisations in America like the Abstinence Clearing House, Concerned Women for America and the Family Research Council are appalled at the idea. Wendy Wright, senior policy director of CWFA says it will send a message to 12-year-olds that "you can now become sexually active". She is not against the vaccine *per se*, but would only want it administered at a much later age, when, of course, it would be least effective. And Pia de Solenni, of the FRC, trotted out the tired old view that abstinence was the only way of combating HPV as well as other sexually-transmitted diseases. Although she refused to endorse the vaccine, she thought that, if it were to be administered, it should only be offered to women of at least 18.

Photographic evidence

I NOTE that the Rev Ian Paisley requires photographic proof of the IRA's weapon destruction programme. I wonder if he demanded photographic proof of the crucifixion before taking up the ministry?

FABIAN ACKER
London

Barbara Barrett

HAVING seen the original article by Barbara Barrett in your publication on the discrepancy between treatment of Animal Rights protestors in this country and, for example, Muslims, and the irrational letters opposing her, I feel I must write in support of her views.

The last letter from Peter McKenna was so convoluted in its somewhat sneering attitude it took time to realise what he meant. No way did I see the original article as an attack on "entire groups of people". Indeed she made clear such views were not her intention. The fact she mentioned restaurants raises the thought that her critics themselves jumped to the prejudice that she considers foreigners belong only in restaurants – totally unjustified and irrational. But, we do owe much to those from other countries who have brought healthier and interesting food in place of the beef-guzzling of the Brits in the past.

Just what motivates such critics of her article? If they can see an attack on all newcomers here perhaps I can jump to the conclusion that Peter McKenna, for example, dislikes the thought that someone else is writing articles once his province, as he tells us – and a woman to boot! Perhaps he scorns a more direct view in place of his bone-picking attitudes as to what we should be against.

I too do not want to be ruled by Islam - or any other religion. It is an insult to the untold numbers of people who suffered and fought against tyranny of the ruling classes here and threats from abroad in the wars for newcomers here to take rights and benefits so hard won and then have the cheek to run us down and take over. Surely the events of murder and threats in Holland and Belgium – given little coverage in the main TV news – should be a warning.

Doubtless many followers are peace-loving and sincere, but since their leaders are so dictatorial, why are we allowing our public money to be spent by the Government on funding their schools – or any religious brainwashing school – so that more of their unfortunate children can be brainwashed?

The matter of Government attacks on Animal Rights protestors seems of no consequence to her critics. This onslaught is to protect the vested interests of un-elected Lord Sainsbury and the pharmaceutical companies from the smokescreen of testing on animals to

pass their drugs – one such company even offering a heart specialist the equivalent of two years' salary if he would suppress information on the dangers of their drugs.

We certainly have much to be concerned about.

M.ALISON
London

Events in Holland

I TOO have been wondering "what on earth is happening to Holland?" (*Freethinker*, December).

I have never been particularly patriotic, but to see the country of my birth gradually being torn asunder is a matter of deep concern.

Ever since the loss of its empire, Holland, like Britain, has nurtured feelings of guilt for the wrongs perpetrated during colonial rule. Since the war the Dutch have operated a virtually open-house policy for immigrants from distressed areas around the world.

People have been made welcome and given massive social support to help them integrate. It had been naively assumed that incomers would soon adopt the Dutch way of life and fit in seamlessly.

But what has been overlooked is that people come with baggage. Their own culture, their own religion. The notion of multiculturalism is akin to communism; a laudable objective but extremely hard to achieve.

It has nothing to do with racism. Immigrant communities in Holland, as in Britain, live in isolation not because of the colour of their skin but because of their different culture and religion.

Not all immigrants are fundamentalists, but they are sufficient in number to cause increasing friction with the progressive secular lifestyle that the indigenous Dutch are now adopting.

It is ironic that just when Holland has got the better of its reactionary Calvinistic tradition and was getting close to becoming a model secular society, the envy of the Western world, the clock is now being turned back because the increasing numbers of immigrants are unwilling to follow the progressive trend. The alarm was first raised by Pim Fortuyn, not a raving fascist as is often alleged, but a Left-leaning academic, who could see that if nothing were done his beloved Holland would be gone forever.

It is one thing to be lending a helping hand to the third world. But let it be done on their patch. To attempt multicultural amalgamation on the large scale is a recipe for disaster. Without the religious ingredient it may just be possible, but for the Dutch to see hundreds of mosques going up just when the churches are coming down is too much to take.

Islam is not just a religion, it is a way of life, a blueprint for society.

No country should be asked fundamentally

to change its heritage within a matter of one or two generations. It was wrong what was done in some colonies; it is equally wrong to reverse roles.

TONY AKKERMANS
Shropshire

'Sky pilots'

CHARLES Hanson's letter "Challenging Prison Chaplains" (*Points of View*, September 2004) was a gospel of truth and I would like to endorse the points he made.

This articulation and analysis of the dilemma that humanists/atheists find themselves in within the prison system is spot on! I know because I have been there.

Whilst there may be a need for some inmates to find comfort in a "safe", neutral authority figure dressed in black, it is my opinion that inmates generally view them with suspicion, and refer to them as "sky pilots".

Most long-term inmates are aware that these "sky pilots" are often called upon for their opinions on parole reviews. Consequently, it is obvious that some will swear to being "born again" into a renewed Christian faith.

Some inmates utilise church services for time out of cells and a chance to meet their mates. An added attraction is the sharing of tea and biscuits with selected civilians after the services. The prison authorities know this and encourage certain inmates to attend as an intelligence exercise, for example, to learn and impart knowledge of subversive activities to a "sky pilot". This is done by those in search of a favourable report.

As an atheist myself, I fully appreciate Mr Hanson's sentiments and I wish him well in his endeavours.

JOE T-S
London

(Full name and address supplied)

THIS is a belated comment on Charles Hanson's letter in the September *Freethinker*.

Following a talk to my local Humanist Group in April by the Governor of The Mount Prison, near Hemel Hempstead, two of us visited the chaplaincy there and met the three (paid) chaplains. It was a friendly and productive meeting, in complete contrast to a meeting two or three years ago, when the then chaplain reacted very differently.

The chaplains told us that they worked as a team, offering help to anyone who needed it, and treating the whole person. There are another 25 or so unpaid chaplains representing different faiths. (including pagans!), who visit as and when a prisoner requests.

Prison induction forms now give prisoners the opportunity to tick a "Nil religion" box. Countrywide some 30% of prisoners do so. We were told that about 20% of prisoners at



The Mount have ticked the "Nil religion" box, the chaplain thinking that most believed in a personal god but were unwilling to put down a specific religion. There were apparently a few agnostics but, surprisingly, no atheists.

There was a genuine willingness to add Humanism as an option, and we have sent them books and magazines on Humanism. I have just received security clearance, and hope to visit the prison again shortly and be available as a "Humanist Representative". (Is there a better word?)

Charles Hanson bemoans the fact that interest from the Humanist community in taking on this role is almost non-existent. I agree with him. I would be delighted to see Humanists carrying out this task in hospitals and the armed forces as well as prisons, but unfortunately the relatively advanced age of most Humanist group members and their limited numbers make this very unlikely in the near future. The success of ceremonies over the last few years provides a good example of an expanding Humanist service, but the public nature of ceremonies makes them self-advertising in a way which prisons, hospitals and armed forces cannot emulate.

ANTONY CHAPMAN
Wendover

Hounded out for her secularist stance

AS A former lecturer at York University in Toronto, Canada, I have had some time to reflect on my experiences of teaching at that institution as a secularist and a humanist promoting an anti-racist, anti-sexist curriculum.

I was Assistant Professor from 1987 to 1994. My untimely departure from the university is quite interesting from a secularist perspective because I was forced out of the university for upholding a secular curriculum.

During my years teaching at York University, I was proselytised by my colleagues who were of all religions and bullied to teach a religious curriculum (without results) in team-taught courses which were explicitly to deal with literature and art with no advertised religious content.

I am fortunate to report that most of my colleagues from that period are either dead (and hopefully buried) or retired and hopefully no longer of influence, although I doubt it. Unfortunately, they were grooming a new generation of covert religious instructors to take over from them.

In my own case, I refused to teach any religious content in my courses. For my efforts, my colleagues began to manipulate the student intake into my classrooms and I began to get harassed by students who demanded that I talk about religion in my tutorials.

I politely told them that this was a secular university and that my curriculum was secular. This did not deter them. They persisted for

months during question time asking me what the "spiritual" content of the art and literature was. At the end of one seven-month course, a religious student snapped at me "Why won't you change?"

This sort of behaviour went on for years. For my efforts, in my final year at the university I had two members of the Canadian Armed Forces (officers, they claimed) in my classroom, one of whom who led disruption in the tutorial for my course every week for the entire two hours of the class for five months.

I had to consult my "team director", a former Roman Catholic priest, who was actually an apostate to the best of my knowledge, and started proceedings to expel the student(s) from the classroom.

It is sad to report that Canada is a highly religious country, with people in positions of privilege using their positions to bully subordinates and youth into religious submission and that the campuses are hotbeds for religious lobby groups. The 2001 Census indicates that 82.6% of Canadians felt coerced into registering themselves as religious.

I subsequently joined the humanists but it was too late for my career. I did however manage to register written reports on harassment of all kinds I experienced in the university to four different bodies of the university. However, as is to be expected, nothing was ever done about it.

I am wondering if any readers of the *Freethinker* have experienced something similar in the universities? My career is completely finished. As far as I am concerned Canada is a crypto-fascist police state with lecturers and students acting as bullies and informants and just one of their targets are the secularists.

E L RAMSAY
Canada

Church should be grateful

IT beggars belief that, in a world blighted by poverty, famine, disease and war, religious leaders can find the time to speak out against something as trivial as a waxwork nativity scene featuring David Beckham and his wife Victoria as Joseph and Mary.

The whole thing was, as Arnold Schwarzenegger would say, a bit of harmless fun – a joke. I mean, what else could it have been, given that three of the lamest brains on the planet, George W Bush, Tony Blair and the Duke of Edinburgh, were portrayed as the three wise men!

To my mind, a more significant dimension to this tableau was that it poked fun – intentionally or accidentally, I do not know – at Christian art, the bulk of which is as ludicrous as it is tacky.

Jesus, for example, is almost universally portrayed as blond and blue-eyed, and the images of him – well-hung on the cross, with

his broad shoulders, slender hips, lithe thighs and a six-pack abdomen – are nothing if not extremely homo-erotic.

The truth is that if Jesus existed at all, he most likely would have looked more like Yasser Arafat than Leonardo de Caprio. Indeed, a biblical face built up from an ancient skull found in Jerusalem was proffered by the BBC in 2001 as a credible likeness of Jesus, and it was not a pretty picture. If I remember correctly, church leaders at the time were less than enamoured with this image.

Instead of griping, religious leaders should be extremely grateful that Madame Tussauds used two very attractive models for Joseph and Mary, rather than portray these two fairy-tale characters more accurately as a pair of hairy, swarthy, beetle-browed cave-dwellers.

DENNIS WILSON
Manchester

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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 Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, February 1, 7.30pm. Public meeting. Subject and speaker to be announced.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

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

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 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.

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 Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh Group: Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday,

January 11, 7.30pm. Granville Williams: *The BBC – past it's use-by date?*

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, January 27, 8pm. Public meeting: Topics from a hat..

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, February 2, 8pm. Frank McDermott: *What is truth?*

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

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 020 7242 8037/4. Monthly programmes on request.

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

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

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. 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: brianmclinton@btinternet.com
website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

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

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