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Aping their American counterparts, fanatical Christian zealots in the UK are increasingly using threats and intimidation to stifle free speech and artistic endeavour. At the forefront of this movement is **Christian Voice**, which is now targeting regional theatres planning to stage *Jerry Springer, The Opera*

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I USE the internet almost exclusively to hunt down items of interest for the *Freethinker*. But, being a gadget junkie, I also use it to track down weird and wonderful objects that I think I simply cannot live without. So you can imagine how fast my heart began beating when, in a men's magazine – buried among a crop of miracle hair-growth products – I discovered a blurb for a razor designed specially for men like me: men who shave their heads.

I rushed off to learn more about the HeadBlade via the internet, and, having seen that it was among *Time* magazine's top ten designs of 2000, my desire for one became all the more intense.

Under the heading "Good head guaranteed", the folk at HeadBlade.com declared: "You don't mow your lawn with a hand saw. Why shave your head with a face razor? Get yourself the right tool for the job: get the HeadBlade. From the boardroom to the basketball court, guys like Vin Diesel, Bruce Willis, and Shaquille O'Neal, are shaving their heads. It's empowering. It's exhilarating. And with patented suspension system, it is painless.

"Shaving is a more attractive and economical alternative to traditional treatments for hair loss. Transplants can cost \$8,000; Hair Club for Men costs an average of \$2,400 per year; a year's supply of Propecia is in the ballpark of \$600. By contrast, the HeadBlade costs \$15, takes replacement cartridges from Gillette and Schick, and elevates head-shaving to an art."



That's all I needed to know, and immediately sent off to Los Angeles for one. A week later it was in my hands, but then an alarm bell rang. The meagre supply of razor blades that accompanied it were Gillette Altras, a brand of which I had never heard, and one not sold in the UK.

So it was back to the internet to see what the British equivalent might be. A few clicks of the mouse revealed that in Europe the Altra is branded the Contour Plus, and was readily available. But, much more interestingly, my research also uncovered something I did not know about Muslims. Both men and women are apparently obliged to shave their pubic hair.

This peculiar fact came to light on a website devoted to consumer reviews of various household products, razors included. On it, a woman explained the need of Muslims to remove their pubic hair, then gave an emphatic thumbs-down to the Contour Plus. She wrote: "I recently bought the Contour Plus razor for my husband from the local chemist. After my husband used it the first time the poor guy had cuts all over his pubic area. He was frustrated, and demanded I

take it back. I refused as I thought it would be unhygienic for the chemist to try and re-sell such a product after it had been used, but my husband insisted.

"To my astonishment the chemist cleaned and re-packed it and placed it back on the shelf. I felt sick to the stomach imagining the times I may have bought used products in the past without being aware of it."

I too was appalled by the idea of a chemist

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE, in search of the right razorblade, makes a startling discovery about Muslims and their pubic hair



repackaging a used razor, but far more appalled by the fact that the woman had caved into her husband's demands to return it – especially if she thought it might be resold.

I have to say that my first use of the Contour Plus in conjunction with the Headblade was by no means a painless experience. I ended up looking like I'd plunged headfirst into a cactus patch. But that was because I hadn't a clue at the start what I was doing with the razor, and I damn near scalped myself. But I persisted until I got the hang of the thing, and now I would not part with it for the world. I am even considering upgrading to the de-luxe chrome-plated version with little wheels on the back. It looks for all the world like a Volkswagen Beetle.

I am also considering writing to the manufacturers of Headblade suggesting they devise a razor specifically for shaving pubic hair. They are bound to make a killing on the Muslim market. I would insist on royalties, of course.

While on the subject of Muslims and gadgets, one item I shall certainly not be bashing my credit card for is the unbelievably tasteless Mosque clock, sold on the internet by Mosqueclock.com – "Home of the mosque-shaped alarm clock".

The purveyors of these clocks (which come in three distinct designs, and priced around £12.00) state at the outset that "Mosqueclock.com in no way wishes to offend, parody or trivialise the Islamic faith and its devotees". And it warns "If you think you may find this site offensive, don't look".

The company was founded in London in 1999 to provide "a specialist resource for alarm clocks shaped like mosques. We are the original, dedicated on-line vendor of mosque clocks, and as such are considered experts in our field."

To be fair to the company, it does not take itself seriously: a rare example of a Muslim website – at least I assume it is Muslim –



exhibiting a sense of humour.

This humour is mainly to be found in the testimonials published on its site.

Here are some examples: "I am pleased with my new mosque alarm clock. It is possibly the tackiest thing I have ever seen in my life and I laughed for a good ten minutes when I first saw it. I can't believe that something so small can make such a racket. I'll never be late for work again!" – *Helen, UK*.

"Thank you very much for the prompt and efficient delivery of my stunning new clock. It is a wonder in plastic. Not only is it deafeningly loud but completely fails to colour co-ordinate with anything in my bedroom. Marvellous!" – *Tanya, New Zealand*.

"The service I received from Mosqueclock.com was first rate. I wouldn't get my mosque-shaped clocks anywhere else – Praise be to Allah." – *Paul, UK*.

"This is one hell of an ugly clock and loud! I bought it as a gift for a very good friend of mine who absolutely hates it – mission accomplished! I am going to force him to put it on display every time I visit." – *Birgitte, Denmark*.

Mosqueclocks provide an "Add-on service for all products. We will personally select inappropriate wrapping paper, and with a blatant disregard for neatness, will wrap each gift for you. Please note that excessive sticky tape will be used and that not all of the product may be covered. Oh – and before you ask – there is no choice of paper."

Three models of the mosque clock are available, each in four colours. All models are fully functioning alarm clocks that sound the *azan* (the Islamic call to prayer). Also available in "tasteful green" is the Koran Clock. "Open it and you have a fully functioning alarm clock that also sounds the *azan*".

I have no need for an alarm clock (at least in the summer). Living in Brighton means that, for around six months in the year, I am awakened at around six every morning by the frightful screeching of the seagulls that congregate in great numbers on the roof of our flat. It is a toss-up as to which is the more annoying racket – the *azan*, or seagulls in full cry.

Young Iranians shun religion in increasing numbers

SHI'ITE Islam's most sacred mourning day is Ashura, the commemoration of the death of Imam Hossein in a 680 AD battle which brought about the schism between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.

But, far from mourning, hundreds of young Iranians chose Ashura, earlier this year, to gather at Mohseni square for a fun-filled street party.

Outraged by scenes of young men and women using Ashura as an opportunity to flirt in public, Iran's religious hard-liners are now calling on the authorities to stamp out such "vulgar displays".

Failure to do so, some newspaper commentators said, would force pious citizens to take matters into their own hands.

"Let the officials realise that the heroic and passionate people of Iran can easily deal with a handful of hoodlums and promiscuous elements that ridicule our sanctities," the hard-line *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* daily said in an editorial.

"In the sunset of Ashura, women and girls in tight clothes and transparent scarves and guys dressed in Western fashion lit candles while laughing their hearts out," said the *Ya Lesarat* weekly, mouthpiece of the feared Ansar-e Hizbollah hard-line vigilante group, members of whom later dispersed the crowds.

Other newspapers printed pictures from the Mohseni square gathering, focusing on young girls wearing make-up, laughing and mingling freely with the opposite sex.

"In this disgraceful event which was like a large street party, women and girls ... as well as boys ... mocked Muslims' beliefs and sanctities in the most shameless manner," *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* said.

Public displays of affection between unrelated men and women are banned in Iran. Western dress, make-up and pop music are also frowned on by hard-liners as signs of moral turpitude.

"Some long-haired guys would openly cuddle girls, creating awful and immoral scenes. Fast, provocative music ... nearby gave the street party more steam," it added.

Tehran residents said the Mohseni square Ashura gathering has swelled in size over recent years, attracting growing numbers from the generally more affluent parts of the city.

But political analysts, according to a Reuters report, said the trend observed at Mohseni square was in evidence, to a lesser extent, elsewhere.

"In general, religious events like Ashura

have become a way for young people to interact freely in public," said one analyst who follows religious affairs closely.

"The religious side of it is much less important to them than the social aspect," the analyst, who declined to be named, added. Religious figures in Iran, including President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist cleric, have noted with dismay that Iran's disproportionately youthful population, around two-thirds of whom were born

after the 1979 Islamic revolution, are increasingly turning away from religion.

Mohsen Kadivar, a mid-ranking cleric and philosophy lecturer whose views have landed him in prison, told Reuters that young people in secular Turkey were more interested in religion than those in Iran.

"This shows that religion is voluntary. Forcing it on society has the opposite effect," he said.

Religious Right threatens Jerusalem gay pride event

A COALITION of evangelical Christians and rabbis from the United States as well as ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem has vowed to try to prevent an international gay pride parade from being held in Jerusalem this summer – but the mayor of the holy city said he has no way of stopping it.

California pastor Leo Giovinetti said hosting the 10-day WorldPride 2005 event could bring divine retribution upon Jerusalem, citing the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorra as a precedent.

According to the American gay newspaper, the *Advocate*, ultra-Orthodox lawmaker Nissim Zeev hinted that there might be trouble if the event went ahead. "If they think they can party here in this city and carry out this provocation without hindrance, I think the police will be kept busy dealing with demonstrations," he told a news conference. "With demonstrations we never know how they end up, we know how they begin.

Residents here are enraged. Everything should be done to stop this event and not cause people to break the law."

Israeli gays have held small pride marches in Jerusalem in the past that have passed relatively peacefully, with a few shouted insults from onlookers and minor acts of vandalism. This time the plan is for a major international event comprising parties, a gay film festival, and workshops, and culminating in the WorldPride parade, street fair, and rally. The event, held every five years, attracted tens of thousands of participants when it was held in Rome in 2000.

Giovinetti, from San Diego, has a nationwide radio ministry in the United States that he says reaches millions of listeners – and he is seeking a million signatures for a petition against the August festival, which he said is

offensive to the values of religious people and debases the sanctity of Jerusalem.

The petition, drafted by Giovinetti, quotes the biblical book of Isaiah (3:8-9) as a warning against profaning the holy city: "Judah and Jerusalem will lie in ruins because they speak out against the Lord and refuse to obey him. They have offended his glorious presence among them.... They sin openly like the people of Sodom."

Organisers of the festival, themed "Love Without Borders," say they want to promote co-existence. "The holiness of Jerusalem does not come from manipulating religion to keep people away," said Hagai El-Ad, the director of Open House, the Jerusalem group that has organised local gay parades in the city. "Jerusalem's holiness comes from its being a city that can bring together all kinds of people," he said.

The decision to host the WorldPride parade in Jerusalem was made by InterPride, the association that organises gay parades around the world. Giovinetti, who heads an evangelical congregation in San Diego, accused organisers of deliberately targeting holy places.

"We are convinced that it is no accident that the last parade was held in Rome and that today Jerusalem is being targeted. Clearly the group's agenda is to create a provocation and thus offend religious sensibilities," he said.

A majority of Jerusalem's more than 600,000 residents are either Orthodox Jews, Palestinian Muslims, or Christians, traditional communities that oppose homosexuality.

The city's ultra-Orthodox Jewish mayor, Uri Lupolianski, said in a statement that while he opposes the parade, he has no legal way of stopping it because authorisation for public events is given by the police.



New right-wing group joins Christiania

A NEWLY-FORMED religious pressure group has sprung up in the wake of the BBC's *Jerry Springer, the Opera* controversy. The Christian Congress of Traditional Values (CCTV) launched a website last month, on the same day that a spokesman made an appearance on Radio 5 Live.

CCTV appears to be run by right-wing fundamentalist "Bishop" Michael Reid of the notorious Peniel Pentecostal Church. It has been set up to protest at the BBC's intention to "push back the boundaries of taste and decency". No-one at the BBC, it seems, has ever actually said this, but that hasn't deterred CCTV from sending a letter to the Director General asking him to withdraw the statement.

Tories chase the Muslim vote

IN A bid to attract the Muslim vote, Tory leader Michael Howard has launched the Conservative Muslim Forum (CMF), declaring that Muslims had made an "immense" contribution to British life. During the launch in central London, Howard told *Muslim News* that the Forum was a "good way of linking the Muslim community with the Conservative Party." He added that the CMF would help the Muslims "to be better represented" in the Party and that the relationship between the Party and the Forum would be mutual. The Conservative Party "can learn a lot from the Muslim community," he said.

He said the Forum would have "an important say in our policies", adding: "economically vibrant, culturally creative, socially aware" Muslims had enriched modern Britain.

He said that there were many "shared values" between the Conservative Party and the Muslim community: "a commitment to the integrity of the family, a respect for the wisdom of tradition, an opposition to the drugs culture, social breakdown and crime, a belief in the importance of compassion and the need to help the vulnerable, a commitment to enterprise, hard work and individual ambition. And a desire for peace across the globe."

Chairman of the CFM, Mohamed Itlaf Sheikh, said the objective of the CMF was to "encourage Muslim participation in various areas of the Party." The CMF will focus on two areas, education and health.

Meanwhile, Labour MP Mohammad Sarwar has launched Muslim Friends of Labour, replacing Muslims for Labour, which collapsed in acrimony last year.

Peniel Pentecostal Church values espoused by Michael Reid reportedly include: that unemployed Christians should be allowed to starve, that homosexuals are "filthy perverts", that Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are "vile" and "foul heathens". The church has been in trouble with the Advertising Standards Authority over their adverts claiming miracle cures, and even resurrections.

The CCTV website declares: "We stand for freedom of speech. We don't use bullying tactics and are fiercely opposed to censorship."

The phrase "we don't use bullying tactics" was echoed several times on radio last month by the Director of Christian Voice, Stephen Green, who employed just such tactics to force the Maggie's Centres cancer charity to turn down a £3,000 donation from a benefit performance of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*. This was followed by a threatening letter sent to theatres around Britain who may be planning to stage the award-winning musical.

The letter said: "I understand that various theatre venues around the UK are being approached by the producers of *Jerry Springer, the Opera* with a view to staging the production this autumn and next year. Having seen it, I can say with some feeling that the show is crude, offensive and blasphemous in the extreme. At the very least, it is not a family show and will damage the reputation of any theatre which puts it on.

"You will be aware that Christian Voice organised street vigils in protest against the screening of *Jerry Springer, the Opera* on BBC2 on January 8 ... In all, some 1,500 Christians came out on a cold, and in some cases a wet, Saturday night to stand up for their Lord and Saviour, mindful that He endured agonies for them when He died on a cruel cross on Calvary's hill."

Green went on to warn theatres "We are at this moment preparing charges of the criminal offence of blasphemy for service upon those responsible for broadcasting the show on BBC2, and those responsible for staging it at the Cambridge Theatre. Should any regional theatre stage *Jerry Springer, the Opera* this autumn, we shall be looking to prosecute them as well. We shall be especially keen to prosecute since the BBC broadcast, because anyone staging the show will now be doing so as a deliberate act of provocation knowing full well that the show is highly blasphemous and extremely offensive to Almighty God and to Christian believers.

"In addition to that, many local theatres are supported by an organisation of friends or by public money, and the use of Council Tax-payers' money being used to subsidise an offensive disgusting, blasphemous production will be hard for

local Councillors to justify.

"The presence of *Jerry Springer, the Opera* anywhere in the United Kingdom brings, I believe the judgment of God on our land, and shame on the town or city which hosts it. Out of love and concern for where they live, our members outside London will be keen to stand up for their Lord outside any theatre which puts on *Jerry Springer, the Opera*, by holding prayer vigils – probably at shows running before the event, and certainly during any run of *Springer* itself."

'Not only were we very concerned about the disruption to our centres and our services, but most importantly, the impact of this disruption on the people diagnosed with cancer who come into our centres on a daily basis'

"I should be glad to learn from you whether or not your theatre has any plans to stage *Jerry Springer, the Opera* and if so, what stage your negotiations with the producers have reached."

Responding to the letter, one theatre manager – Gwenda Hughes of the New Vic Theatre in Staffordshire – told Mr Green:

"I will continue to programme as I see fit and appropriate for the organisation. Neither I, nor the Trustees, will change the programme or the programming policy as a result of threats, bullying or intimidation from any outside body."

Referring to Maggie's Centres' turning down the donation, Green claimed that the charity "commendably distanced themselves at the last minute from any association with the show. That demonstrated how seriously they take their responsibility to raise money ethically and in ways which do not cause offence."

The truth is that Maggie's caved in to crude intimidation. This is made clear in a statement sent to the editor of the *Freethinker* by the charity's Chief Executive Laura Lee, after he wrote to them, deploring their decision to turn down the donation.

Ms Lee said: "I would like to explain what happened and our reasons for taking the decision we did. Maggie's is committed to providing cancer support and information for everyone affected by cancer, through our growing network of cancer centres across the UK. We are a non-religious organisation, with no affiliation to any religious or political group. Our goal is to provide support for people affected by cancer, whatever their background or beliefs may be. *Jerry Springer, the Opera*

Christian Voice's campaign of intimidation

offered Maggie's a donation of £10 per ticket sold for the matinee performance of the show on February 18, 2005. This amounted to £3,000. The day before the performance, we were contacted by Christian Voice, the organisation that lobbied against the BBC. They told us that if we accepted the donation we would cause offence and that they would take action against us, effectively blocking our ability to work. They said that they would picket our centres, send out a press release deploring our action and email their 50,000 members. We felt that these actions would have prevented us from being able to function effectively. We

also came under similar pressure from a second organisation, UK Life League.

"We decided that we would withdraw because we believe that our job is to help the people who come to us for support with their own battles for living with cancer.

"This had the potential to be an extra battle, not of their own choosing, that they didn't have to fight.

"Not only were we very concerned about the disruption to our centres and our services, but most importantly, the impact of this disruption on the people diagnosed with cancer who come into our centres on a daily basis. We then pre-

pared a statement for use when people contacted us about the situation. It said: 'As a result of contact on 17 February from an organisation called Christian Voice, Maggie's Centres, the cancer care charity, has taken the decision not to accept the proceeds from today's performance of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*.

"We are a small charity with limited resources and our primary aim must be to provide people affected by cancer with the practical and emotional support and information they need. I understand the concern that this has caused and hope that this explanation helps you understand the difficult decision we had to take."

Cardinal O'Connor abortion demand is 'a danger to democracy'

THE intervention by the Catholic Church into British party politics on the issue of abortion has been condemned as "manipulative and dangerous" by the National Secular Society.

"Like the Prime Minister, we believe that abortion should be a matter of conscience, not a party political one," the NSS said in a statement following Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor's commendation of the Conservative Party for their policy on abortion,

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS said: "This intervention is an attempt to push the abortion issue higher up the political agenda. By commending the Tories in this way, the Cardinal obviously hopes that Labour will engage in a bidding war that will make each party promise harder and harder restrictions on abortion.

"But there is no evidence of a popular demand for restrictions on abortion, and the political parties must not allow themselves to be manipulated into making promises to religious leaders who are often not representative even of those they purport to speak for."

Mr Wood said that this was the latest attempt by religious bodies to manipulate the political agenda. "The Government is already courting the Muslim community with promises of new legislation, and now the Catholics are jumping on the bandwagon, flexing their political muscle to manipulate the agenda."

Mr Wood said promises of enshrining religious demands into law in order to win votes was a dangerous tactic. "Religious leaders who make these demands are not speaking for the whole of their community. There is no unanimity of opinion on abortion or anything else among Catholics and it is short-sighted of politicians to take what religious leaders – with their inevitably theocratic agenda – say at face value. Poll after poll shows that Britain is one of the least religious countries in the world.

Voters will not thank any political party for enshrining religious dogma into law in an attempt to win votes."

Mr Wood drew attention to Vatican policy: "Whether they think it is in their electorate's best interests or not, Catholic politicians are required to toe the Vatican line on matters of sexual morality. The Vatican has called for politicians not doing so to be punished.

"In America, the Catholic Church tried to manipulate the latest presidential election result by denying communion to politicians who wouldn't vote against abortion. John Kerry found out that the Catholic Church would use any tactic to get its way. But Britons have a very different attitude to religion than Americans."

He added: "In reality, the Cardinal's statement is likely to swing very few votes. UK Mass attendance is only about 1.3 million each week, just a half of what it was 25 years ago. Many Catholics – probably most – ignore some of their Church's stances on sexual morality, such as the ones on contraception. Some Catholics will be influenced in their position by the dangers of back-street abortions, and some will be voting Conservative anyway." Abortion was not the only issue raised by the Cardinal, but it is by far the most controversial one.

Earlier, the leader of Scotland's Roman Catholics, Cardinal Keith O'Brien attacked the National Lottery for handing £3.3m to Brook Advisory Centres and the FPA – formerly the Family Planning Association.

The organisations support women who are having abortions.

A total of 17 awards worth £1.7m have been made to Brook Advisory Centres and eight grants totalling £1.6m have gone to the FPA.

In calling for a boycott of the lottery, Cardinal O'Brien said: "I am quite staggered at

the volume of funds provided to these agencies, which is in stark contrast to the lack of support for organisations offering alternative approaches."

The National Lottery has raised more than £16bn which has benefited 180,000 organisations over the past decade.

A spokeswoman for the Big Lottery Fund, which distributes the cash to good causes, said: "We are open to everyone who wants to apply for lottery funding and we respect the right of individuals to decide whether or not they purchase lottery tickets or apply for lottery grants.

"Information on grants is publicly available, which allows people to make an informed choice."

- A Roman Catholic bishop in Austria has ordered his diocese to shake up its portfolio after a probe revealed investments in firms linked to abortion, weapons, child labour, and product-testing involving animals

Among the stocks held by the diocese of Gurk-Klagenfurt was a US hospital group that runs abortion clinics

Others of the 15 unnamed companies found to have contravened the church's ethical business practices included a manufacturer of combat aircraft and a shoe company using child labour.

Vatican slams Da Vinci Code

THE best-selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, has been condemned by the Vatican as "a sack full of lies against the Church, against the real history of Christianity and against Christ himself."

The attack on Dan Brown's blockbuster was made by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Archbishop of Genoa. The novel is an international murder mystery centred on attempts to uncover a secret about the life of Christ that a secret society has tried to protect for centuries.

Oh omnipotent God of Israel, hast thou not heard the cries of the mothers, hast thou not heard the screams of the children, hast thou not seen thy people being exterminated?

WHO needs a God like that? What is the meaning of praying to a God who cannot hear and cannot see?

The immense and unequalled tragedy of the Holocaust offers huge support for a separation between the Jewish Identity and the Jewish Religion.

Shma Israel, Adonai Eloenu, Adonai Ehad.

Listen O Israel, The Lord is our God, God is one.

Jewish children are brainwashed from very early childhood with this claim of a special relationship between the Jews and God. In fact God becomes almost a private God belonging to the Jews, and Jews, mainly those in the Diaspora, base their identity on this special relationship with their God.

In fact, the idea that being Jewish means believing and following the rules and regulations of the Jewish religion is so implanted from childhood that the notion that Jews could still be Jews without believing and following these rules is taken at best as a joke and at worst as an insult.

The Jewish religion orders Jews to follow more than 300 rules and regulations. How Jews should dress, how and what they should eat, how and when they should address themselves to their Lord in Heaven, and in what way they should be accepted in society first at birth and then as adults, and also the way to start a family – and even when and how they could travel. All this in addition to what Jews should or should not believe in.

In fact most religions have their own sets of rules and regulations apart from their belief sys-

tems. Until not long ago this is what religion was all about, and the Jews felt that it was quite appropriate that their Jewishness would require them to adhere to those 300 rules.

Religion was very, very important because it offered an explanation about the world, about why and for what purpose we are in the world, and established rules of how people should behave – and even how people should think.

However, we can see clearly today that the symbiosis between identity and religion is dangerous, because whereas it is natural for people

On January 27 – Holocaust Day – DAVID IBRY gave this talk at South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, London

to be proud of their identity, linking their identity to religion is bound to promote fanaticism and intolerance.

Religion started losing its supremacy in Europe when, at the beginning of the Renaissance, Italian scholars devoted their studies to human matters and no longer to the world of the “divine”. In the vernacular of Florence they were called *umanisti* (humanists). One of the greatest humanist philosophers was Baruch Spinoza, but the Jewish community of the time persecuted him because he refused to adhere to Jewish religious rules.

The Italian *umanisti* were not like the humanists of today. They were not anti-religious and not even a-religious. Probably some were devoted Christians. But they started a new trend of thought which focused on humans and the realities of the human world. Of course, through the centuries, there had been many individual philosophers and writers who denounced religion and probably many more would have done the same if it were not for the great dangers which such a denunciation would have exposed them to.

However, the Italian *umanisti* started a new movement – a new way of seeing the world, and also inspired new forms of art for describing the world. This new way of seeing the world opened the minds of more and more people and eventually ended the religious darkness of the Middle Ages.

This new approach to life went back to the pagan values of Rome and Greece. The pagan gods of Rome and Greece were very powerful and immortal, but they were not perfect. They made mistakes just as we do, they loved and

hated like ordinary humans. The concept of a perfect Deity which made no mistakes was unknown to the classical world which started our civilisation.

The Enlightenment followed, and for the first time philosophers, writers and ordinary people had the courage to denounce the evils of religion.

When humans created a religion with a perfect Deity, they created an instrument against which it would not be possible to argue, because they claimed it was revealed to mankind by a supernatural and superhuman source. But some dared to ask: “What if those revelations from heaven were merely the products of human imagination?”

Today we see much more clearly the danger of religion – all religions. The “absolute truth” that religions claim leads unavoidably to fanaticism. When belief rules out doubt, believers feel justified and motivated to act fanatically. Believers will blindly follow the rules and regulations “revealed” to them from heaven: how to dress, how to behave, how to punish transgressions and in some cases even when and whom to kill.

Luckily we have achieved a society where we have the right to warn against the great dangers of religion.

But for most Jews and in particular the Jews in the Diaspora, to lose religion seems to imply the loss of their identity. So I set out to write a book – *Exodus to Humanism* – about saving the Jewish identity by being a Jew without the Jewish religion, and I sought other Jews sharing the same views – all proud of sharing the great Jewish history and tradition without believing in the Jewish religion.

Eventually I received 26 contributions from many countries: 17 from the UK, three from

Humanism updated

A NEW, revised, 80-page edition of Barbara Smoker's book *Humanism* (for secondary schools) is about to be published by South Place Ethical Society.

The text is considerably improved, updated, and expanded, with more illustrations.

The new ISBN will be 0 9023 6823 0 (in the SPES series), and the cover price will be £6.50. Copies should be available by the end of April, and a launch party (with book-signing, brief speeches, and good free refreshments!) will be held in the library at Conway Hall on Thursday, May 12, at 6.30 p.m. (free parking being available in Red Lion Square from that time).

Copies of Barbara Smoker's previous book, *Freethoughts*, are still available from her at £10.00 each, post free.

Mexican sect worships death

A SMALL religious sect that worships death is in conflict with the Mexican government. The sect, an unofficial offshoot of Roman Catholicism, was registered as a religious group in 2003, allowing it to legally raise money and own property.

But earlier this year, the Mexican government said it was considering withdrawing official recognition of the sect after an excommunicated member registered complaints against it.

Sect members worship La Santa Muerte (St Death). Believers regard La Santa Muerte as an angel or saint who only kills on God's orders. The Roman Catholic Church speaks out against worshipping La Santa Muerte, linking the sect to black magic and Satanism. David Romo Guillen, head of the sect, said the Catholic Church was scared “because our popularity is growing”.

the US; two from Canada, two from France, one from South Africa and one from Sweden. Fifteen contributors are mentioned in *Who's Who*.

So what is the message of *Exodus to Humanism*?

The Jews gave Christianity to the world, and to a large extent Islam too. Unfortunately the religion that the Jews offered to a large part of the world did not turn out to be the "light unto the nations" mentioned in the Bible, and the Jews suffered persecution, humiliation, cruelty and unimaginable genocide.

Zionism was born with the aim of creating a new secular country with a new kind of Jew, no longer depending on following the 300 rules of the Jewish religion, for their identity.

Unfortunately, to a very large extent, the old

Jewish world managed to hijack the new Zionist ideals.

Israel is today very strong. The strength of Israel offers the Jewish people a much better protection than an imaginary God sitting in an imaginary Heaven.

Of course Jewish people living outside Israel are now protected like any other group. But it was not always so. In Nazi Germany and later in fascist Italy, as well as throughout German-occupied Europe, Jews were subject to state persecution. When the school I was attending expelled me, it did so to obey laws which compelled it to expel Jewish students.

The immense and unequalled tragedy of the Holocaust offered huge support to the idea of a separation between the identity of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion.

Of course we realise that it will not be easy for many Jews to accept that they have been duped into believing that their pride in being Jewish is mistakenly based on their religion.

The message at the core of *Exodus to Humanism* is that the Jewish religion, like all religions, is obsolete, and an identity based on an obsolete religion will sooner or later itself become obsolete.

To save the Jewish identity in the Diaspora will require time and valid initiatives.

I and the contributors hope that *Exodus to Humanism* will help.

• *Exodus to Humanism* is available from Lavis Marketing, 73 Lime Walk, Headington, Oxford OX3 7AD (Tel 01865 767575) at £12.00. The book is also available through Amazon.co.uk

Carlisle's 'Cursing Stone' saved from the superstitious

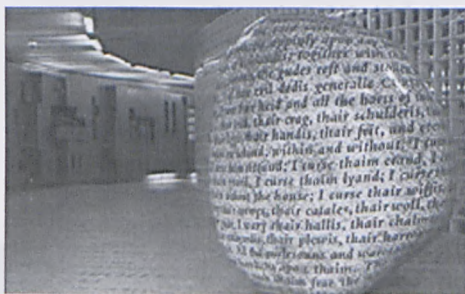
A GRANITE artwork blamed for bringing misfortunes of "biblical proportions" to a British city has been saved.

Carlisle City Council last month rejected a proposal to destroy the stone, commissioned to mark the millennium. Since the Cursing Stone was placed in Carlisle, the city has suffered floods, foot-and-mouth disease, job losses and a goal famine for the local football team.

But council leader Mike Mitchelson said the decision proved the citizens of Carlisle were rational people.

The 14-tonne artwork – which stands between the city's castle and the museum – is carved with a 1,069-word curse invoked by the Archbishop of Glasgow in 1525.

At the time, the area around Carlisle was torn by fighting. The archbishop is said to have



placed the curse on cross border families – known as the "reivers" – who lived by stealing cattle. It begins: "I curse their heads and all the hairs on their head; I curse their face, their brain, their mouth, their nose, their tongue,

their teeth, their forehead ..."

The stone was designed by artist Gordon Young, whose own family was among the "reivers".

Last month councillor Jim Tootle blamed the Cursing Stone for he recent floods and the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 2001. We have had floods, pestilence, a great big fire in the city – it is of biblical proportions," he said.

He wanted the stone destroyed and tabled a motion to discuss it, but the council voted overwhelmingly to keep it. All but two councillors voted to save the stone.

The city council said it had previously consulted Christian groups who were in agreement that the stone should stay.

The groups pointed out that a blessing was also included within the artwork.

IRISH comedian Dave Allen, famed for his TV routines as he perched on a stool with drink and cigarette in hand, died in his sleep at his home in London last month, aged 68.

He was most famous for his TV shows *Tonight With Dave Allen* and *Dave Allen at Large*, which featured his satires on topics including religion.

According to writer Ian Davidson, who worked for ten years with Allen. "He had so much anger, especially against the priesthood, and that was where he got his energy."

His attacks on religion outraged many, and he was banned from appearing in a number of towns.

He was educated by the notoriously strict Catholic Christian Brothers who, in his own words, "literally beat the fear of God into me". He was to become an atheist.

He changed his name to Dave Allen, and broke into television in 1959 on *New Faces*.

Atheist comedian Dave Allen dies

After working in TV in Australia in the early 1960s, he returned to Britain for *Sunday Night* at the London Palladium and launched his BBC TV series. His jokes about religion were a frequent source of controversy. A sketch in the 1970s, in which the Pope did a striptease, brought protests from many quarters and resulted in a *de facto* ban on his shows by the Irish state broadcaster, RTE.

He once said: "The institution you never laughed at in Irish society as a kid was the church, whether it be the Catholic Church or the Church of Ireland. It was alright to snigger at the Church of Ireland, but certainly not to laugh at the Church of Rome."

Dave Allen's use of a four-letter word in

January 1990 was raised in the House of Commons.

He leaves a wife, Karin, and three children.

Pregnant girl gets 150 lashes for adultery

AN Islamic court in the United Arab Emirates has sentenced a pregnant Asian housemaid to 150 lashes for adultery, local newspapers reported this month. Authorities in Ras al-Khaimah emirate arrested the woman after her UAE employer found out she was pregnant out of wedlock, *Al-Khaleej* newspaper said.

Officials at the Sharia Court told *Gulf News*, that the sentence would be carried out in two stages and then the maid, whose name and nationality were withheld, would be deported. Adultery is forbidden in this Muslim country and under sharia law the penalty can range from flogging to stoning to death.

The future the future

In every heart there is a hunger for God. God has “set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Deep down no one is satisfied by materialism; we know there is more to life. There is a God-shaped gap in the heart of every human being. This hunger drives us to search for God. It is one of the explanations as to why there are so few atheists in the world, and why so many seek after God.

– Nicky Gumbel, architect of the Alpha Course, in a booklet entitled “What About Other Religions?”

GUMBEL is an educated and, one would assume, an intelligent man – a barrister no less, who became an ordained minister and who is now on the staff of Holy Trinity, Brompton, in London. So how can such a person claim that “there are so few atheists in the world” when every modern survey indicates that the non- and anti-religious constitute at least around 14 percent of the world’s population?

A 1995 survey published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* indicates that the non-religious are about 14.7 percent of the world’s population, and those identifying themselves as atheists

around 3.8 percent, in total around 850-million.

In the 2001 Australian Census 15.5 percent of respondents ticked “no religion” and a further 11.7 percent either did not state their religion or were deemed to have described it inadequately (there was a popular campaign at the time to have people describe themselves as Jedi).

A 2002 survey by Adherents.com put the proportion of the world’s population who are “secular, non-religious, agnostics and atheists” at about 14 percent.

In a 2003 poll in France, 54 percent of those polled identified themselves as “faithful”, 33 percent as atheist, 14 percent as agnostic, and 26 percent as “indifferent”.

A 2004 survey by the BBC of ten countries showed the proportion of “people who don’t believe in God or in a higher power” varied between 0 percent and 30 percent, with an average close to 10 percent in the countries surveyed. About eight percent of the respondents stated specifically that they considered themselves atheists.

A 2004 survey by the CIA in the *World Factbook* found 12.5 percent of the world’s population was non-religious and about 2.4 percent were atheists.

A 2004 survey by the Pew Research Centre showed that in the USA, 12 percent of people under 30 and six percent of people over 30 could be characterised as non-religious.

The country with the highest percentage of self-claimed atheists (59 percent) is the Czech Republic.

While one can take heart from these figures, studies have shown that, in the short term, the number of non-believers is likely to fall. There are two reasons for this. First, atheists

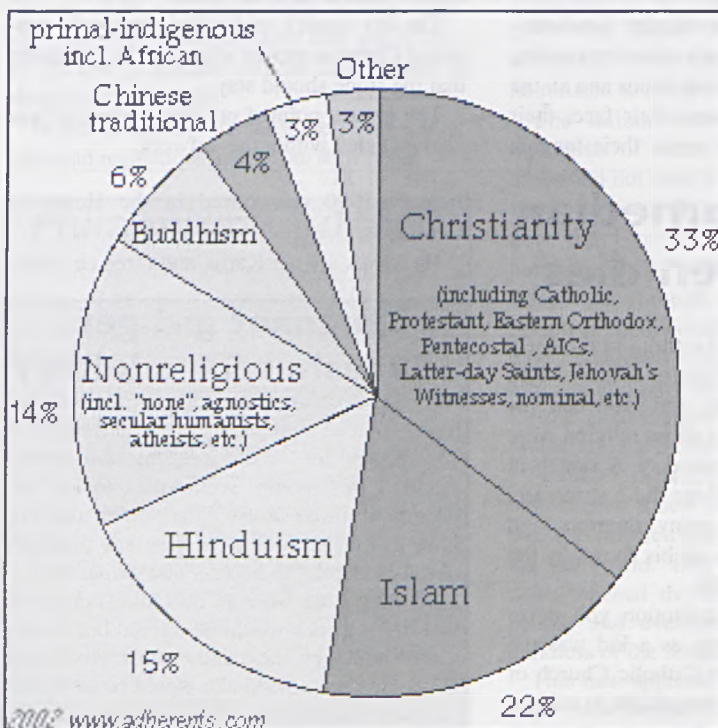
and non-believers were overwhelmingly concentrated in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The collapse of communism in those areas, and the loss of faith in communism in other parts of the world, opened the door to frenetic religious activity, and large numbers of people are now embracing religion, both Christianity and Islam.

Atheists make up around 14 per cent of the world’s population, and this number may rise substantially by the end of the century as more Third World countries achieve First World status. BARRY DUKE reports.

Second, the religious have far higher birth rates. The Vatican, which draws much of its support from the Third World, is aware of this, and it is far from cynical to suggest that its unyielding opposition to birth control must be based on the fear that falling population numbers in the least developed parts of the world will inevitably lead to a diminution of its influence – something which, to its intense annoyance, has happened in Europe. It is therefore in the Vatican’s interest to sustain high levels of poverty and low levels of education in Third World.

In future, the lower birth rates among more radical atheists, the anti-religious, the agnostic and the religiously indifferent, will probably lower their presence in the world population. And if China, which accounts for around two-thirds of the world’s atheist population, relaxes its opposition to religious activity, there could be a significant decrease in its atheist and non-believing population.

This may sound like good news to the Gumbels of this world, but before they set the



A graph published by adherents.com in 2002. It shows non-believers making up the fourth biggest bloc of the world’s population: 850 million. There are two billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims, 900 million Hindus, and 360 million Buddhists.

He is bright, but is Godless

champagne corks popping, they need to consider that this downward trend in atheism may well be simply a temporary blip.

With the exception of those Third World countries that are controlled by communists, or were formerly controlled by communists, atheism and other forms of non-belief are rare in Third World countries, but much more prevalent in the First World, particularly in Japan and Europe. Atheism and non-belief in general is likely to gain strength as an increasing portion of the world's population lives in rich, industrialised First World democracies – and that, surprisingly, includes the United States, in which there is widespread disapproval of atheists. (One recent survey revealed that 52 percent of Americans claim they would not vote for an atheist for president no matter how qualified the candidate was.)

When George Bush, sr., was campaigning for the presidency in 1987, one of his stops was in

Chicago, Illinois, in August of that year. At O'Hare Airport he held a formal outdoor news conference, where Robert I Sherman, a reporter for the *American Atheist* news journal, had the following exchange with the then Vice-President.

Sherman: What will you do to win the votes of the Americans who are atheists?

Bush: I guess I'm pretty weak in the atheist community. Faith in God is important to me.

Sherman: Surely you recognise the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists?

Bush: No. I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.

Sherman (somewhat taken aback): Do you support as a sound constitutional principle the separation of state and church?

Bush: Yes, I support the separation of church and state. I'm just not very high on atheists.

After Bush's election but before his taking office, American Atheists wrote to Bush asking him to retract his August 1987 statement. Bush had his White House aide, C Boyden Gray, reply on White House stationery on February 21, 1989, stating that substantively Bush stood by his original statement.

"As you are aware, the President is a religious man who neither supports atheism nor believes that atheism should be unnecessarily encouraged or supported by the government."

American Atheists had not asked Bush to either "unnecessarily" or even "necessarily" encourage or support them. All they wanted was an apology for the insult.

On February 21, 1990, American Atheists wrote to every member of the United States Congress asking that body to pass a resolution condemning discrimination against atheists by any elected or appointed official of government. The offered resolution read: "No person in

public life may be free to impugn the patriotism of any minority group because of that group's opinion in respect to religion. President George Bush is hereby censured for his public expression of August 27, 1987."

Not a single senator or representatives answered that letter, a clear demonstration of the contempt those in the US administration had for its atheist population.

How big is that population? A comprehensive survey carried out four years ago showed that almost 30 million Americans "Do not subscribe to any religious identification".

The American Religious Identification Survey 2001 was carried out under the auspices of the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York. The poll utilised a sample of over 50,000 randomly selected respondents, and was described as "the most comprehensive portrait of religious identification in the US. The study indicated significant shifts in the nation's religious composition, with mainstream faith groups stagnating, and the numbers of those who profess no religion on the rise.

The survey noted that one of the most significant findings involved growth in that segment of the adult population "identifying with no religion." In 1990, 14.3 million or roughly 8 percent identified with this category. The new ARIS count indicated that the non-believer population has grown to 29.4 million, roughly 14.1 percent of the American community.

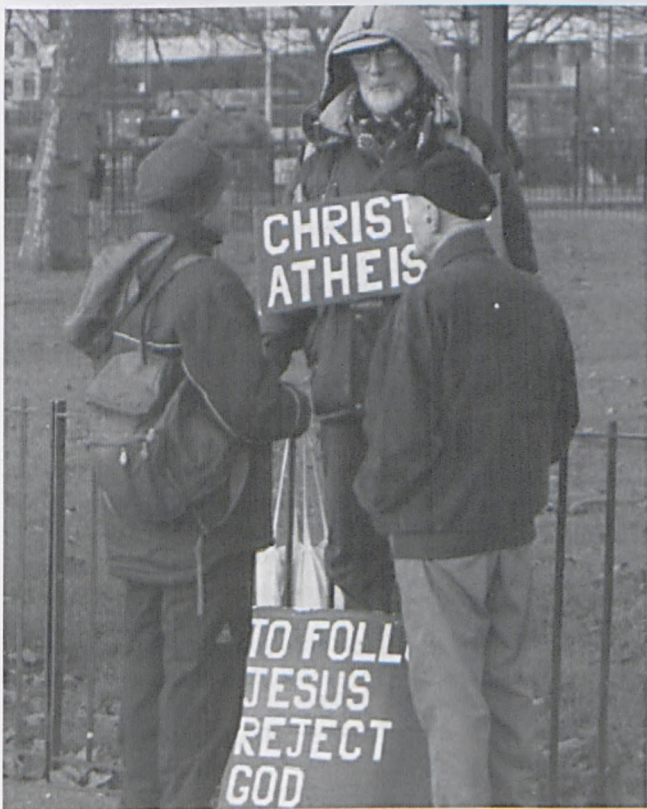
The study introduction quotes an observation by anthropologist of religion, Diana L Eck (*A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, Harper – San Francisco, 2001) who observed, "We the people of the United States now form the most profusely religious nation on earth."

"Often lost amidst the mesmerizing tapestry of faith groups that comprise the American population," notes ARIS, "is also a vast and growing population of those without faith. They adhere to no creed nor choose to affiliate with any religious community. These are the seculars, the unchurched, the people who profess no faith in any religion."

In addition, "the present survey has detected a wide and possibly growing swathe of secularism among Americans. The magnitude and role of this large secular segment of the American population is frequently ignored by scholars and politicians alike ..."

In recent decades, the rise of some Third World countries, for example South Korea, to First World status, and the net migration of Third World people to the First World has been roughly matched by the higher birth-rate in the Third World, and the ratio of five people in the Third World for every one in the First World has remained fairly stable.

(Continued on p10)



Even Christians can be atheists, as this character, pictured at London's Speakers' Corner, demonstrates. He exhorts people to reject God and follow Jesus instead.

However, this is likely to change in the future as populations increase in the First World as a result of countries accepting more and more immigrants to stave off population decline. Meanwhile, many of the people living in the Third World will be in countries with rapidly growing economies, and these could reach First World status in a matter of decades. Roughly one quarter of the Third World lives in China, and China doubles its economic output every ten years. India is home to another

20 percent of the Third World population, and it too is on the verge of doubling its output every decade.

If China attains First World status in 35 years, as predicted, this alone would double the size of the First World. When the point is reached that more people live in First World than in Third World countries – and this could happen before the end of this century – we should start seeing a steady climb in the numbers of those rejecting religion.

But it is not enough simply to sit back and hope that such an increase will happen. It will only happen if we strive to emphasise the positive nature of atheism, and hammer home the message that practically all progress made by humanity has come about through the efforts of brave non-believers, many of whom over the ages were executed by the religious as “heretics.”

Now is the time for non-believers around the world to stand up proudly and be counted

IN AN excellent, but sadly unattributed essay posted on the American philosophical website www.2think.org the author states that “some of the most poorly understood words in the English language are: “theism”, “atheism”, and “agnosticism”.

The writer continues: “The main reason the above words are misunderstood is that theists tend to define atheism, atheists tend to define theism, and people who call themselves agnostics don’t want to belong to either of the definitions the other two parties have given to each other.

“First I will begin with atheism, which will also be the main focus throughout since I think it is the most misunderstood and poorly defined of the three. For example, someone called R. Hall wrote to this site saying, ‘Atheism is a ferocious system, that leaves nothing above us to excite awe, nor around us to awaken tenderness’. This is just one example of a theist incorrectly defining atheism. Atheism is not a system (ferocious or otherwise), it says nothing about what is above us, it says nothing about tenderness, and atheists can be just as excited and awed about life as theists.

“The atheists I know and have read are, on average, more excited and awed by the wonders of life than theists. This statement is not intended to knock theists, but merely to point out that the above definition is a false generalisation that has nothing to do with the ‘real’ definition of atheism.

“There are several other false definitions usually put on atheism by theists.

“Theists frequently claim that atheists ‘claim to know there is no God’, ‘are merely rebelling against a god that they really believe in’, ‘think they can prove there is no god’, ‘say there is no god so that they can be evil’, ‘don’t want to be accountable’, etc.

“Although some atheists (and they are in the minority) may claim to know that there is no God, most atheists claim no such thing.

“Atheism is an ‘absence of belief in god’ and nothing more. Those who claim to ‘know’ there is no god are sometimes referred to as ‘strong atheists’, but their thinking is as faulty as

Who is an atheist?

those who claim to know that there is a god. Atheists who don’t go as far as claiming knowledge of no god can also be called ‘strong atheists’. For instance, atheists who claim an affirmative belief that there is no god usually are also referred to as ‘strong atheists’ even though they do not claim knowledge of such a thing.

“For now, let me just state that no one can know there is no God for the same reason that no one can know there is no Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, unicorn, or other such creature. Some may say that we can know that there are

none of the above since we can trace through history where these characters were created and that the ideas about them have changed over the centuries.

“The same can also be said of God (except the history of God goes back a bit farther, so it is more difficult to track with certainty), but for this argument’s sake, let’s say that such creatures, although there is a strong probability that they are fictional, cannot be 100 percent positively proven unreal, for the basic reason that the entire universe would need to be explored to positively assert the non-existence of such a hypothetical being. If theists attempt to define their God, however, that specific god can be disproven through the use of logic and reason. In these cases, an atheist can accurately state that they know that the god described does not exist.

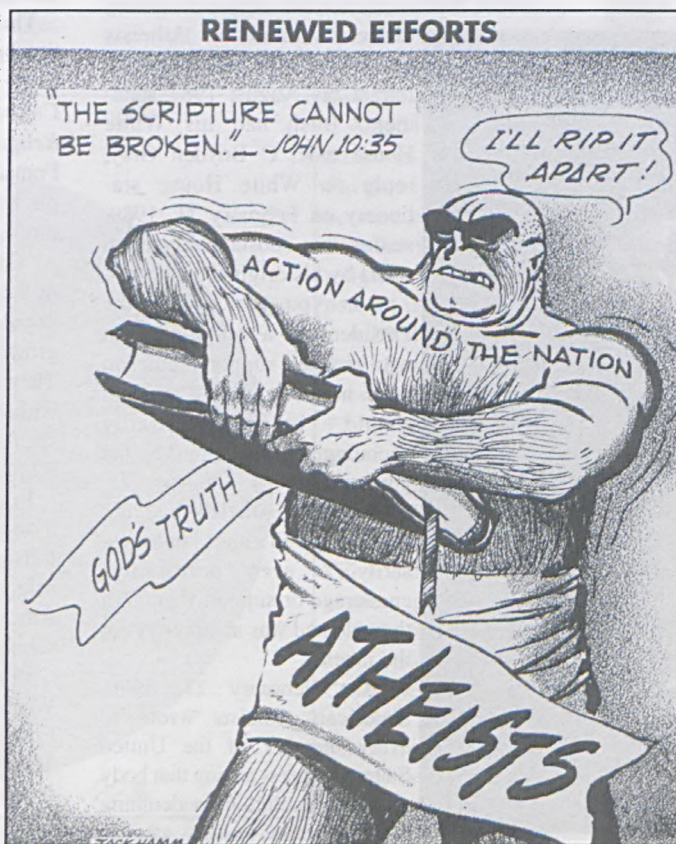
“To summarise, atheism is a lack of belief in

god. Basic atheism (of the ‘non-strong’ variety) on its own does not positively assert anything regardless of what some atheists may say or think, and regardless of what theists frequently define as atheism.

“Now let’s move on to theism briefly. Theism is simply the opposite of atheism. A good definition of theism is ‘a positive assertion that God does exist’.

“Whatever this God may be to the theist is irrelevant to the definition of theism as a word on its own. Based on these two definitions, everyone is either a theist or an atheist. Either you positively assert that there is a god or you lack such a positive assertion. There is no middle ground – which brings us to our third word: ‘agnosticism’.

“When you break down the word agnostic, you come up with a term meaning ‘without knowledge’ or ‘unknowable’. The word agnostic isn’t a very old word. Despite this fact, T H Huxley, who created the term, used it to mean our modern definition of ‘scientist’ more than anything else. The word has changed meaning over the years, and people



A typical portrayal of atheists in the US. This one is by Jack Hamm, a prolific Christian cartoonist

have tended to use the term as a sort of middle ground between atheism and theism. In my opinion, such a middle ground doesn't exist. One either asserts that there is a God or they lack such an assertion.

"Agnostics have labelled themselves as such either because they don't understand the definition of atheism or because they have heard only about the 'strong atheists' who do make a positive assertion that there is no God and they don't personally hold such a strong assertion.

"My modern definition of agnostic is probably different from any that you have previously heard. It is that virtually everyone is an agnostic. That's right, almost everyone is either an agnostic/atheist or they are an agnostic/theist because no one can 'know' God.

"Atheists probably don't have a problem with this definition, but I'd be willing to bet that many theists who are reading this will not appreciate being labelled an agnostic.

"The reason I claim that no one can know God is this: Many who believe in God don't claim any first-hand knowledge. They will tell you that their belief comes from feelings, reliance on scripture, or their wanting to believe. Those people are fairly easy to rule out as non-agnostics as they really don't assert knowledge in the first place. They can readily be dubbed agnostics because they are without knowledge of their belief. Their belief is simply a belief and nothing more.

"The slightly-more-difficult-to-dub agnostic variety of theists are those that claim first-hand knowledge. The main problem with these people is this first-hand knowledge they assert is always based on personal experience rather than any sort of tangible proof or external evidence. Some claim to converse with, see, or otherwise personally experience God.

"The issue with these claims, and my reason for still labelling these people as agnostics, is that all of their personal experiences (1) more or less contradict the personal experiences of others who claim this same 'knowledge' and (2) can't be shown to others (especially sceptics, scientists, or others who want to see proof).

"Knowledge in any item isn't something based solely on personal experience. If I have a personal experience that gives me knowledge, I should be able to share that knowledge in a verifiable manner with others so that they too can obtain this knowledge. For instance, if I figure out that the earth is round based on my personal experience of flying in the space shuttle and seeing first-hand that it is round, I can share that knowledge with others either by having them also go in the space shuttle and view earth for themselves, or I can take photos or provide some other sort of evidence of my experience to others so that they too can obtain this knowledge.

"Their knowledge of the earth's shape is then based on reality rather than their own desires to believe or some other 'non-proof' Real knowledge should be objective and capable of being tested, demonstrated, and/or experimentally verified. Given these factors, even those that claim 'knowledge' of God are agnostics as their 'knowledge' is really a misuse of the word. What they have is not knowledge. What they have is a belief in their own experience and nothing more. If they had 'knowledge', they would be able to share it with the doubter, the evidence seeker, and those who don't already believe.

"To conclude and summarise, both you and I are agnostics. Almost everyone is an agnostic (in the modern sense of the word) since none of us has any evidence, proof, or other tangible

means of sharing knowledge regarding any of the various versions of God that the masses currently believe in, or have believed in, in the past. The few people who truly believe that they can prove or disprove the existence of God(s) probably could not be classified as agnostics under this frame of thought (although even this is debatable as one person's 'proof' can be pure nonsense to another, and would, therefore, leave the non-agnostic status only in the eyes of the person claiming the illogical 'proof'). Everyone is either a theist or an atheist.

"If you answer the question, 'Do you believe in God?' with an affirmative, then you are a theist. If your answer is 'no' or 'I don't know' then you are an atheist due to your lack of an affirmative belief."

Atheism and social progress

THE Fifth World Atheist Conference was organised by the Atheist Centre of India, and staged earlier this year at Siddhartha Auditorium, Vijayawada. The theme of the Conference was "Atheism and Social Progress." The backdrop banner of the conference dais – with impressive pictures of Gora, Robert Green Ingersoll, Charles Bradlaugh, Periyar E V Ramaswami and Abraham T Koor – reflected the historic significance of the Conference.

Dr Vijayam, of the Atheist Centre, highlighted the historical significance of the five World Atheist Conferences from 1972 to 2005, stating that atheism and social progress were intricately interconnected and that atheism was a way of life and a philosophy based upon reality and social outlook. It aimed at the development of an individual's personality in every sphere of life. "Atheism," he declared, "was not negative, but positive – it is constructive and creative. It encompasses all the problems of life and aims at human liberation."

Mrs Saraswathi Gora, the 93-year-old co-founder of the Atheist Centre, delivered her message in Telugu, the local regional language. Subha Gora, her great-great granddaughter, read out the fuller version of her speech in English.

Saraswathi Gora highlighted the struggles she encountered with husband in their bid to spread atheism as a way of life. She recalled her husband being dismissed from colleges for championing atheism. The couple were also shunned by the orthodox as "godless people".

But through dialogue and discussion, as the years passed, the barriers disappeared and those who shunned them came to realise that "To do good and to be good, god and religion are not necessary."

She strongly believed that religions promot-

ed a slave mentality, demanded submission, and engendered a sense of fatalism. Atheists, on the other hand, were people who had learned to take personal responsibility and tried to change the world in which they live for the better, rather than sit back and blame supernatural forces for things that went wrong

She stressed that to free a society from the clutches of religion, it was important for atheists to develop alternative ways of life, literature, language. The only weapon against the growing trend of fundamentalism was to edu-



Saraswathi Gora
Photo: Jim Herrick

cate the young along secular lines.

Chief guest at the Conference, Roy Brown, President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, highlighted the need for separating religion and state. Such separation, he said, was the only way in which which people of different faiths could live together in peace. Expressing concern over the recent mixing of religion and politics in the US, he said secularism alone was not enough. In a majority of the secular States, recognition of democracy and human rights should be further strengthened. "Democracy must mean more than simply the

winner takes it all”.

Citing examples of different secular democracies, he said atheists could no longer keep themselves aloof from the political fray. The “battles for the future of humankind” were being fought out in the arena of world politics and the key word for every humanist must be “engagement”.

“Four hundred years after Copernicus, religious belief has finally been exposed as no more than wishful thinking. We won. Reason really has triumphed over the supernatural. The result has been social progress unprecedented in human history. History will probably show that it was during the 20th century that belief in a Supreme Being, both personal god and creator of the Universe, finally became untenable. Untenable, that is, for anyone reasonably well-versed in the discoveries of science.”

He stressed that scientific progress would be impossible without the rationalist, atheist worldview. “We must work to ensure that our worldview becomes dominant – not just in the sense of being right, but in the sense of becoming the most widely believed.”

He added that children should be handed the tools of discovery – literacy and numeracy. “The greatest gift we can give our children is the ability to discover the world for themselves. But we must also teach them critical thinking. And more than that, we must *justify* critical thinking to them by giving examples of how it has led to social progress. We need to teach our children scientific literacy, not so they can become scientists, but so they can see for themselves how totally the discoveries of science differ from religious “knowledge” that is sterile, unchanging and all too frequently, wrong. And finally, we need to teach them science, not as the wisdom of a new, white-coated priesthood, but as a continuing process of observation and discovery.

Norwegian Levi Fragell, former President of IHEU, underlined the need to promote atheism as a legitimate alternative to theism. He pointed out that it was the belief in God that most often was an obstacle for ethical, social, human, and artistic development as well as scientific creativity.

He said that as secular knowledge and

human experience accumulates, religious doctrines often become more and more dysfunctional, inhuman and suppressive. The conditions of women in many theology-based cultures are one example. Social development is obstructed and natural human needs are neglected. For more than 2,000 years humanists and philosophers in India, Greece, and Rome – and later on all over the world – have attacked theology. This has been a major contribution to civilisation. Criticism of theology is still extremely important for the future welfare of millions.

A warning about the spread of radical Islam was sounded by an Iranian delegate, Azam Kamaguan. Speaking as an atheist, a critic of Islam and a women’s rights activist who had survived “an Islamic holocaust” in Iran, she warned that “political Islam was a contemporary movement seeking power not only in the Middle East but also in the West. The main means of this movement to achieve its goal is terror and bloodshed.”

She was scathing about governments in the West which tolerated Islam “as long as it left its weapons outside their borders, and did not carry out its terrorist activities on their patches”. At the same time these governments were ready to pass laws to silence critics who dare to criticise Islam.

As a result, the fear of offending religious feelings was gaining ground everywhere. “It is getting harder to argue against *hijab* and the Koran’s role in the subordination of women. As a teacher, advisor, health or social worker, you are seen as racist if you question and object to the oppression of women and girls within many Islamic communities.

“Under the guise of respecting the culture of others, and through promoting the idea of multi-culturalism, religion is being protected while dissent is stifled. By promoting multi-culturalism, Western governments, the mainstream media and the majority of liberal intellectuals are turning a blind eye to the oppression of women under Islam in immigrant communities controlled by sheiks and mullahs. The truth is that all cultures are not equal and humane. Human beings must be respected, but not all cultures are deserving of respect. We cannot hope to have a civil society if we do not value the same rights, if we do not pursue the same goals, and we cannot do this if we keep emphasising the differences.

“We, the secularists, atheists and freedom-loving people, need to do more – much more. We need to push religion back to where it rightfully belongs. We should fight for unconditional freedom of speech including freedom to criticise religion in general, and Islam in particular. We should raise our voices, both in the East and in the West, for secularism and the separation of State and Religion.”

More Scots say ‘no’ to religion

SCOTLAND has a weaker sense of religious identity than the rest of the UK, according to a new report that shows the changing face of religion in modern Scotland. Despite a strong Christian past, just 67 per cent of Scots identified with a religion in 2001, compared to 86 per cent in Northern Ireland and 77 per cent in England and Wales.

The breakdown of the first national census to show religious leanings – published by the Scottish Executive – showed important social information about the different religious communities in Scotland.

Christianity remains the largest religious group in Scotland at 65 per cent. Of those Christian groups, 42 per cent are Church of Scotland, 16 per cent Roman Catholic and seven per cent other Christian groups.

But the Christian population is ageing, with more than a quarter of the Church of Scotland and 17 per cent of Roman Catholics over pensionable age.

The Rev Dr Marjory MacLean, the deputy clerk of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, said the statistics reflected the number of people who associate with the Church rather than active worshippers and therefore the comparison with the UK failed to show the real picture. She said: “In other parts of the UK notional adherence may be expressed differently, but it is certainly not the same thing as active Christian practice and therefore I do not think these statistics are helpful or meaningful.”

Young people are still much more likely to say they have no religion compared to those in older age groups. A quarter of those under 16 said they did not associate themselves with any religion. But David Jasper, a priest with the Scottish Episcopal Church and theologian at Glasgow University, said Scotland is still a very spiritual country, with young people finding other ways to express their spirituality, for example through the arts.

“There are a lot of people who would still say they are fundamentally Christian in their perspective, but the church does not give them the space if they are homosexual or different in any kind of way.

“I think to a certain degree the Church has been inflexible but there are other ways of looking for what you are looking for.”

The Catholic Church was also upbeat about the future, pointing to the Church’s own census in 2002 that showed 11.2 per cent go to church on Sundays compared to 7.5 per cent in England.

Nevertheless, the figures make sobering reading for the Catholic Church with 7 per cent of Roman Catholics divorced, the same figure as the Church of Scotland. Also, couples involving one Roman Catholic come second only to Buddhists as the most likely to co-habit.

I AM one of those few secularists who have publicly opposed the authoritarian French ban on Muslim headscarves in schools – suppressing personal and cultural choice and the sensible shunning of expensive French hair-dressing. Since the ban took effect, it has, of course, proved divisive, as predicted, with many more Muslim girls being denied education; and were it to be followed in Britain the ban would also lead to a proliferation of separate Muslim schools – funded, of course, by the taxpayer.

However, I would like to make it clear here and now that I certainly do not support last month's English appeal-court judgment in favour of the body-wrap (aka the *jilbab*) of the 16-year-old schoolgirl Shabina Begum, which deliberately denigrates womanly physique. How long will it be now before one or other design of the Muslim face-mask is seen in our schools and other public institutions?

Shabina's former school, which was defending its right to prescribe a school uniform, had always permitted the usual Muslim headscarf (the *hijab*). Moreover, in recognition of Islamic religious sensibilities, the school staff had actually consulted imams before designing the uniform, so that the fabric was opaque and the design non-revealing (apart from the lascivious neck) – whether non-Muslim girls liked it or not.

Now it has apparently become case-law that pupils attending schools which prescribe a uniform need not abide by it if their objection to the uniform is religious – though not otherwise. Yet another religious exemption has thus crept into the law of this country; and some moderate Muslims have voiced the opinion that this litigious "victory" has done a real disservice to the Islamic population.

In the television news shots of Shabina's smugly leaving the Law Courts with her older brother Shuweb Rahman (who is also, apparently, her *de facto* guardian, their parents being dead), his body-language showed that he was her puppet-master. Later I read that he is allegedly a member of the extremist Islamic group Hizb-ut-Tahrir – which, while banned in Germany and the Middle East, was behind the successful court action here.

Incidentally, the barrister who represented Shabina and her puppeteers in court was a QC named Cherie Booth, claiming the case as a Human Rights issue. Since her celebrity husband is known to be anxious to win back disaffected Muslim supporters of his ruling Party before the general election, the pillow-talk at Number Ten could be quite instructive – especially as the appeal hearing was so well timed.

Some twenty years ago, when, as president of the National Secular Society, I was invited to defend secularism in university debates around the country, I often came into scary contact with student followers of Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the vociferous spokesmen

they brought in to oppose me. They made no secret of the fact that they planned to make the whole world Muslim, beginning with Britain, and they openly denounced democracy and free speech as being against the will of Allah.

BARBARA SMOKER comments on the case of Shabina Begum and her controversial *jilbab*

Less important, perhaps, but very significant, was the sex segregation of the audience. Remember, these were not the modern "faith" academies, but ordinary British redbrick universities. I took to writing a letter to the university authorities prior to each event, asking them to back my opposition to sex segregation – but the invariable reply was that I must elicit the majority view of the audience, and abide by it. (This was apparently an area where democracy was respected!)

Needless to say, the students, being predominantly Muslim, invariably voted for sex segregation – including the young women, almost without exception. (Even those female students who might have been bravely feminist enough to vote against it would never do so, knowing that to sit next to a sex-starved male student would almost inevitably mean putting up with

groping.) While the male side of the hall was generally overcrowded, with many standing throughout the lengthy debates, there were empty seats on the other side – but anyone who dared to sit on the "wrong" side was shadowed out of the hall and often spat at outside.

At about the same time, I carried out an investigation into the sartorial and other oppression of girls and women by both Muslim extremists in Hackney and Hassidic Jews in Stamford Hill. Many of the latter, who had been refugees from the Nazis 50 years before, were still holding back later generations of their women-folk from assimilation into the wider British society, even including learning to speak and read English. Horrified by my findings, I wrote articles exposing the situation, whereupon I was denounced by a certain Mr Ken Livingstone in his then regular column in the London *Evening News*, as "racist" and "anti-Semitic" – obviously for the sake of political dissociation, though it was before the invention of "spin" and "political correctness".

I cannot resist a little *Schadenfreude* now at Ken's recent press denunciation – with exactly the same epithets as those he used against me. But I would like to know his uncensored opinion of Shabina's *jilbab* – not to mention the inhuman face-masks.

The French ban, one year on

IT IS now a year since the French introduced their ban on religious symbols in schools, and a senior government official has declared it a success. Hanifa Cherifi, inspector general at the Education Ministry, said the law reconfirmed the separation of church and state as an essential rule. After the stormy debate over the law, she said, France now understands its Muslim population better and is better able to distinguish between radicals and moderates. The law had reduced tension in state schools and was a success.

"In terms of the numbers, the result is quite positive," Cherifi said on Radio France Internationale. "Beyond that, the general atmosphere is quite positive and satisfactory for all, both the schools and the pupils. We are quite pleased. Remember what it was like before this law. For the past 15 years, we had permanent tensions, sessions in administrative courts, headlines that gave France a terrible image."

The March 15 Freedom Committee, a Muslim group supporting schoolgirls who defied the law, issued a dissenting report about "victims" of the new policy. It said 47 had been expelled from school and 533 had agreed under pressure to shed their headscarves and were now "in a deplorable psychological state." The report was detailed in the daily newspaper *Le Monde*.

To continue wearing their headscarves, others had dropped out of school, switched to correspondence courses or moved to such countries as Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Turkey where they are not banned in schools, the report said.

Cherifi questioned the committee's figures and cited Education Ministry statistics showing that 639 pupils – "and not just veiled young girls," she said – came to state schools in September wearing banned clothing. Education Minister François Fillon said in January that 48 pupils had been banned for wearing religious symbols, including 3 Sikh boys who refused to remove their turbans. Cherifi said that reaffirming the official separation of church and state, which Muslim activists have criticised as too strict, had helped France get through the latest headscarf controversy.

"I have 15 years of experience with the headscarf issue and we have had tenser periods than this," she said. Contrary to warnings that Muslims would revolt if headscarves were banned, most have accepted the policy, she said.

Accommodating Muslims

ANY efforts to mitigate the nastiness of Islam by the pretence that it is accidental and not in the grain, and to negotiate with spokesmen for Islam, are seen by Muslims as yet more evidence of the weakness of the West.

Ms Moia (*Points of View*, March), wondering whether there have been positive results from Russian domination, where, within and bordering Russian frontiers, there is a strong Muslim presence, and whether they outweigh negative consequences, and alluding to the Islamic seclusion of women in Amsterdam, hints at this central problem.

Can Islam, anywhere, be satisfied by the infidel? Before the invasion of Iraq, the orientals in the State department and at the FO must have been troubled by comparable questions. After a long time with the holy texts and living in the *dar ul islam*, I am sure that Islam

cannot be cohabited with – without our trading in our customary freedoms. Contrary to what Ms Manji (*The Trouble with Islam*) wishes to believe, and what the British government and BBC appear to prefer us to believe, it cannot change and remain Islam; it is fundamentalist. Fortuyn and Van Gogh quite properly drew a line in the sand. I will get into my car and drive some distance rather than buy from a local Muslim outlet. So, meantime, I keep my mind though I might lose my head, but what are our governments intending to keep and hoping not to lose?

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Secular symbol

I AGREE with your reader's suggestion that freethinkers and secularists should adopt a symbol. But a star, even an eight pointed one,

is ambiguous as several religions have already appropriated stars. I suggest the mathematical symbol π .

TIM BOYCE
Hampshire

Buddhism

THE fantastic ideas pertaining to Buddhism described by David Simmonds in the February 2005 issue of the *Freethinker* would certainly not have originated in the mind of Gautama Buddha, and he would not have dreamt of trying to propagate such illusions and wild hallucinations, verbally.

A Penguin 60s Classics book, *Buddha's Teachings*, translated from the Pali by Juan Mascaro, furnishes a selection of the teachings from the *Dhammapada*. Some of the chapters given include reflections on eg Watchfulness; Wakefulness; Self-possession; To Arise,

Four key points to put to parliamentary candidates

WRITING last month in the National Secular Society's *Newsline*, secularist Des Langford revealed that he had constructed a letter he intended to send to the candidates in his constituency.

We at the *Freethinker* believe that the points he raises should be put to all candidates before the forthcoming election, and publish them in full so that readers might use them as the basis for similar contact with candidates in their areas.

Des Langford wrote:

I have been following the discussion about who we secularists should vote for in the forthcoming election. I have devised the attached letter – drawing upon NSS provided information – which I intend to send to the candidates in my constituency:

I am seeking your views on a matter which is important to me and my wife in casting our votes at the forthcoming election. I am concerned by the growing power and influence by religious groups over the government's policies and society in general.

Incitement to Religious Hatred: I am very concerned that such a proposal, if it becomes law, would restrict freedom of speech and may lead to prosecutions of writers, comedians and satirists because they have offended the sensibilities of some group or other. We already have examples of the closure of a play in

Birmingham as a result of pressure from Sikh extremists, and demands for censorship by some Christian groups of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*. An Incitement to Religious Hatred law would also lead to conflicts between faith groups, accusing one another of blasphemy, as it has in Australia recently. Addressing racial hatred and violence is of course desirable, but this can be done through existing laws; censoring free speech and stifling criticism of a belief, on the other hand, is the mark of an intolerant society.

Involvement of faith-based groups on government policy making: This is a terrible initiative because it gives disproportionate influence to individuals simply because they claim to represent a particular group. Who can say whether they are truly representative, since there are many splits within religions, and even if they were, why should their group be favoured over others?

Encouragement of faith-based schools, supported by taxpayers' money: I am appalled that faith based schools should be allowed to indoctrinate young people into a particular belief, simply because it may happen to be that of their parents. To support such schools with taxpayers' money just adds insult to injury. Religion, or lack of it, should be a personal choice, and it is unfair to foist it on secular families, or to limit their choice of schools because of it. It is also divisive in the community to have a proliferation of such faith schools rather than an integration of children from different cultural backgrounds within mainstream education. A recent poll found that 56 percent of people felt that children of all faiths should attend the same school, and only 5 percent thought the government should encourage separate schools – but that is what

the government persists in doing.

Religious exemptions from employment discrimination legislation: This could allow religious groups (such as faith schools) to refuse to appoint, or otherwise discriminate against, potential employees whose life style or world view is disliked by their fundamentalist "principles" – such as gay people, or atheists.

I believe that the liberal values of free speech and toleration are under threat from a vociferous and extremist religious lobby which has a growing and disproportionate influence. I am in favour of freedom of religion, but this must also include freedom from religion for the very significant number of people in this country who are atheists, humanists, agnostics and sceptics.

It currently seems to be considered politically correct, and even liberal, to pander to religious intolerance. But doing so cannot be liberal when it means giving power to repressive ideas, which discriminate against the rights of minorities such as women and gays.

Finally, if we give power to Muslims and Jews to match that of Catholics and Protestants, what about Buddhists, Sikhs, Scientologists, Seventh Day Adventists, Moonies, loonies and devil worshippers? Where does it end? The only fair way for society to go is to level the playing field, and ensure that no religious group has excessive influence. That way we can all start from a point of equality within a fair, open and tolerant society.

I should be grateful for your views on each of the four issues I have identified above. I am sending this letter to the parliamentary candidates for all the main parties in my constituency, and your replies will influence how my wife and I vote.

Quotable quote

"I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world, and do not find in our particular superstition [Christianity] one redeeming feature. They are all alike, founded upon fables and mythologies."

– Thomas Jefferson



Watch; Hasten and Strive; Endurance; Infinite Freedom; Forsake Anger, etc.

If Gautama Buddha was willing and prepared to renounce his life of luxury in a regal palace to go out into the forest in order to spend years in meditating and thinking on these things, it is most unlikely that there was anything wrong with his ways of thinking. He would not have intended to start a new Religion (nor did Jesus Christ) and would have met with strong opposition from the religionists of his time. Of course, hi-jacking of illustrious names associated with the eternal theme of mysticism – union with reality and the search for truth – has been big business for thousands of years.

It seems Buddha really knew how to concentrate, and taught his disciples how to do it. Modern teachers and business people reckon that just one in ten people understand concentration, and out of those, only a very small minority know how to use it efficiently. It seems that the Buddha was very much an evolutionist as well as a freethinker, and knew that consciousness evolves – with personal effort particularly. Such a soul personality would by no means have tried to tell people that they might reincarnate, say, as an animal, a bird, a fish, etc. That would be like trying to put evolution in reverse, and to expect the oak could grow backwards to an acorn, or the frog back to a tadpole, etc.

The Enlightened One is also reputed to have declared: "The human race is asleep, and needs to wake up". What insolence! He must have been a heretic, or at least a proper terrorist in his day.

FREDERICK BACON
Mansfield

I RECENTLY found myself reading with interest David Simmonds' thoughts on the values and vices of Buddhism. This interest soon turned to disbelief as I saw error after error on the page. I shan't bore you with every piece of misinformation, but here is a sample:

- the misspelling of "Sanskrit" (he writes "Sanscrit")

- he writes that all suffering is the result of good or bad deeds. In fact, although some suffering is seen as karmic retribution, not all of it is so, and it is the very existence and horror of suffering that forms the foundation of Buddhist doctrine.

- he talks of a "convenient shortcut" to nirvana, when in fact what he refers to is a method of obtaining a better rebirth – nirvana is an escape from the cycle of rebirth (not a 'land of bliss') and can only be achieved the hard way.

- he states that Buddhist scriptures are "divinely inspired". This is quite simply not true.

With growing curiosity, I dug out his earlier

appraisal of Hinduism, and was not entirely surprised to find another selection of glaring errors. Not least of these is the repeated assertion that the *Bhagavad Gita* is from the *Upanishads*. In fact, the *Bhagavad Gita* forms part of the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, as a quick glance at Will Johnson's introduction to the text (or indeed the back cover) should have made clear to Mr Simmonds.

As an atheist, I have no problem with people rejecting religious beliefs, but I cannot see how a misinformed rant can do anyone a service. Before publishing someone's two-page dismissal of a major world faith, it might be advisable to check that it at least has the basic facts correct. This would avoid misleading your readership, and enraging those who have read more than two books on the subject.

NAOMI APPLETON
London

Vegetarianism

AS A fellow victim of an inappropriate surname. I sympathise with Frederick Bacon (March *Points of View*), but question the basis of his faith that "the entire human race was vegetarian before the Ice Age". Why, in that case, did we evolve the teeth required for meat-eating? And how can he maintain that the (mythical?) Jesus was vegetarian, when the gospels depict him not only consorting with fishermen but miraculously multiplying piscine food?

Finally, I hope Mr Bacon does not have a pet cat, to be starved on "the household dinner left-overs of spuds and greens", for cats are natural carnivores – unlike dogs, which (in common with humans), are omnivores.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Exorcism

IT WAS recently reported that a Vatican university is to open a diploma course in Satanism. Yet the eponymous subject does not appear to have been sighted for some little time; so that, like his Tasmanian equivalent in mainland Australia, he has even been declared extinct. Nevertheless, his minions are everywhere alive and kicking.

Ecological tourists do not need to go at midnight to remote villages in the American Appalachians or the Italian Apennines to behold these exotic internal parasites – or, rather, the responses of their human hosts. They are as likely to be found in the suburbs of our major cities and in broad daylight. Even the Holy Father, whom one might have thought to be otherwise preoccupied, what with population explosions, family planners, abortionists, blasphemers, pornographers and gays, and species declines of holy men and women (to say nothing of candidates for the

Apostolic Succession), is devoting much attention to them.

In many respects this proliferation of devils, demons and other infernal creatures is a god-send to Christianity: literally, as the Lord God made them all. With a steep drop in church-going, exorcisms provide useful occupational therapy for such male clergy as survive, who might otherwise hanker after wives or, worse, husbands. While occasionally victims of demon possession may die of suffocation or a broken neck during their liberation, such tragedies generally result from the ministrations of untrained Protestant amateurs.

Pig farmers in rural areas should be alerted to the danger to their herds. Like HIV and many other viruses, devils seem unable to survive long outside living hosts, and when not flourishing inside *homo insapiens* show a predilection for pigs. In urban areas it is feared cats and dogs may be at risk

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

The Free thinker

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Events & Contacts

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: Ivor Moll, 6 The Brooklands, Wrea Green, Preston PR4 2NQ. Tel. 01772 686816.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 461404. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Meetings first Tuesday of the month, May 3, 7.30 pm. Barry Duke, Editor of the *Freethinker: Proud to be An Atheist*.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, April 12, 8pm. Hanne Stinson: *Campaigning for Humanism*.

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

Cotswold Humanists: Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleevelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: Information: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. Email: info@devonhumanists.org.uk. Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk.

Ealing Humanists: Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

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

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450.

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

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, April 7, 8pm. *Annual General Meeting, members only*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on

0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, May 10, 8pm. *European Humanist Federation video: 2,500 years of Freethinking*

Isle of Man Freethinkers. Information: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: murielgarland@clara.co.uk. Website: www.iom.freethinkers.co.uk

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

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://home-pages.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. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, April 28, 8pm. Jim Radford: *An Evening with a Folk Singer*.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

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: Linda Wilkinson, 0208 882 0124.

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. May 4, 8pm. Chris Pilkington: *Humanism and Religion in Northern Ireland*.

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

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

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. Email: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk.

Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

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

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

E-mail: brianmclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.com

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

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