

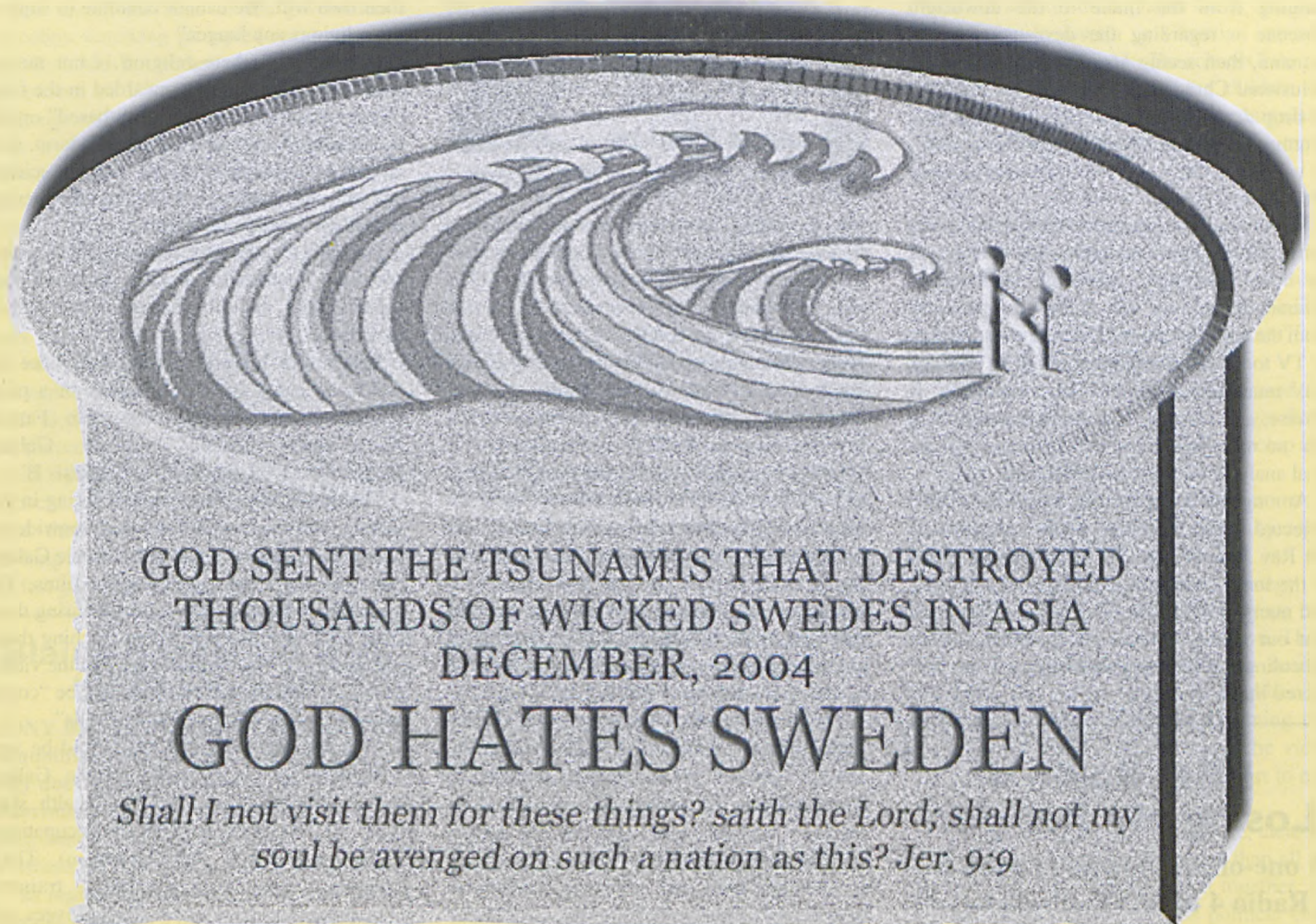
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The

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# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881



## Asian tsunami unleashes torrents of tosh and intolerance

– see report on page 10

### Also in this issue:

**Jerry Springer, the Opera:** BBC refuses to buckle under threats from Christian zealots – see pages 2 & 4

**Chief Inspector of Schools** accused of 'Islamophobia' – p4

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IN SHEER exasperation, Jerry Springer – in hell after being shot by a corpulent, nappy-clad coprophiliac (who actually intended killing a tap-dancing Ku Klux Klansman) – looks down on God, Jesus, the Devil, the Virgin Mary and Adam and Eve – and tells this squabbling, wholly-disfunctional mythical group: “fuck you all.”

I whooped with delight. After spending a deeply depressing week ploughing through emails and web pages detailing the views – ranging from the inane to the downright obscene – regarding the devastating Asian tsunami, then seeing a rag-tag of dim-witted, delusional Christians clamouring for the BBC to drop *Jerry Springer, the Opera*, I was in a thoroughly foul mood when I finally sat down to watch the show, and see for myself what all the fuss was about.

Within minutes, my mood had changed, my spirits lifted. This, to my mind, was television at its best: stunningly produced, challenging, meaningful and very, very funny – a world away from the mindless pap which comprises the bulk of TV today. Most important of all, its message was unashamedly humanistic: humanity is diverse, and diversity is to be celebrated; there are no moral absolutes; and religion is, in the final analysis, a load of old ballcocks.

Among those hysterical no-brainers who objected to the screening of the musical was the Rev John Webster, of Brighton. He wrote to the local paper, the *Argus*, saying: “What I and many other TV licence payers object to is that our money was used to produce a show ridiculing all that we hold most dear and sacred in our lives.”

## BBC Radio 4 Losing My Religion

A one-off documentary for BBC Radio 4 to be broadcast later this year

BBC Radio 4 would like to hear from people of all previous religious backgrounds and experiences who would like to share their experiences of leaving their faith.

Was it liberating? Was it frightening? Does it offer freedom? Does it leave you isolated? What prompted you to lose faith in the first place?

All experiences welcome and I am particularly interested in hearing from those who have left non-Christian religions.

If you feel that you would like to be involved or would like more information please email :[Nicola.humphries@bbc.co.uk](mailto:Nicola.humphries@bbc.co.uk) or call direct on 0121 567 6737. All calls are confidential. We look forward to hearing from you.

And what is wrong with that? History has shown us that the things Christians “hold most dear and sacred” led to the most appalling acts of cruelty and barbarity in the past. And its present record is hardly any better. We would still be in the Dark Ages but for those brave souls who dared to ridicule religion.

This point was hammered home in the *Independent* last month by Gillian Sathanandan, who wrote: “We in Europe were

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE has his spirits lifted by Jerry Springer, the Opera**



once a stifled, theocratic, feudal, crusading society that not only burned books but people too, and it was blasphemy that set us free. The term “blasphemer” has been ennobled by the likes of Socrates, Galileo, Kazantzakis and Joyce. We should remember the great debt that society and democracy owe to heresy and blasphemy and implore our MPs to rid us at last from this long-outmoded blasphemy law.”

Of course, there are many non-believers who are uncomfortable with full-on attacks on the religious, and feel that their beliefs should be respected – or, at the very least, tolerated. But if those beliefs are just plain dumb, we would, in effect, be endorsing stupidity. By encouraging the religious to wallow in pools of ignorance, those pools will soon become oceans that will engulf us all.

The issue of “do we tolerate or do we attack” most recently came under discussion among members of the recently-established Anti-Christian Movement in the US. One member posted these thoughts on the group’s internet message-board:

“Our long-term goal – the end of religion’s domination of the mind of man, is going to happen individual by individual – a long, slow, arduous process. It starts by capturing the minds of the young, before they become enmeshed in religious dogma. Each time you wean a teenager away from religious thought, and a religious person dies, you mark a 1 in the plus column.

“And frankly, I’d rather it be that way. I don’t particularly savour the idea of destroying someone’s faith. We all know people for whom faith is like breathing – the end of their faith would be the end of their life. It is what sustains them. I want no part of yanking people off of “life-support” (not in this sense, anyway). Let them die peacefully, blissful in their ignorance, believing they are going to see Jesus in the afterlife.

“Instead, we set about getting their grandchildren before it’s too late.”

This view drew an immediate response from

another group member, who pointed out that “Letting people live in their blissful ignorance would be fine, if it did not affect the rest of us – but it does. The more people who are allowed to hold on to this ignorance, the worse off we all are. If you take away a child’s pacifier, it will learn to live without it. If you take the shepherd away from his sheep, the sheep will learn to lead themselves. Human beings don’t ‘need’ anything to survive but the earth and their own will. We cannot continue to support the religious any longer.”

In America, where religion is not merely respected but is actively rewarded in the form of huge state subsidies to “faith-based” organisations, ignorance has become the norm, with attacks being made from all sides on science and the arts, radio and TV, by the newly-empowered Religious Right.

Hardly a day goes by without some or other religious organisation making claims of such breath-taking stupidity that one is left reeling in disbelief.

Just before I began writing this piece, an American contact sent me a copy of a press release issued by the American Family Association, headed “Movie Gallery Employees at Risk from HIV, Hepatitis B”.

The AFA claims that people working in this video rental chain of 300 stores nationwide are at risk from disease because the Movie Gallery rents out hard-core pornographic films. The gist of their warning is that people hiring these films will have had sex while watching them, and that there was a real danger that the videos or DVDs, or their containers, might be “contaminated” with “infected bodily fluids”.

Said the AFA: “Employees should be very concerned for their health. Movie Gallery should immediately implement health standards as prescribed by OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration). These include ‘Universal Precautions’ training, Hepatitis B vaccinations for all employees, and contamination control stations.”

One wonders whether the AFA will follow this absurd scare-mongering with a warning to everyone working in public libraries. After all, millions of books contain passages that could sexually arouse readers, not least the Bible, which contains passages designed to inflame the passions of the most jaded of sado-masochists.

Towards the end of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*, Springer, in despair over his failure to bring about closure in the long-running feud between Christianity’s main protagonists, tells Jesus, whom he describes as “the hypocrite son of the fascist tyrant on high”: “Grow up ... and put some fucking clothes on!”

Instead of fertilising religion with reverence, or worse, putting large dollops of funding its way, we should be telling believers: “Grow up, and put your infantile delusions behind you!”



# Chief Inspector of Schools accused of 'Islamophobia' over 'faith schools' remark

REPEATED warnings by secularists in the UK that "faith schools" are divisive and breed cultural conflict are at last being taken seriously in some official circles.

Last month the head of the government's education watchdog prompted an angry reaction from Muslim leaders after he claimed that the growth of Islamic faith schools posed a challenge to the coherence of British society.

In a deliberate intervention criticised as "irresponsible" and "derogatory" by senior Muslim representatives, the Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell, claimed that a traditional Islamic education did not equip Muslim children for living in modern Britain.

Diversity and acceptance of different cultures was potentially a great strength, Mr Bell said, but it could also undermine "our coherence as a nation" if taken to extremes.

Mr Bell used a speech about citizenship to the Hansard Society – an educational charity which promotes effective parliamentary democracy – to explore how youngsters determine their "national identity" through the teaching of citizenship in schools. He turned to the fast-growing independent faith school sec-

tor – which includes about 100 Muslim, 100 evangelical Christian and 50 Jewish schools – broadening his argument to say: "Faith should not be blind. I worry that many young people are being educated in faith-based schools, with little appreciation of their wider responsibilities and obligations to British society." The new figures on independent faith schools are contained in Ofsted's new annual report, which will be published this month and which will say that many Muslim schools "must adapt their curriculum to ensure that [they provide] pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England and help them to acquire an appreciation of and respect for other cultures in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony".

Mr Bell said: "The growth in faith schools needs to be carefully but sensitively monitored by government to ensure that pupils at all schools receive an understanding of not only their own faith but of other faiths and the wider tenets of British society. We must not allow our recognition of diversity to become apathy in the face of any challenge to our coherence as a nation ... I would go further and say that an awareness of our common heritage as British citizens, equal under the law, should enable us to assert with confidence that we are intolerant of intolerance, illiberalism and attitudes and values that demean the place of certain sections of our community, be they women or people living in non-traditional relationships."

The role of single faith schools in the British education system has long been controversial. Last year a report from a group of Muslim academics and educationalists urged ministers to fast-track some Muslim schools into the state system, claiming that "institutional racism" was preventing the government from setting up Muslim state schools from scratch.

In his speech Mr Bell said that "traditional Islamic education does not entirely fit pupils for their lives as Muslims in modern Britain". He also warned that diversity should not be interpreted as separation or segregation.

Dr Mohamed Mukadam, chairman of the Association of Muslim Schools, accused Mr Bell of Islamophobia and challenged him to a public debate on the issue. Mr Mukadam, who is also principal of Leicester Islamic Academy, which has 700 pupils aged five to 16, said: "I am very surprised to hear Mr Bell's comments and I challenge him to come up with evidence that Muslim schools are not preparing young people for life in British society. It's a misconception of Islamic schools and a further example of Islamophobia. For a person in his posi-

tion to make such a generalised comment just beggars belief."

Dr Mohammad Naseem, the chairman of Birmingham's Central Mosque, said: "Muslims schools do not harm social cohesion and neither do Jewish or Christian schools. Why he is picking on Muslim schools I do not understand. Why would teaching children the principles of their faith affect community cohesion? It's unfortunate that he has made these comments."

While welcoming David Bell's observations, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said that the chief inspector had touched on only one aspect of a much larger problem. The government, he said, was set on a course to open many more "faith schools" of all denominations.

"We object to state funds being used for proselytising. There is also a real danger that a form of educational apartheid will develop as a result of 'faith school' expansion.

"Not content with instituting education policies which mitigate against community cohesion, some of the proposals in the Government's recently launched strategy 'to increase race equality and build a strong and cohesive society' are similarly divisive. These include the 'incitement to religious hatred' provisions and the growing trend of addressing minorities as religious groups, assuming that the religious leaders are reflecting the views and attitudes of those who they purport to represent.

"At the most conservative estimate, there are three times as many non-believers than all the minority religious groups added together, yet the non-religious have far less political clout than religious leaders," he said.

## Biblical artefacts faked

FOUR Israeli antiquities collectors and dealers have been charged with running a sophisticated forgery ring that spanned the globe and produced a treasure trove of fake Bible-era artefacts, including some that were hailed as major archaeological finds.

Police said they forged what were presented as perhaps the two biggest biblical discoveries in the Holy Land in recent years — the purported burial box of Jesus' brother James and a stone tablet with written instructions by King Yoash on maintenance work at the Jewish Temple.

Scholars said the forgers were exploiting the deep emotional need of Jews and Christians to find physical evidence to reinforce their beliefs.

## Blair's obsession with 'faith schools'

TONY Blair never ceases to emphasise his unqualified admiration for Islam. Not only does he read the Koran, he is also determined to increase the number of faith-based schools, particularly for Muslims, in the state sector.

In reply to critics who doubt that such schools will have a full science curriculum, Dr Nadeem Malik of Imperial College wrote to the *Independent* the other day pointing out that the winner of the 1979 Nobel prize for physics, Abdus Salam (1926-1996), "was a devout Muslim from Pakistan."

Indeed he was. But Dr Malik omitted to mention one salient fact. "You will be interested to know," Abdus Salam wrote to an acquaintance in 1982, "that officially I have already been excommunicated from Islam by the orthodox priests".

The mullahs who excommunicated the greatest scientist that the Islamic world has produced are, of course, precisely the kind of people whom Blair now wants to entrust with the minds of children in Britain.

— *Private Eye*, November 16, 2001

# Christian bullies fail to stifle 'Heart of the Beholder'

A FILM which tells the story of how a group of Christian extremists wrecked the lives of an American couple who owned a video rental company has, despite all the odds, finally been made, and is due for release this month.

*Heart of the Beholder* tells the true story of how the couple were targeted by a group of fundamentalists because they were the only ones who dared to stock Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The couple stood up against relentless harassment, intimidation and even death threats. When they refused to buckle, the zealots blackmailed the District Attorney into destroying their business and family.

When news got out that this story might be the subject of a feature film, Christians again mobilised, and began targeting Hollywood production companies who expressed an interest in making the movie. No-one in Hollywood had the guts to stand up to this level of intimidation, and the film was never made.

But a small independent group, determined that *Heart of the Beholder* – in essence an exposé of the power of the Religious Right – should not be stifled, and managed to raise \$500,000 to put it into production, and it was completed last month. All through the production, the company received thousands of hate-filled letters and e-mails, many of them containing computer viruses.

News of the completion of the film came at precisely the same time that Christian fanatics in this country tried to bully BBC2 into dropping *Jerry Springer, the Opera*. It was reported that threats were made against BBC personnel by rabid Christians, but this was denied by Stephen Green, Director of Christian Voice, who helped orchestrate the protests against the BBC. "These reports are not true. We are Christians, and by nature peaceful," he said in a radio interview.

The National Secular Society sprang to the BBC's defence, and urged it not to cave in to intimidation.

Terry Sanderson, Vice President of the National Secular Society, said: "This organised attack is the latest in a series of attempts by religious interests to control what we can see or say in this country. The BBC has already wasted £2.5 million of licence-payers' money by cancelling the satirical cartoon series *Popetown* at the behest of the Catholic Church. In Birmingham, the play *Bezhti* was cancelled after violent protests by Sikhs. This growing power of the religious lobby over our media



A scene from *Heart of the Beholder*

must be halted or free expression in this country will be severely compromised."

"It is the BBC's formal duty to reflect society and bring such plays to a wider audience who might not otherwise be able to see them at a theatre. All the research by TV regulators shows that British audiences have a high tolerance threshold for swearing on TV, as long as it is relevant to the context. The programme was scheduled for a late hour, with adequate warnings about its nature, and viewers had a right to see it. Those likely to be offended have a similar right to turn it off."

Mr Sanderson added that it was the BBC's

duty to cater to all audiences, and not just one section of the community. "Religious broadcasting already has a disproportionate amount of air time," he said, "We shouldn't now see minority religious leaders dictating what the rest of us can and can't see. If we follow that route, there would be hardly any contemporary drama on TV.

"Drama and comedy are about pushing the boundaries. *Jerry Springer, the Opera* must go ahead, not only because it is worthwhile drama, but also to show that the BBC is fairly run and does not give in to opposition from powerful minority interest groups."

## Muslims and Christians clash at NJ Funeral

A FUNERAL for an Egyptian Christian couple and their two daughters slain last month in Jersey City, New Jersey, ended in violence when protesters carrying anti-Muslim signs, and shouting anti-Islam slogans, converged on the Coptic Orthodox Church where the service was being held.

One sign, above a photograph of the smiling family, read, "American Family Beheaded on American Soil. Welcome Bin Laden." Another read "Terrorists Reached Our Home."

"Muslims as a group kill people," said Ashaf Baul, a marcher at the head of the procession. "Nobody else slaughters people."

Investigators are looking into the possibility that Hossam Armanious, 47, his 37-year-old wife, Amal Garas, and their daughters, Sylvia, 15, and Monica, 8, were slain by a Muslim angered over postings that the father placed in an Internet chat room.

Copts generally live in peace with Muslims, but violence flared in Egypt recently, when protests got out of hand.

The New Jersey family's bodies were found bound and gagged, their throats and heads stabbed repeatedly.

After the bodies were loaded into four black hearses to be taken to a cemetery, clashes between mourners and protesters erupted in the street outside the church.

# Muslims to set up their own political party in Holland

A GROUP of Muslims in Amsterdam plan to launch the Muslim Democratic Party (MDP) in May, and contest local elections in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht, according to their spokesman Mohammed Jabri.

He told news agency ANP that the group was also looking at contesting the local election in a city in the province of North Brabant where a large number of Muslims live.

Depending on how well the party grows, Jabri said it might contest the next general election. But he also said the party was having some difficulty in attracting people with the expertise to lead the party.

The establishment of the MDP comes after the controversial Arab European League (AEL) was founded, originally in Antwerp, Belgium, by Dyab Abou Jahjah to fight what he said was discrimination against Muslims and Arabs. It now has a branch in the Netherlands and has forged a link with the MDP.

But the MDP also wants to remain independent, and is in discussions with well-known and less-well known Muslims to get the party off the ground in the big cities. Contact was also being sought with non-Muslims, Jabri said, "in order to get a balance within the party's management".

The announcement of the new party comes days after former Immigration and Integration Minister Hilbrand Nawijn said Muslims should assimilate into Dutch society.

He said that Muslim schools should be banned in the Netherlands, even though the Constitution enshrines the right to establish religious schools.

Following the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam last November, there has been a spate of tit-for-tat attacks against Muslim and Christian buildings.

Figures released late last year showed that the majority of attacks after the murder were targeted against Muslims.

MDP spokesman Jabri is a writer and columnist for a website for Muslims in the Netherlands. The website's homepage features a cartoon of a person dropping a Jewish Star of David into a wastepaper basket.

A column on one page "thanks" Muslim critics Ayaan Hirshi [sic] Ali, Van Gogh, Geert Wilders and people like them for helping in one go "to make young Muslims in the Netherlands more aware of their Islamic roots".

Van Gogh was shot and stabbed to death apparently because of his movie *Submission*,

which accused the Koran of sanctioning violence against women.

MP Hirsi Ali, who collaborated on the film, and MP Wilders went into hiding after the murder following threats to their lives for criticising Islam. Both Wilders and Hirsi Ali have since returned to public life.

The article on the website finishes by noting: "Since 9/11 [September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon] one million Americans have become Muslims. God's ways are truly unfathomable".

Meanwhile, the Dutch authorities have brought an additional charge against the man accused of Van Gogh's murder. Dutch-Moroccan national Mohammed B, a suspected Islamic militant, is now accused of preventing Hirsi Ali from carrying out her work, a charge that carries a life sentence. The 26-year-old faced a pre-trial hearing in Amsterdam Court on January 26.

The latest charge relates to disrupting the democratic process and dates back to 1886, when the law was enacted to tackle revolutionary crimes. The charge is also expected to be brought against all 12 members of the alleged terror network Main City Group (Hofstadgroep). Among other allegations, the suspects are accused of plotting to kill Hirsi Ali and Wilders.

One of the suspected members of the network, 18-year-old Samir A, is accused of planning an attack against the parliament in The Hague and other targets, such as the Borssele nuclear reactor and Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. His trial will start in Rotterdam Court on February 24.

The new charge is based on the letter that was left pinned to Van Gogh's body with a knife, warning that Hirsi Ali and several other politicians were next. She subsequently went into hiding and did not reappear in Parliament until mid-January, when she vowed to maintain her stance against radical Islam.

Hirsi Ali was also targeted by a rap group called DHC (Den Haag Connection). In a "dis" – a rap song written to disrespect a person – DHC sang about wanting to break the Somali-born MP's neck. The lyrics also suggested an assassination was being prepared in which she would be killed in a bomb attack.

A public prosecutor in the Hague has asked a court to impose a 150-hour work order on the rap group for allegedly threatening the life of MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The court was also asked to impose a four-month suspended sentence on the rappers.

## Police investigate firebrand cleric's latest remarks

SCOTLAND Yard last month opened an investigation into alleged remarks by Muslim cleric Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad that could have broken terror or racism legislation.

In a live webcast, the cleric apparently suggests young people should join al-Qaeda and describes Osama Bin Laden as an "emir".

MP Andrew Dismore said the Home Secretary should "throw him out of the country if we can't prosecute him". But the cleric said he had been quoted out of context.

The cleric, who came to the UK from Saudi Arabia in 1985 fearing persecution for membership of a banned group, said the webcasts were a private matter and that police would be wasting their time investigating him.

"I don't think it's advisable for anybody from the media to take things out of context and to try to interpret it in a way to provoke youth or the government against me or Islam."

A Scotland Yard spokeswoman said: "We are assessing purported comments made by an individual to determine whether a criminal offence has been committed."

Earlier, another Muslim extremist, Abu Hamza, failed to appear on a video link to the Old Bailey – where he was due to face 16 charges, including soliciting murder. A prosecuting lawyer said Mr Abu Hamza had claimed he was "unable to walk" because his toenails were too long.

Judge Beaumont remanded him into custody and ordered that a trial, if there is one, takes place on 4 July.

Abu Hamza, 47, who denies any involvement in terrorism, has been held at Belmarsh prison since May 2004.

The judge asked for a medical report on Abu Hamza and said future hearings might have to be held at Woolwich Crown Court, nearer Belmarsh Prison.

Ten of the charges faced by Abu Hamza allege he solicited people at meetings to murder non-Muslims, including Jews. A further four allege he used "threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour with the intention of stirring up racial hatred".

He is also charged with possessing eight video and audio recordings intended to encourage racial hatred.

A final charge under the Terrorism Act alleges he was in possession of a document that contained information "likely to be useful" to someone who was plotting an act of terrorism.

# Non-believers mobilise against Bush,

THE largest gathering of non-believers since Ronald Reagan won the American presidency with the help of the Moral Majority in 1981 took place last month to plan a strategy to halt “creeping theocracy” in the US.

To shape an agenda, leaders from as many as 20 non-theistic groups convened on January 15, just days after President Bush placed religion at the centre of American politics by insisting all US presidents needed a relationship with God to do their job.

“I don’t see how you can be president ... without a relationship with the Lord,” he told the *Washington Times*.

His comments prompted renewed outrage from those in the US and abroad who see in Bush a Christian fundamentalist let loose on the Oval Office and pandering to the powerful evangelical movement. The religious right turned out in record numbers to re-elect Mr Bush, a Methodist, in many “heartland” states.

But Bush, a “born-again” Christian who credits his faith with curing his alcohol problem and turning his life around, said the last thing he wanted to do was force his own beliefs on others.

“I think people attack me because they are fearful that I will then say that you’re not equal as patriotic if you’re not religious,” he went on. “I’ve never said that.” However, his father, campaigning for the presidency in 1987, said “I don’t know that atheists should be considered as

citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.”

Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, was quick to condemn George W Bush for his remarks, which she described as “divisive and insult millions of Americans who do not believe in religious creeds or a deity”. She added that Bush “demonstrates clearly that he does not respect the diversity of the country, and the fact that non-believers and so-called ‘seculars’ are one of the fastest growing segments of American society.”

**President Bush goes far beyond keeping his faith to himself. He’s trying to turn our government into a ‘religion bully’ where the state enforces religious belief and religious correctness**

“He just doesn’t get it,” said Johnson, “and he seems to ignore the fact that in our Constitution we do not have a religious test for those seeking public office.”

Johnson also took issue with Bush’s claim that the difference between America and the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan was sim-

ply “the right to worship the way you see fit”.

“The real distinction between American and governments like the Taliban is that at least on paper, we have a Constitutional commitment to separation of government and religion,” said Johnson. “We have freedom of and freedom from religion.”

Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists, said that policies like the federal faith-based initiative or efforts to keep “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance show that Mr. Bush is dedicated to using the power of the state to advance religion.

Meanwhile, reports coming out of America show that Bush’s pronouncements, and the increasingly bizarre antics of religious organisations like the American Family Association, have had the effect of mobilising non-believers determined to defend their freedoms in what feels to them like a time of siege.

“A lot of non-theistic people tend to be independent and non-joiners,” said Herb Silverman, president of the Albany, N.Y.-based Secular Coalition for America, which represents five non-theistic organisations and has endorsements from others.

“Now they’re starting to get worried. It seems we’re a group politicians can feel comfortable discriminating against.”

Such a perception seems to be driving non-theists to get active. For example:

- Membership in the Washington-based

## What if Bush had lost the presidential election?

AT THE end of last year, BBC Radio 4 invited a number of commentators to imagine what life would be like if Bush had lost the presidential election.

This is what Reggie Nadelson, the New York crime writer who divides her time between the US and Britain, had to say:

“If George W Bush had not been re-elected, America might still feel as diverse, complex and ambiguous as it really is, not to mention sexy. The few – some say the very few – who say they voted for Bush because of moral issues would not now be a killer force to reckon with.

“But the press needed a story, morality was a good one and the ‘Bushies’ saw it as a free pass. In the *New York Times*, Frank Rich, America’s great cultural critic, describes how *Kinsey*, the movie, has become the object of a ferocious attack by the Right. We’re talking back to the past with a vengeance. Alfred Kinsey first published his scientific work on human sexuality in 1948.

In real life now, under attack are contraception, homosexuality, abortion – almost anything to do with sex, including sex itself. Abstinence is the only sex education the government supports. Teenagers are routinely informed that condoms do not prevent HIV/AIDS. Family planning programmes are wiped out. Sex is the new communism, alongside terrorism ...

“In the 1950s, Kinsey, the man, was virtually destroyed by Joe McCarthy because it was alleged that, in researching human sexuality, he undermined the sanctity of the American family and played right into the hands of the ‘commies’. Sounds familiar? If G W Bush had not been elected, America would at least have been a land of better sex.

“On every front the ‘Bushies’ promote the simple-minded: Sex is bad, God is good – and they work to divide us. Without them we would not be simply red states (conservative) and blue states (liberal). Without them I would not have been so blue – and I am plenty blue. I

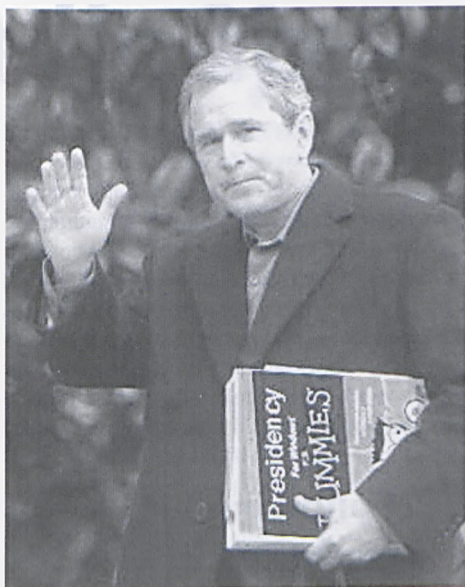
am blue about four more years of attacks on civil liberties, about more pre-emptive war – hello Iran! About a Christian theocracy in the USA, about the rich getting the big bite on everything. And I am hugely blue about the environment. If Bush were out, the world might be in...

“And I am dark, dark blue about the docile media which takes its cues from the White House, takes commercials for *Kinsey* off the air. Bluer than Billie Holliday, seeing them all back – Condie and Dickie and Rummie preparing to do it all over again.

“Kerry is a decent man with a good brain – tolerant, worldly, smart and liberal, and if only he had proclaimed himself liberal right out the reds might not have stolen my country’s heart.

“On the New York subway the other day I saw an elderly woman wearing a badge that read proudly “Blue Stater”. Right on, I thought. Now let’s all put our heads out the window and shout ‘we’re blue, we’re liberal and we are not going to take it any more.’”

# , still burning with religious fervour



American Humanist Association has jumped 5 percent since the election and 15 percent since the beginning of January to reach the 7,000 mark.

- The Secular Coalition for America has grown its lobbying fund from \$8,000 a year ago to \$50,000 today. At \$100,000, the group intends to hire a lobbyist and possibly an administrative staffer.

- At the Los Angeles-based Atheist Alliance International, donations in November 2004 outpaced those of the prior three months put together as donors, apparently troubled by President Bush's re-election, began giving in four- and five-figure amounts.

Encouraged by these developments, both the Secular Coalition and the American Humanist Association are pressing ahead with plans to legally finance congressional lobbying efforts. And insiders are hearing some hardened non-theists warming to the notion of collaborating with liberal religious groups for pragmatic reasons.

"There's been a shift," said Roy Speckhardt, deputy director of the American Humanist Association. "Some in the atheist constituency are saying things like, 'We'd like to work more with you (in coalitions with progressive religious groups) so we can have an effect in Washington.' They've realised they need to do this in order to get things done."

Over the years, non-theist groups have tended to organise locally as supportive communities for those whose beliefs aren't compatible with church, mosque or synagogue. Atheist Alliance International includes 40 local chapters whose collective membership totals about 3,700. Such numbers represent just a fraction of the 38 million Americans who self-identify as "secular," according to the Washington-based Pew Research Centre for the People and

the Press.

Organisational numbers have tended to be small, leaders say, because skeptics are by nature wary of being followers. And in some cases, would-be joiners might fear potential repercussions for coming out of the closet publicly as non-theists in an overwhelmingly religious nation.

Leaders identified with atheism say they routinely receive anonymous hate mail, including threats. One staffer at the Madison, Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation reported received an early December e-mail saying, "You deserve to be shot in the chest".

But with a rising tide of power emboldening religious conservatives in Washington, non-theists are increasingly finding reason to stand, be counted and speak up themselves. Topping the list of concerns is a sense of decay in the principle of church-state separation. From faith-based initiatives to frequent religious expression in the public sphere, people of a secular viewpoint are feeling excluded from the public domain.

"There's a strong impression on the religious right that religion has been excluded from public life", said Tom Flynn, editor of *Free Inquiry*, a bi-monthly magazine read by 30,000 secular humanists. "Our perception of fairness is their perception of discrimination

against the religious right."

On the judicial front, the New York City-based American Civil Liberties Union has seen membership grow by almost 50 percent since the start of 2004, from 300,000 to 445,000. Meanwhile, the Freedom From Religion Foundation has seen membership climb by about 4 percent since the election to about 5,100. Both groups use donations to mount legal challenges to government-sponsored religious activity.

Yet for non-theists, the new goal is to win a favourable opinion from lawmakers and their constituents. The arrival of a solidly Republican Congress and a second term for Bush mean, in Silverman's opinion, it's time to get more organised.

"There's a feeling we need to get our community out and not just sneer at those we feel are influencing the culture for the worse.

"Bush wants all Americans, including over 30-million non-religious citizens, to subsidise religion-based social programs, and he wants to protect ceremonial religious rituals like the post-1954 Pledge of Allegiance."

"President Bush goes far beyond keeping his faith to himself. He's trying to turn our government into a 'religion bully' where the state enforces religious belief and religious correctness. That's un-American," says Silverman.

## Christian group attacks 'tolerance' song and DVD

LAST November a video remake of the song, "We Are Family", was created using the voices and images of over 100 beloved children's TV characters, and in March the video performance will be shown simultaneously on the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon and PBS in the US. Also in March, the DVD of the song will be distributed to 61,000 public and private elementary schools across the country.

But already the video, featuring such characters as SpongeBob and Winnie the Pooh, has come under fire from the American Family Association, who claim that video, while "using all the right words and happiest faces in an attempt to speak directly to the nation's children about 'tolerance and diversity', is a cunning way of celebrating homosexuality".

Heading the project is the We Are Family Foundation which states that the song was remixed "to speak the message of diversity and tolerance to elementary school children nationwide".

The AFA claims that the website operated by We Are Family "is filled with pro-homosexual materials. A 'Tolerance Pledge', for example, encourages signees to pledge respect for homosexuals and work against 'ignorance, insensitivity and bigotry'."

"Most Christians are now aware of what those code words mean, said AFA Chairman Don Wildmon. "If you are a person who accepts the homosexual lifestyle, then you are tolerant," he said. "If you don't, then you are a bigot who is motivated by ignorance and hate."

Wildmon said it was difficult taking a stand against such projects. "Nobody I know has a problem with teaching children to be respectful and tolerant. It is wrong, however, to use such concepts to open the door to a secondary discussion about a controversial subject like homosexuality."

It is interesting to note that the National Federation for Decency, the organisation that orchestrated the campaign of intimidation and hatred that destroyed the lives of Ken and Carol Tipton, the American video store owners featured in the film *Heart of the Beholder* (see p4 report) subsequently changed its name to the American Family Association.. The NFD was headed by the Rev Don Wildmon.

# Buddhism: the least intolerant of all the

I suppose that if, with a gun to my head I were forced to take up a religion, it would have to be Buddhism – as the least aggressive and intolerant of the major religions. It has not, as far as I know, been responsible for any wars or inquisitions. However, going straight to source and studying many of the most revered Buddhist scriptures, I uncovered some very strange and deranged ideas.

It will come as a surprise to some, for example, to learn of the cruel and gruesome terrors which lie in store for us in the Buddhist afterlife. As with the Hindu scriptures, the words of wisdom are, in my view, well hidden and outweighed by the welter of nonsensical ideas.

This is not meant to be a rounded view of Buddhism, and does not contain much that is recognisable from your old RE school syllabus. It is more a critique, focusing on the texts, rather than an explanation. However, there are innumerable sympathetic books and articles in the shops or on the web for those who would like a different angle.

Buddhism has no central text such as the Bible or the Koran, but there is a large collection of scriptures from across Asia. The texts I studied come mainly from the volume "Buddhist Scriptures" (Penguin Classics) by Donald Lopez, jnr, a renowned scholar on Buddhism who has written widely on it, and is currently Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Michigan. The selection of texts includes 60 of the most important scriptures, all considered to be "canonical" according to Lopez, and with a long tradition of use and influence. All the scriptures were written after the death of Buddha (who lived in the 5th century BCE), some of them many centuries later, and have been translated from Sanscrit, Pali (related to Sanscrit), Tibetan, Chinese and other languages. (The bracketed references below refer to the numbered texts in the Penguin book, sometimes followed by a page number).

What is a Buddhist? Most devotees across Asia would be likely to say that they are seeking refuge from suffering in the *three jewels* [the Buddha, the dharma (the teachings) and the sangha (the community of monks and nuns)]. The "suffering" refers to the cycle of birth and rebirth, to which we are manacled, until liberated by achieving *nirvana*, a state of never-ending heavenly bliss.

A central theme of Buddhism, as with Hinduism, is the doctrine of *karma*, a kind of tally or sum-total of all our good deeds and misdeeds during this and previous lives, which determines our fate in this world and the next. Thus the pleasure or pain you are blessed with is a result of past deeds, as surely as night follows day. It is a kind of natural law accounting for all the suffering and happiness in the world. Even being born a female is a consequence of misdeeds in a previous life. Those who might ques-

tion the relevance of all this should be reminded of Glen Hoddle's much publicised belief, a few years ago, that disabled people were being punished for their transgressions in earlier lives. This caused offence to disabled people and others and eventually led to Hoddle's resignation as England football manager.

Karma also explains natural disasters such as the recent tidal waves in SE Asia. Though it was a demon who brought about the disaster, that demon was motivated by the karma of all those who suffered from it. The misdeeds which have led to this punishment may have been done many lifetimes in the past (3 p25). Which I suppose is about as logical as any other religion!

One of five realms awaits us in the hereafter. At the "bottom" is the realm of the hells. Buddhist texts often describe a realm of eight hot hells, eight cold hells, four neighbouring or secondary hells and various less important ones (1). To give just a few examples from the *Pancagatidipani* ("Illumination of the Five Realms of Existence"): "Those men who, because of greed, delusion, fear or anger, kill living creatures, or having reared them, slaughter them [*farmers?*] – they surely go to Sanjiva; though killed and killed again for many thousands of years, because they revive there (again and again) it has the name of "Sanjiva" – the Revival Hell" (1, verses 6 & 7). [Well, let's at least be thankful it's not for ever and ever]. Even animal lovers may find such punishments a touch disproportionate.

"Men who show enmity to their friends, including mother, father and dear ones, who are slanderers and liars, they go to Kalasutta; since they are split like wood with burning saws along [a mark made by] black thread, so it is thought of as 'Kalasutta' – the Black Thread Hell." (1, verse 9).

Other hells have names such as "The Crushing Hell", "The Hell of Those Screaming Aloud", and "The Hell Without Intermission" (1, verses 11, 13, 21). Other transgressors are thrown into a cesspit where "they are pierced with horrible hordes of worms" and those who "steal others' property again and again" are made to drink molten copper. Anyone who "undertakes right conduct, but does not maintain it correctly is broiled for a long time in Kukkula with flesh and bones dissolving" (1, verse 40). And take care not to kill the lice from your hair, or you'll be "crushed again and again between rams as

big as mountains" (1, verse 39). Enough, enough! This goes on for several pages.

More familiar to us is the second kind of afterlife, which is to be reborn as an animal – for all kinds of sundry misdemeanours not that dissimilar to the misdeeds which send you to hell. Eg: for too much anger and ill-will you will be reborn in the womb of a snake; for excessive conceit a donkey; if you flog elephants you'll "become spiders of cruel character, stinging insects and scorpions" (verse 48). Perhaps the latter one is not such a bad idea.

## Following his exploration of Hinduism in the December issue, DAVID SIMMONDS this month turns his attention to Buddhism

The third realm is that of ghosts, sometimes referred to as "hungry ghosts" because they are always hungry and thirsty. Included in this realm are a wide variety of ghoulish and generally malevolent beings such as the *kumbhanda*, literally "pot testicle" – so-named because of the size of its testicles, creating difficulty when walking but apparently providing a convenient place to sit (1 p4). How it is decided whether you become a ghost or go to hell is not at all clear.

"Those who steal what can be chewed and eaten and who lack energy [for good deeds] become corpse-eating *petas* (ghosts)", and "Whoever longs to steal another's property, and gives and then regrets it, is reborn as a *peta* feeding on dung, phlegm and vomit." And "Whoever speaks unpleasantly in anger... becomes for a long time a *peta* with a mouth like a furnace" (verses 52, 57 & 58). We can only marvel at the inventiveness of the Buddhist imagination.

At least on the plus side for Buddhism, all these terrible punishments are to take place as a result of "natural law," usually in the next life, and not meted out in this one by some despotic judge or religious leader.

As with most religions, criticism of your superiors is severely frowned upon. Spare a



# ast aggressive and he major religions

thought for the poor *bodhisattva* [one who is on the path to perfect Buddhahood] whose name was "Surplus Assets" and who committed the grievous sin of criticising the superior *bodhisattva* "Noble Divinity": "For 91 aeons he was always reborn in the womb of a whore, who always abandoned him at birth, so that the wild foxes always ate him" (3 p32). Monks are also warned that they may be turned into repulsive petas for criticising their superiors. There is also little love lost for non-believers or heretics: "The nihilist who asserts perversely that the *dharma* is non-dharma (that is that the truth is untrue) is consumed by fire in Patapana" (1, verse 18).

Thus religious leaders, whether popes or gurus, have managed throughout history to preserve their positions of authority by outlawing criticism through the use of fear, and promising good karma and rewards in the afterlife, to those who toe the line. One suspects also that they are not averse to a little subterfuge in order to maintain a reasonable lifestyle. Lay people, for example, are urged not to make *direct* sacrifices to their deceased relatives but to give the offerings to the monks instead, who will then "transfer the merit of their gifts to the ancestors" (35 p330). And "those who in this world convey folk such as mother, father and guru in carriages become

yakkhas [in the next world] travelling in celestial palaces, provided with ease." (1, verse 66)

On the one hand enlightenment can only come from dedicated training, meditation and hard work over a very long period, perhaps many lifetimes (40 & 41); but elsewhere we learn of some convenient shortcuts. The mere act of sincerely reciting the name of the Buddha will achieve "rebirth in the land of bliss"(42). And in "A Sutra for Long Life" we are told that "Whosoever ... will write down this litany of the one hundred and eight names of the *tathagata* [Buddha] they, their lifespan exhausted, will once again come to have a full lifespan of one hundred years. After they have died they will be reborn in the Buddha-field of the *tathagata*...." And "Whosoever will write down this *Aparimitayuh-sutra* or have others write it down, ninety-nine billions of Buddhas will at the moment of his death present with a vision face to face..." (47).

The biblical miracles are puny compared with those which can be performed by fully enlightened Buddhists. There are many references to their psychic and magical powers, including Christ-like healing powers (27 p258; 39 p366). On one occasion a single bowl of food provided enough for "84,000 *sravakas* (disciples)...12,000 *bodhisattvas*" and others and still did not run out, which beats the feeding of the 5,000! (20 p181).

Sometimes the hyperbole knows no bounds. Once at a huge gathering the Buddha was "accompanied by Sakra, lord of the gods, and by Brahma, lord of the Saha, and by many other hundreds of thousands of trillions (sic) of gods" (8 p62), and someone else recounts a story about a previous Buddha which happened a "hundred thousand millions of billions of aeons ago" which by my calculation was way before the big bang! (20 p180). There are numerous stories of the Buddha images speaking to their devotees.

By way of light relief, see if you can untangle the following pearl of conciseness: "So the dharma that Rama declared he entered upon and abided in by realising

for himself with direct knowledge is the dharma that you enter upon and abide in by realising for yourself with direct knowledge. And the dharma that you enter upon and abide in by realising for yourself with direct knowledge is the dharma that Rama declared he entered upon and abided in by realising for himself with direct knowledge...etc." phew! (14 p109).

Sometimes the writing is more impenetrable and obscure than this, and full of contradictory and enigmatic statements, which is odd in a religion which one associates with simplicity. See for example "The Perfection of Wisdom" (51 p458; p516).

There is a hilarious section describing how to free birds and fishes from bondage, and from their evil karma (44). The priest asks the Buddha to purify the assembled creatures and remove the mental defilements that prevent them from understanding what is about to be said (mental defilements which are a result of misdemeanours in earlier lives). The ceremony includes a long and obscure lecture to the unfortunate animals on "the twelve-fold chain of dependent origination", a difficult doctrine to understand, even for humans!

As in Hinduism, the breaking of family ties is strongly urged if "enlightenment" is sought. The Buddha declares unequivocally that "no *bodhisattva* who lives at home has ever attained supreme perfect enlightenment"(29 p270). The ideal is a life of asceticism and self-denial.

Not surprisingly, women do not feature prominently in the writings, but where they do the attitude is dismissive. As with most religions, women are a distraction and sexual pleasure is frowned upon, a nuisance, and quite incompatible with spiritual progress (244). To be reborn as a woman is considered a calamity and a result of bad karma, but there are of course rituals which can reduce the likelihood of this (47 p427). The following quotation comes from "The Enquiry of Ugra" a very influential scripture in earlier centuries, preserved in five languages:

"O eminent householder, the householder *bodhisattva* who lives at home should bring forth three thoughts towards his own wife ... the thought of her impermanence, the thought of her unreliability, and the thought of her changeableness." A few paragraphs later we must think of her as an "enemy", an "executioner", an "antagonist" and as "impure" (29 p272).

Most modern Buddhists, I suspect, would not take such texts too literally, if they have read them at all. Some may be outraged at such one-sided and selective treatment of their scriptures. But surely any books claiming to be divinely inspired should be able to stand up to scrutiny and be held to account.

Ref: *Buddhist Scriptures*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr., London, Penguin Classics, 2004.



# 'It was God what did it – praise

TO SOME, happiness may be something as simple as a cuddly pup, a chirruping canary or a bacon-and-egg sandwich oozing yoke at the edges. But for millions of believers *true* happiness is turning on the tellie and watching a catastrophe of biblical proportions unfold before their eyes.

Am I being just a little cynical, a tad uncharitable in thinking that major disasters are a source of enormous satisfaction to those who choose to believe in a vengeful, interventionist creator? I think not. Such disasters, after all, are seen by the credulous as a vindication of their belief that a megalomaniac, attention-seeking deity has not lost its touch when it comes to human (and animal) destruction on a monumental scale. And surely, with vindication must come a feeling of great pleasure.

End-timers (or dispensationalists, as they are known) were positively euphoric in the days that followed the disaster, convinced that the tsunami was part of the Tribulation that would bring them one step closer to Jesus.

Furthermore, the terrible event provided a great recruitment opportunity. The media is awash with reports of evangelists tripping over themselves in their rush to the stricken areas, ostensibly to help, but in reality to convert traumatised Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists.

Christian groups with other agenda also snatched at the disaster to support their various positions. For example, the sex-hating Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas, architects of the notorious **GodHatesFags** website, gleefully turned its attention to the large number of Swedes "who perished ignominiously in Asia under the wrath of an outraged God", and proposed a monument in their memory.

The church suggested that this monument (pictured on the cover), should be made of pink salmon granite, and depict two tsunami waves bearing down on a pair of stick-figures simulating anal copulation. The inscription should read: "God Sent the Tsunamis that Destroyed Thousands of Wicked Swedes in Asia".

Why on earth Swedes?

"Do you realise," proclaims the church, "that among the dead and missing are 20,000 Swedes and over 3,000 Americans? Filthy Swedes went to Thailand – world epicentre of child sex traffic – to rape and sodomise little Thai boys and girls ... We sincerely hope and pray that all 20,000 Swedes are dead, their bodies bloated on the ground or in mass graves or floating at sea feeding sharks and fishes or in the bellies of thousands of crocodiles washed ashore by tsunamis. These filthy, faggot Swedes have a satanic, draconian law

criminalising Gospel preaching, under which they prosecuted, convicted and sentenced Pastor Ake Green to jail – thereby incurring God's irreversible wrath."

Sweden, in fact, does not have law criminalising Gospel preaching. It does however, have a law against inciting hatred, and Green received a jail sentence for preaching hatred of homosexuals. But hey, why let facts spoil a good rant?

Addressing the issue of thousands of children perishing in the same disaster, the WBC claims "It is God's prerogative to kill children to punish their evil, Godless, vile, filthy parents and others who were raising them for the devil anyway; they are most certainly better off now than they were in the hands of such evil people. He always has done that, and He always will. Deal with it."

With this sort of stuff sloshing about on the web, the job of those who parody fundamentalist Christian views of world events is made all the more difficult. Nevertheless, the inventive folk at [Landoverbaptist.org](http://Landoverbaptist.org) (See *Freethinker*, December) did make a valiant effort:

**Not since the time of Noah has God used water so effectively to harass sinners and wreak havoc upon those who don't flatter Him with sufficient regularity. As unsaved, impoverished Hindus toiled in beachside shacks on Christmas instead of exchanging expensive gifts from American department stores to celebrate the Baby Jesus' Birthday, the Lord was plotting their horrific, briny demise. True Christians know from the Great Flood that one of God's favourite ways to indiscriminately kill enormous swathes of children is by drowning them and watching them gasp for air while floating like little discarded Styrofoam cups in the tide.**

**Sometimes, He extends an enormous hand as if He is about to rescue the bobbing tot, only to retract it at the last minute to teach the drowning child a valuable lesson about the ineffable nature of God's love.**

**While American Christians have long delighted in the carnage that resulted from the Lord's irascibility as depicted in countless, grisly episodes in the Old Testament, the present-day flooding in Asia brought home the enormous power of their deity more vividly because of its immediacy. After all, there were no 24-hour news cycles in Samaria.**

**As Pastor Deacon Fred said during Wednesday evening services, "My stars! It**



A scene of devastation in Thailand

really is something to see the glorious purity of God's Biblical wrath unfold on a 62-inch plasma wide screen in from the comfort of your own Christian living-room. These are certainly amazing times for technology when the Almighty's insatiable appetite for snatching little infants from their unsaved mothers' arms are transported directly from the pages of the Bible right into your home theatre!

**We ran plum clean out of popcorn! Praise Jesus!"**

So close is this piece to that published by *Godhatesfags*, that it is virtually impossible to separate the real thing from parody.

The idea that disasters like the latest tsunami are deliberate punishments by God is by no means confined to religious extremists. In an article in the *Age*, Melbourne, Kenneth Nguyen pointed out that "in the aftermath to last year's Bam earthquakes, which killed more than 20,000 (mostly Muslim) Iranians, conservative American rabbi Daniel Lapin argued in the *Chicago Jewish News* that God dispatches natural disasters to punish those who have not embraced Judeo-Christian traditions. Noting that the US had been relatively untouched by natural disasters, Lapin wrote: "We ought to acknowledge that each day, every American derives enormous benefit from the faith of our founders and of their heirs."

# ... se Jesus and pass the popcorn!



Thailand following the tsunami

After the Asian tsunami, a Saudi cleric, Mohammad Saleh al-Munajjid, claimed the water rose to strike non-Muslim holidaymakers "who used to sprawl all over the beaches and in pubs overflowing with wine" during the Christmas break.

Yet most of the victims were from Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority nation.

In Sri Lanka, a statue of Buddha in the southern town of Galle did not topple when the waves washed over an area near a bus terminal – scarcely a miracle given the proportions of Buddha. But a Buddhist monk, Sunama, considered it a "sign".

"The people are not living according to religious virtues," he said. "Nature has given them some punishment because they are not following the path of the Lord Buddha. The people have to learn their lesson."

A Roman Catholic priest from St Mary's Church in Colombo cast the blame wider.

"This is a punishment from God because everybody is leading a wretched life," said the Rev Lucian Dep. "All of us are to be blamed for the tsunami. There is no sense of modesty or religiosity anymore. People have gone so far away from God. It's a message to say, 'Look, I'm the boss.'"

Though irrational and distasteful, these

views are, to my mind, far more honest and palatable than the silly, slippery ramblings of those religious leaders who haven't the stomach for a vengeful, interventionist God. Principal among these half-baked Christians is our very own Archbishop of Canterbury.

Consider this, contained in an article by Rowan Williams in the *Sunday Telegraph*: "There is something odd about expecting that God will constantly step in if things are getting dangerous. How dangerous do they have to be? How many deaths would be acceptable?"

"If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God? Wouldn't we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties ... Belief has survived such tests again and again, not because it comforts or explains but because believers ... have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift. They have learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement."

What amazes me – and exasperates me even more – is how anyone in such a position can pen such meaningless waffle.

As always, the most sensible commentaries on the disaster came from non-believers.

Nguyen, in concluding his piece in the *Age*, said: "For agnostics, including me, the tsunami has highlighted just how unpalatable the idea of an interventionist God ultimately is. Of the thousands killed in the disaster, probably about one-third were children, too young to have a fully considered view on the existence of God. Did they deserve to die? And what of the many Christians and Jews, including charity workers, still missing? Do they, and their family members, deserve their suffering?"

"The truth is, the random destruction wreaked upon our earth by one tectonic shift fits uneasily with prevailing visions of an all-powerful, philosophically benevolent God. The tsunami broke countless lives, hearts, communities. It would be little wonder if it ended up breaking many people's faith too."

In a round-up of views published on the BBC website, Hanne Stinson, of the British Humanist Association, commented thus: "Faith in God does not protect people from disasters or give the victims what they need to survive and rebuild their lives. We need to accept responsibility for our fellow human beings. We need to put our efforts into practical ways of preventing disasters when we can,

preparing for disasters that cannot be prevented, including investing in early warning systems for tsunamis, and helping those affected by disasters. We cannot rely on any god to solve the world's problems. We – the people of the world – are humanity's only hope."

In a letter to the *Guardian*, Professor Richard Dawkins wrote: "The Bishop of Lincoln asks to be preserved from religious people who try to explain the tsunami disaster. As well he might. Religious explanations for such tragedies range from loopy (it's payback for original sin) through vicious (disasters are sent to try our faith) to violent (after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, heretics were hanged for provoking God's wrath). But I'd rather be preserved from religious people who give up on trying to explain, yet remain religious."

"In the same batch of letters (published in the *Guardian* on December 29), Dan Rickman says 'Science provides an explanation of the mechanism of the tsunami but it cannot say why this occurred any more than religion can'. There, in one sentence, we have the religious mind displayed before us in all its absurdity. In what sense of the word 'why', does plate tectonics not provide the answer?"

"Not only does science know why the tsunami happened, it can give precious hours of warning. If a small fraction of the tax breaks handed out to churches, mosques and synagogues had been diverted into an early warning system, tens of thousands of people, now dead, would have been moved to safety."

"Let's get up off our knees, stop cringeing before bogeymen and virtual fathers, face reality, and help science to do something constructive about human suffering."

## Bible influenced baby-killer

A US mother who admitted killing her baby daughter by severing the girl's arms was guided by a Bible passage in which Jesus refers to cutting off body parts to cast away sin, the woman's lawyer said last month.

Dena Schlosser, 35, a housewife with a history of mental illness, has referred to the New Testament passage since being charged with the murder of 10-month-old Margaret, lawyer David Haynes said. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus says: "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."

IRSHAD Manji is an author and journalist, born in East Africa. After her family had been expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin Dada, she was raised in a middle-class suburb near Vancouver. She is a lesbian feminist Muslim, now based in Toronto, who travels the world spreading her message of liberal reformation of Islam. She describes herself as a Muslim refusenik, one who refuses to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah.

The book is written in the form of a letter, "a wake-up call for honesty and change" to her fellow Muslims and so she dispenses with the usual source references which would spoil the effect: these appear on her website [www.muslim-refusenik.com](http://www.muslim-refusenik.com).

In the introduction she starts as she means to go on:

*Through our screaming self-pity and our conspicuous silences, we Muslims are conspiring against ourselves. We're in crisis, and we're dragging the rest of the world with us. If ever there was a moment for an Islamic reformation, it's now.*

And:

*As I view it, the trouble with Islam is that lives are small and lies are big. Totalitarian impulses lurk in mainstream Islam. That's one hell of a charge, I know.*

Manji's first chapter gives an account of her schooling which bizarrely began in a free baby-sitting service at the local Baptist church where she was first introduced to the Bible, at age eight winning the title of the most promising Christian. Soon afterwards the local *madrassa* was completed and she was transferred to Saturday morning classes there. She continued to ask awkward questions in the new school as she had at the Baptist church. At home she endured an abusive and violent father. Eventually her persistence in demanding answers to her questions resulted in her precipitate departure from the *madrassa*. This might have led to her rejecting Islam altogether, but, she says, her natural sense of fairness demanded that she give Islam a fair shake. So she began to discover Islam untrammelled by rigid ritual and unquestioning acceptance of what she was told, hoping to reconcile homosexuality with the faith.

In 1998 she began to host QueerTelevision, expecting opposition from both Christians and Muslims, but disappointed to find that her challenges to the teaching were routinely ignored:

*... not a single Muslim addressed my counter-challenge ... how can the Koran at once denounce homosexuality and declare that Allah "makes excellent everything he creates"?*

Instead, Muslim correspondents blamed the existence of Muslim homosexuals on "Jewish pigs and dogs".

Then her boss gave her another challenge: to explain how a 17-year-old girl forced into sex

with three men could be sentenced by a Sharia court to 180 lashes.

She began to delve deeper into the way the Koran was routinely interpreted, asking after 11 September 2002:

*What if Mohamed Atta had been raised on soul-stretching questions instead of simple certitudes? ... what if [he] had known that the origins of select words ... about the hereafter can be contested?*

– referring to 72 virgins vs white raisins [the alternative translation].

**BARRY THORPE reviews**  
***The Trouble with Islam*, by**  
**Irshad Manji.**  
**Mainstream Publishing,**  
**2004, hardback £13,**  
**ISBN 1 84018 8375**

In her explorations she discovered, thanks to a thoughtful letter written in response to an article on the lack of adequate Muslim condemnation of the 9/11 attack, that there was such a thing as *ijtihad*, an Islamic tradition of independent reasoning which allowed every Muslim, female or male, straight or gay, old or young, to update his or her religious practice in the light of contemporary circumstance.

Manji discovered that *ijtihad* flourished in Islam's golden age, c 750-1250 ce, but towards the end of this period Muslim rulers took to enforcing their interpretations of Islam, always in the direction of narrow authoritarianism, evolving into the state of affairs today, where *ijtihad* is mostly unknown in mainstream Islam as either a concept or a word.

In chapter four Manji describes her visit to the occupied territories of Palestine at the invitation of Zionist sponsors, who agreed to complete journalistic freedom, unlike the Arab and Muslim bodies she spoke to about a similar mission. Chafing under the requirement to wear a girdle over her already enveloping clothing at the Dome of the Rock, she made unflattering comparisons between the religious freedom of the Israelis and the restrictions on Muslims:

*Israel allows its legitimacy to be questioned by histories that are marketed at its national airport. Go figure. And yet I can't shake the allegation of apartheid hurled so vigorously by Palestinian activists. Day in day out they witness what I have only glimpsed.*

On the flight home she read in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies* of 1997 a piece written by a man who returned to Gaza after years away:

*... he found ... a society blanched of honesty, grasping at every excuse to vent old grievances. ... The thirst for martyrs is consuming, a dominant passion ... [There was ] a total dismissal of introspection. Elevating oneself above criticism is not so much self-confidence*

*as a sign of encapsulating oneself ... The price has been exorbitant.*

She resolved to learn more about how Muslims have broken faith with the Koran's warning that "God changes not what is in a people until they change what is in themselves."

In a chapter about Arab/Muslim hypocrisy, Manji writes of the part played by Arab states in displacing the Palestinians, Muslim complicity in the Holocaust, Muslim complaints about Israeli apartheid practices despite the evidence (that she cites) to the contrary, rank anti-Semitism on the part of the Muslims, the open acceptance of Western culture while at the same time denouncing it, and the fraud of democracy in Mubarak's Egypt.

*... Muslims have a choice to make: acknowledge that the Prophet Muhammad's pre-emptive assaults on Jews were morally wrong, in which case Muslims have credibility when slamming the Bush doctrine. Or accept what the Prophet did as necessary and divinely guided, in which case the same could be said for Bush, a born-again Christian who has his own communion with God.*

A section dealing with the contradictions in Pakistan is followed by what she calls colonisation by desert Arabia. She quotes King Faud of Saudi Arabia:

*The democratic system prevalent in the world is not appropriate in this region ... the election system has no place in the Islamic creed" since Islam views the leader as a shepherd responsible for his flock. What's bad for desert Arabia must be bad for Islam the creed.*

The next chapter takes up this theme, that the culture of "desert Arabia" has become identified with the religion of Islam in the minds of non-Arabs, while Arabs still regard Pakistanis, for example, as mere converts.

Maybe the grip of desert tribalism is why Palestinian suicide bombers rely on handouts from Arab despots. The paternalism of the desert tribe means that welfare trickles down at the discretion of the sheikhs.

Manji posits the question thus:

*Can the norms of the desert be dislodged from Islam? If so, but only if so, we have a hope in hell of reform.*

She uses the veiling of Muslim women as an example. The Koran requires the Prophet's wives to veil, but does not extend this to all women. While the veil is a suitable modest garment for the sands of the desert, it need not be preferred over equally modest dress more suitable for northern climates, such as baseball cap and high-necked sweater.

After the desert Arabs suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of infidels, the only consolation they had was the "glory of Islam's founding moment." This fixation on the founding moment, on the past, she calls "fundamentalism". The clerics went back to the

Koran to show that innovation was a mistake, and *ijtihad* was forgotten.

The anti-innovation rule hit Muslims well beyond the desert. In 1579, for example, Istanbul got an observatory. In 1580, clerics had it demolished.

This chapter goes on to detail the suppression of all religious expression in Saudi Arabia



**Irshad Manji, pictured with Salman Rushdie, who revealed last month that a fatwa, calling for his execution for his novel, *Satanic Verses*, had been renewed in Iran**

except that of the state Wahhabi-ism, and suggests the sources for Osama bin Laden's peculiar brand of religious thought. Many of the examples are really horrifying.

She ends the chapter with a three-fold aim:

*To revitalise economies by engaging the talents of all the people in the Islamic world; .. to give the desert a run for its money by unleashing multiple interpretations of Islam; to work with the West not against it.*

The next chapter lays out some ideas to achieve these aims, such as empowering Muslim women to set up small businesses with microloans. This could be done by using part of Western overseas aid budgets to concentrate on the commercial liberation of Muslim women, the use of radio and TV stations to spread the idea of *ijtihad*. This means working within Islam, a ploy rejected by Taslima Nasrin, who believes that reform will come about only when Islam has retreated. Apparently Manji thinks it's worth a try.

Manji then appeals for honesty on the part of commentators and policy-makers and a rejection of self-censorship:

*...since my young adulthood Muslims in the West have been sucking on the nipple of public ignorance about Islam, wailing for validation under all conditions, at all costs ... we should not let multicultural bromides anesthetise our brains any further.*

She goes on to appeal to non-Muslims to dare to challenge Muslim complacency:

*When Muslims say that they are democracies in their own way, ask what rights do women and religious minorities actually exer-*

*cise and brush aside ill-informed allegations of racism.*

*It's up to us in the West to drop reactionary charges of racism against the whistleblowers of Islam ...Instigating change means not taking the Koran literally, and also not taking multiculturalism literally. Why should forced clitoridectomy be indulged? ... why should human rights belong only to non-Muslims?*

She finishes the letter with "Thank God for the West", where she was able to explore Islam and its traditions in freedom. In a Muslim country, she says, she'd probably have been an atheist at heart, and she has a message for secular humanists:

*Religion has compelled me to bow to no one but God dwelling restlessly in my conscience, a precious skill to develop in an era of boundless spin. Better, religion has taught me not to confuse authoritarianism with authority. You might stand to hear more about this, since those who incriminate all faith as "irrational" sometimes forget that rationality can become an orthodoxy unto itself.*

I rather think that it is not so much her religion that has taught her to distinguish between authority and authoritarianism, but her habit of careful enquiry into that religion.

She goes on:

*So, I'm down to my final fair shake for Islam. Whether I leave it behind will be up to me.*

In a recent Radio 4 Analysis programme on

the recrudescence of religious belief, she shows no sign of leaving Islam; rather she attacks rationalism for destroying mystery in a series of non-sequiturs untypical of the rest of her thinking.

She ends the last chapter with three questions: will Muslims snap out of their closed thinking, accept that one may question the Koran, and if her analysis is wrong, why?

*No other religion is producing as many terrorist travesties and human rights transgressions in the name of God. And can you explain this without pointing fingers at everyone except Muslims?*

I found this an easy and enjoyable read, unlike Anwar Shaikh's book, *Islam and Terrorism*, and I learned quite a bit more about the early days of Islam (assuming the traditions are true, of course!) and its relationship with other religions in later years – the fact that, for example, the behaviour of Muslims towards people of other religions was not really so admirable as it is now fashionable to claim.

Few non-Muslims would disapprove of Manji's campaign to reform Islam, but as she is a woman, a lesbian and a Westerner, I suspect that only those Muslims in the West who are already half-awake will take any notice of her wake-up call. However, the book gives us secularists insight into the, I won't say thinking, but reactions of mainstream Muslims, and as such a great deal of material for our own campaigns.

## 'Waiter, I said croutons, not cretins!'

OUR caption contest, launched last year, drew a great number of excellent entries, but Dave McKeegan's hilarious reworking of "waiter, there's a fly in my soup" was judged to be the best of a brilliant batch.

Dave receives our top prize of a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*, plus a DVD of his choice from the National Secular Society's Movie Store (check out [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk)), as well as a set of Heroes of Atheism mugs, and £20.00 worth of book tokens generously donated by *Freethinker* subscriber Ivor Williams.

Two runners-up each receive a year's subscription to the magazine, and a DVD of their choice.

They are Tony Akkermans of Shropshire, whose entry was: "You can take dupes to water, but you can't make them think" and Enver Carim of Surrey, with "Yes sister, wetting your knickers is part of the process."

If any of the winners do not have access to the internet, we will supply them with a list of the movies on offer.



## Temples of Reason

REGARDING Matthew Coniam's lively and optimistic piece "Can the secular church save your soul?" (January), I wonder if he is aware that his proposal to use grand church buildings to propagate science instead of religion has already been tried?

In the 1790s, French revolutionaries stripped their great cathedrals of crucifixes and all the other fetishistic Christian bric-a-brac, and re-dedicated them as "Temples of Reason". For a few years, Catholic masses were replaced by worthy science lectures, anatomy demonstrations and the like, interspersed with symbolic pageants where Liberty would bow her head to the Flame of Reason, slaves would be freed from their chains, and so forth.

It sounds marvellous, but unfortunately it doesn't seem to have produced the effect that Matthew Coniam envisages. If he thinks the beheading of a handful of westerners in 21st century Iraq represents "unparalleled barbarism", he has overlooked events in 18th century France. The rationalists who set up the Temples of Reason also invented the guillotine, and they employed it on an industrial scale to behead alleged representatives of the old order. The years of the Temples of Reason are better known as "the Terror".

History has shown again and again that when groups see themselves as unjustly oppressed, they act brutally and mercilessly against individuals they perceive as representing their oppressors.

No matter how realistic, or deluded, their ideas on the nature of the universe, and no matter what brand of rhetoric they use to justify their actions, people are, and always will be, a variety of ape. We behave how we have evolved to behave.

Sad to say, human nature can no more be altered by science lectures than by sermons.

GRAHAM NOBLE  
Fareham

## Homophobic Isle of Man

IN THE last *Freethinker* the editor mentioned Christian Music TV's attempts to whip up young UK bigots into a hate campaign directed against gay advice groups.

Barry Duke was one of the few to respond to information I sent to a number of organisations and newspapers who I thought might want to know about a phenomenon I've started to notice more and more.

I found this example particularly disturbing because the list includes my notoriously homophobic homeland's only gay advice service – which has already had harassment from local evangelicals and their powerful friends in the Manx government and business community.

Similar examples I've noticed include late-night sponsored religious programmes on a local radio station which mix crypto-fascist twaddle with thinly veiled exhortations to take direct

action against "sinners" and an annual evangelical "youth festival" with a peculiar interest in war games and a penchant for inviting "reformed" ex-paramilitaries as "preachers".

What worries me is that I've seen this approach used before by organisations such as Combat 18 in the early 1990s, and even before that when the National Front tried to ape Rock against Racism's success. More recently, *Searchlight*, the anti-fascist watchdog, published articles about an Irish youth-orientated right-to-life group's attempts to make links with both local paramilitaries and US Christian militia.

I came across the war-gaming evangelists when reporting for a local paper in 1999, and passed my concerns to members of the local "Churches Together" group, who I thought would at least be responsible enough to investigate. Through a third party I found out that, effectively, the churches were more concerned about dying Sunday schools than parasites who only find religion when their UVF income dries up. They still underwrite the festival, but make sure the press only turn up for a pre-arranged photocall.

Though such religious freakshows are noticeable here on the Isle of Man because of the smallness of the place, and made worse by our closeness to Northern Ireland, they are not unique to this place. Having given some examples, I invite others to start watching their local evangelists more closely. You may be startled, or even terrified, at what you find.

Maybe we can take it as a compliment that churches are so desperate they'll flirt with anyone and try anything to survive. However, I'm concerned enough to want to monitor this and would happily work with other secularists to try and set up some sort of watchdog project.

Anyone interested can contact me at [stuart@manx.net](mailto:stuart@manx.net) or this address: **Stuart Hartill, 1 The Sycamores, Walpole Road, Ramsey, Isle of Man, IM8 1LU**

## The secular mind

IT IS not that Mr Bookbinder says that the "secular" mind may not understand the difference between the "spiritual" and the "political" that is remarkable; it is the demonstration of yet another BBC front man's ignorance of the fact that usually in theory and regularly in practice there is no difference. In one polity, for example, you worshipped Caesar in the ritualistic way one associates with religion. In Islam that is how it has always been, for you cannot be a private Muslim; Mohamed was quick on to that kind of back-sliding. As in antique Catholicism, you have to hand yourself over to the chosen community as you are giving god his due. Hence the label given to Muslims in past times – "Muhamedans" – comparable in significance to "ROMAN Catholics". Hence, too, the terror of "heresy" as of rats, the beard-fetishism and the rest of the wardrobe of the "life apart". As for Christianity, if Mr Bookbinder is unaware that neither Luther nor Calvin admitted a signif-

icant difference between the "spiritual" and any left-overs, then he joins the ranks of the illustrious such as John Humphreys who once boastfully claimed he couldn't get it, that a man in Kuwait who had converted to Christianity was having his wife and children taken from him. The crucial difference, in fact, is between a politics which flatters nonsense in the public arena and one which is critical of it because its civilisation depends on criticism. More interesting, however, in the Bookbinder proposition is the ghostly give-away. He believes, with St Augustine and Calvin and a few others, that there's a pre-determined, non-comprehending "secular" (damned) mind as against a "spiritual" one. It was around this assumption of a universe of the elect and the damned that Orwell constructed "1984", the model for which, of course, is the BBC. I suggest we should not be so impressed by the bullying comportment of the happy-clappies that we fail to see that the smoothies are more subversive than the ecstasies, for they are smooth. The sort of thing they do, for this seems to be like democratic negotiation, is to make sure that they grab hold of the education of the young. Now that's not, as in "1984" and ancient papal claims to dominion, "political", is it? Purely spiritual as in *Mein Kampf*, the Koran and the gospel according to Bookbinder. And very smooth.

KEITH BELL  
Wrexham.

## Hinduism on trial

LET ME at the outset make it known to your readers that there is no precise definition of Hinduism. For centuries the Hindu religion has been dominated by the Brahmins. Hinduism as practised today means Brahminism, which is a form of social fascism based on the evil caste system. They put themselves on top of the social ladder and subjugated the rest on a pecking order through their wits. They are abominable parasites living on the ignorance and credulity of the masses; so much so, that the word "pariah" is synonymous with a Brahmin.

In Hinduism there is a large number of gods and goddesses with different brands and the number continues to increase, with godmen appearing from time to time in different parts of India claiming to perform miracles. Their *modus operandi* is to produce *linghams* (male phallic symbols), holy ash, wristwatches and gold chains from the air. There are others who have found an easy way of making money out of the gullible by promising to do various things to them through their divine powers. The most notorious among them is Sai Baba of Bangalore. His nefarious paedophile activities were recently exposed by the BBC.

The arrest of Kanchi Sankaracharya Jayendra Saraswaethi in connection with the murder of the Kanchipuram Varadarajaperumal temple manager Sankaraman has brought to light some of the sinister aspects of Hinduism. Day by day his kinsmen and his hit men are being



arrested for their complicity in the crime. He is also accused of misusing temple funds received from abroad for sexual abuse and other crimes.

Along with Kanchi Sankaracharya, many other religious charlatans are falling into the net for similar crimes. But what puzzles most of us is how Sai Baba avoids arrest, despite the many murders committed within his ashram and lack of transparency in financial matters. The Indian government should give a valid explanation to its people.

YAL N ALAGAN  
India

### Circumcision

IN 1804 we had slavery. By 1854 it was banned. In 1904 we were agreeable to no votes for women. By 1954 we had moved on. But in 2004 there are still many who accept genital mutilation – without anaesthetic. Let us hope that by 2054 things will have changed for the better.

I'd been a GP for 25 years before I saw the suffering this causes. Last year I saw a sad little Somalian baby at a routine check. Its painful penis looked like an overripe strawberry stuck on a mushroom stalk.

Children have rights – one of which is bodily integrity. There is now a Human Rights Act into which the European Convention of Human Rights has been incorporated. There has been no test case yet, but non-therapeutic amputation of the foreskin is now, arguably, against the law.

Medicine has always been in the forefront of social progress and doctors enter this century on a wave of continual improvement, doing only that which has been shown to be of benefit and, just as importantly, not doing that which is of no benefit. Above all, they should do no harm.

I have learned that some parents are suspicious that circumcision has been recommended because of the belief of their doctor. You all know, or you can look it up, that there is almost no medical justification for this procedure. If there was, we would recommend it for every boy on the planet.

It is astonishing that ritual amputation has survived for so long amongst a modern civilised progressive society. It was even more surprising to learn that at least one Health Authority, Leeds, makes special provision for this practice, thus presumably putting its seal of approval on it.

Obviously most of the male world is intact and does not need to hear this argument. For me, at least, it is shocking to have to admit that in the 21st century this cruel practice has become so widespread in England that it has come to my attention in rural Northamptonshire.

Because of the British Medical Association's "Well, it doesn't really matter one way or the other, and we don't want to offend anybody" equivocal attitude, the lay public genuinely believe there is no harm in it and there might be some benefit. Clearly the medical profession needs to show some leadership in this matter. There are many people, especially women, in

the groups which practise this rite who want change and who are let down by this well-meaning ambivalence.

No doubt there are doctors who will argue that it must continue. When deciding how much weight to give to their argument, please consider whether there are two obvious conflicts of interest. Firstly, are they members of any such group and secondly, are they paid for performing this procedure?

DR JOHN FITTON  
Northampton

### Sincerely deluded

I HAVE never been able to understand why the mere assertion by the credulous that "God" exists and that "He" has given us "His" wisdom in the shape of one or another allegedly "Holy" (though somewhat confused and self-contradictory) book should be regarded as proof of anything other than, at best, the sincerity of the believer. However, it is perfectly possible for sincerity to coexist with a greater or lesser degree of delusion. (Tony Blair, is perhaps a prime example of this!)

Of course, the counter-claim is made that, for its part, science (ie the application of reason to experience and experiment) is unable to offer a full explanation of the existence of space, time, matter, and life – but then, what real light is thrown on such mysteries by the evocation of an imagined "God", whereby mere say-so is substituted for hard evidence? In any case this objection hardly proves the fallibility or unreliability of science, only its (present) limitations. The truth in matters which lie beyond the reach of current knowledge is certainly not to be attained to by fashioning facile, unsupported and untestable hypotheses, and an honest acceptance of ignorance is surely to be valued above mere supposition and guesswork! As long as we appreciate that we do not yet know the answer to a question or the solution of a problem we are at least likely to continue to look for one – whereas if we allow ourselves to be fobbed off with mere speculation (and highly improbable speculation at that!) then rational proof-based inquiry is at an end. Unvalidated assertion is the enemy of reason: dogmatism is the enemy of truth.

At the same time I appreciate that, as Jonathan Swift (surely a doubting dean?) well said, "It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing (ie a belief) he was never reasoned into." Religious sentiment is indeed neither based on nor susceptible to reason, but proceeds rather from a deep need for reassurance and hope. Man's unreasoned, intuitive, beliefs arise, more often than not, from an emotion-infused conditioning inflicted on us, perhaps, from a very early age and over a lengthy period, and such beliefs are fostered by a culture which inclines our minds to accept and act on certain irrational values and judgments without our even being aware that we have been so conditioned.

Beliefs thus implanted, which once acquired

feel as natural and are as unconscious perhaps as breathing itself, can be so firmly rooted in our minds that, immune to mere reason, they are only to be displaced by a contrary emotional experience or experiences. The awakening from, and rejection of, such imposed and hitherto uncritically accepted values may, for example, be the result of either a major single episode of life that fails to come up to our unrealistic expectations or indeed be the cumulative effect of a number of such failures. It may even be brought about by the experience of "the splendour of an encountered truth" which, revealing previously entertained beliefs to be hollow illusions, may well succeed in bursting these bubbles of the mind and dispelling their harmful contents.

As regards the role that we as rationalists can play in the process of the enlightenment of the presently deluded, this must largely depend upon the clarity, authenticity, and courtesy, with which we convey our opinions and beliefs, for an insistent, dogmatic and offensive approach can only call forth a stubborn resistance.

ALBERT ADLER  
London

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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. Meetings first Tuesday of the month, 7.30pm. February 1, Robert Stovold: *Evolution – A nightmare for theologians*. March 1, Malcolm Cornwall (subject to be announced). April 5, Denis Cobell, President of the National Secular Society.

**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](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com).

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, Feb 15, 2pm. Public meeting.

**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](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk). Website: [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://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. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1. Friday, February 18, 7.30pm. Fire and Brimstone present *Sea Change*, a play by Terry Sanderson to commemorate Darwin Day.

**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).

**Harving & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgore Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, February 3, 8pm. Mark Sweetingham: *An Editor's View*. Thursday, March 3, 8pm, Roger Evans, London Assembly member

**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](http://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](mailto:humanist@spiershill.fsworld.co.uk).

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. Email: [alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto: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](mailto:perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk)

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, February 8, 8pm. Rob Murfin: *Is Environmentalism a New Religion?*

**Isle of Wight Humanist Group.** Information: David Broughton on 01983 740421 or email [davidb67@clara.co.uk](mailto: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/Iss>. Public meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm. Winter solstice party.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, February 24, 8pm. Barbara Smoker, *Thy Will be Done!*

**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, March 2, 8pm. Rob Murfin: *Is Environmentalism a New Religion?*

**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.

**The Thomas Paine Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Saturday, March 5, 2pm. The Eric Paine Memorial Lecture by Brian Walker, former Director of Oxfam: *Thomas Paine – Empire, War and other threats in the 21st Century*.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto:BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net).

**Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282. Website: [www.wmhumanists.co.uk](http://www.wmhumanists.co.uk). Email: [rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk](mailto: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](mailto:ken@kallen14.fsnet.com).

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

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Please send your listings and events notices to:  
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