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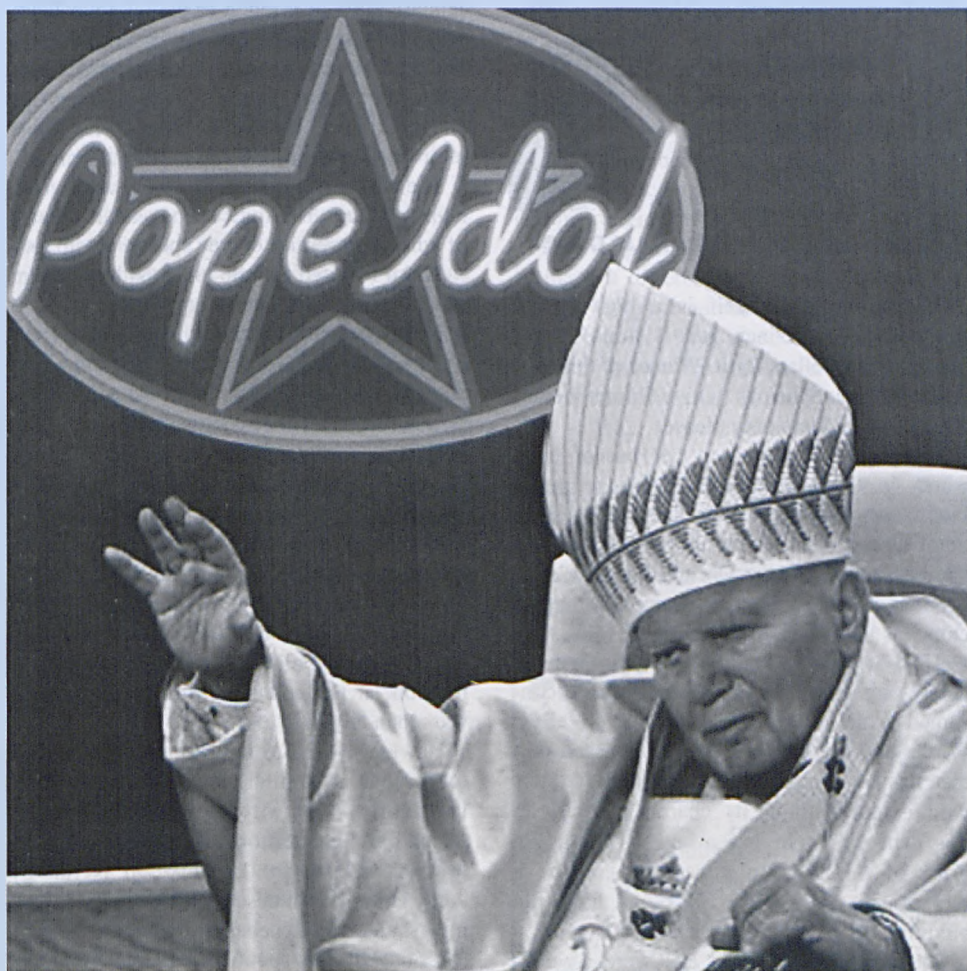
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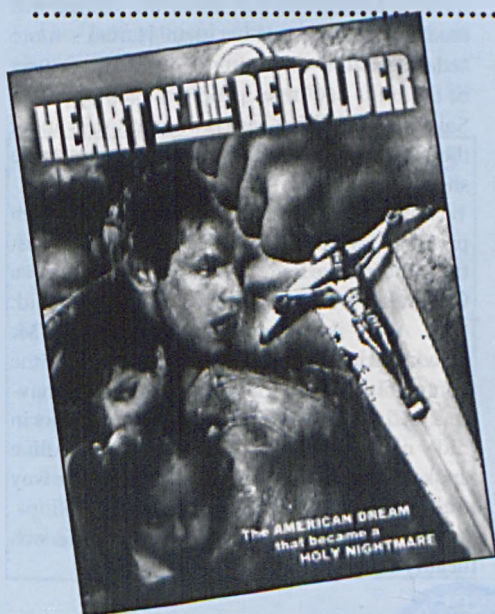
# Freethinker

**Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881**



He was idolised by people too blind or too brainwashed to recognise him for what he was – a totalitarian despot whose teachings blighted the lives of millions. It now seems likely that the Pope's successor – the man known as 'God's Rottweiler' – will continue enforcing hard-line doctrine

– see centre pages



*Heart of the Beholder*, a film exposing the vindictiveness of Christian zealots in the US, is finally completed – p12

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Computers banned in new 'faith-based' school – p5

Raped women have only themselves to blame, says Muslim teacher – p7

In pursuit of the Holy Ghost – p11



*"I wasn't a writer particularly interested in religion until a particular religion came after me. Now I find religion is coming after us all and if we don't confront this particular fish, it may fry us all. And I don't just mean radical Islam. The fish, I recall, is a Christian symbol."*

– Salman Rushdie speaking at the University of Montana.

RUSHDIE'S recent quote made me smile, for fish and frying pans have been on my mind for the past week.

It began during a spring clean, when I uncovered a press cutting, going back a few years, concerning a "miracle" talking fish.

The report was of two fish-cutters at the New Square Fish Market, in New York, who were about to kill a carp and prepare it for Sabbath dinner "when it suddenly began shouting apocalyptic warnings in Hebrew". It was clearly not a Christian fish.

New Square is home to around 7,000 members of an Hassidic Jewish sect – you know, the ones with big black hats and funny hair – who were "gripped in awe" by what they believed to be a mystical visitation by the 20lb carp.

Soon after the event, many Jews worldwide began hailing it "as a modern miracle". Irritatingly, the report failed to mention whether the creature was returned to the sea or turned into *gefilte* fish balls.

And now to the frying pan – and yet another illusory image of the Virgin Mary.

A few months back eBay, after having second thoughts, allowed the auction of a grilled cheese sandwich, minus one bite, which apparently bore the image of She Who Miraculously Remained Intact. It sold for around \$14,000!

Well, not to be outdone, someone in Australia put a Virgin Mary frying pan up for auction on eBay. The accompanying blurb said: "This incredible image of the Virgin Mary was discovered by a restaurant kitchen worker. As he worked, cleaning pots and pans, he was stunned to discover an ordinary steel frying pan which bore a scorch mark shaped just like the Holy Virgin! The scorch is not burned food which can be washed away, it is deep in the metal itself.

"The frying pan may have healing powers, as evidenced by the healing of the dishwasher's sore thumb. After discovering the frying pan he could straighten his thumb, where previously he could not. At the time of the discovery he was considering quitting his job because his thumb hurt while he worked!

"The three kitchen staff working that night decided together that the only responsible thing to do would be to auction the item on eBay in the hope that it will find a home where it will be appreciated for the amazing religious artefact that it is."

In the same week, eBay hosted the "Extra Virgin Mary Olive Oil on a Frying Pan – Image

of Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus"

The seller claimed "This morning I put some Extra Virgin Olive Oil in a frying pan...I got side-tracked and burned the oil. When I looked at the pan I was shocked to see an image of what looks like the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus in the manger.

"While I don't particularly believe in this kind of phenomenon, I have to admit the resemblance is quite uncanny. So instead of attempting to clean the pan, I figured someone would appreciate owning it.

**This month  
Freethinker editor  
BARRY DUKE  
reflects on fish,  
frying pans and an  
anti-social behaviour order**



"The frying pan itself is a high-quality, stainless steel, 12-inch pan. I think I paid around thirty dollars for it. Winner of this auction will receive the pan. Olive Oil not included. Serious bidders only please.

Things really started to get out of hand when, in the same month, someone put a Dorito corn chip up for sale. This "very unique item" emerged, according to the seller, from a bag of Nacho Cheesier Doritos. "A wonderful experience came upon us when we saw that the chip was in the shape of the Pope's Mitre.

"The auction is for just this chip and the empty bag, as the rest of the chips were consumed while creating this listing on eBay. While not quite a grilled cheese sandwich that has an image of the Virgin Mary, this chip is not without its charms... Don't let this "cheesy" item get away! Opening bid price of \$3.29 is to cover the cost of a replacement bag... Good luck and have fun bidding!

Then to put the cap on it, as it were, a wooden picture frame bearing Hitler's image found its way onto the internet auction site.

According to the Giroux family in Aurora, Ontario, Canada, who placed the item on eBay, they agonised over what to do with the frame, then finally decided to auction it off, stating "we would have preferred the image of the Virgin Mary, but Hitler's face appearing is unique in itself."

When I checked to see how much these various items had sold for, I was disappointed to see that all the auctions had all been terminated early by eBay, which had no doubt grown weary of "miracle" merchandise.

A great shame really, because I was hoping to fund a holiday in the Bahamas by purloining one of Jesus' many foreskins – artefacts said to be in the custody of various churches around the world – and selling it on eBay for a small fortune.

AND now an apology. In last month's issue we carried a piece detailing the antics of a dotty new Christian pressure group, the amusingly-named Christian Congress of Traditional Values ("traditional values", of course, being bigotry, prudery and insufferable prod-nosing). Due to an oversight, we failed to acknowledge that the piece had first appeared on a website set up by long-standing *Freethinker* subscriber David McKeegan.

**MediaWatchWatch.org.uk** was set up in January 2005 in reaction to the religious campaign against the BBC's broadcasting of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*. According to McKeegan, "We are trying to keep an eye on those groups and individuals who seek to limit our freedoms in order to protect their beliefs from offence."

The site is an excellent one, and well worth many a return visit, for it keeps readers abreast of what the enemies of free speech are up to.

When I visited the site last month, one item immediately leapt out at me. It was about a man threatened with an anti-social behaviour order (Asbo) because, among other things, he posted a number of jokes about the pope on his satirical website, **www.lynehamvillage.co.uk**.

Police were asked to investigate after Mitch Hawkin posted a spoof advert for the job of pontiff following the death of John Paul II. The website said: "Fancy a new job? The Vatican is now looking for a new Pope, now that the current one has snuffed it." It continued: "Let's hope the next Pope can do a better job. Better still, why not abolish the position of Pope, as religion, at the end of the day, causes more wars than anything else."

Hawkin's website has been involved in a feud with a similarly named website in Lyneham – **www.lynehamvillage.com** – which has a gentler tone, and claims to be the original website for Lyneham. It is run by Andy Humm, who describes his rival as bringing "shame" on Lyneham.

Critics of the spoof site fear that people looking for information about the village will read that site first rather than Humm's more sedate version, whose home page has pictures of daffodils and urges people to pick up litter. Said Humm: "What Mr Hawkin has said about the Pope is disgusting and outrageous. He should be charged."

Humm and a local councillor have been pressing for an Asbo to be taken out against the alternative site. Allison Bucknell, a Conservative councillor for Lyneham, said: "An Asbo is being looked at against Mr Hawkin. He's causing a lot of damage to the community." The council's antisocial behaviour officer had tried to mediate, but Hawkin did not show up. A Wiltshire police spokesman said investigations were under way after a series of complaints.

And there was me thinking village life was deadly dull.





# UN resolution 'restricts the right to criticise religion'

AT THE behest of a coalition of Islamic countries, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights last month passed a resolution condemning the "defamation of religion".

The resolution, entitled *Combating Defamation of Religions*, expresses "deep concern that Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism."

Ironically, the resolution was passed at around the same time that over 100 men in Saudi Arabia were sentenced to jail and flogging for alleged homosexual conduct.

The men were arrested in March at a private party because they "were dancing and behaving like women," according to local reports.

On March 26, a Jeddah court, meeting in a closed session from which defence lawyers were excluded, sentenced 31 of the men to prison for six months to a year, and 200 lashes each. More than 70 other men were released, reportedly because they had influential connections. But on April 3, they were summoned back to a police station and informed that they to had been sentenced to a year in jail.

The case has outraged human rights organisations across the world. In Britain, Neil Durkin, a spokesman for Amnesty International said: "This is not the first time that men have been subjected to horrendous punishments on the basis of their sexuality in Saudi Arabia – but it's certainly on a larger scale than before. We are calling on the Saudis to stop the floggings and release the men from prison. Anything less confirms that Saudi Arabia is a country that will tolerate cruelty against people solely because of their sexual orientation."

The International Commission of Jurists also condemned the Saudis, and pointed out that Saudi Arabia is a member of the UN

Commission on Human Rights. "We call on the government to stop these practices, which disregard basic principles of human rights."

Five days before the UN vote on the defamation of religion, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) sent an appeal to delegations of the 53 member states, asking them not to accept the draft resolution without inserting a paragraph calling upon the international community "to condemn all who defame religion by claiming to kill in the name of their religion or God." IHEU's appeal clearly made a difference: 16 votes approved the motion (a higher number than opposed a similar motion in 1994) and 5 abstained, but 31 voted in favour. The resolution was sponsored by Pakistan on behalf of the 57 states belonging to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Last month, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan criticised the political use of the Human Rights Commission by states with bad human rights records, saying that the "Commission's declining credibility has cast a shadow on the reputation of the United Nations system as a whole."

"The irony of the OIC calling for tolerance and respect for all religions and their value systems appears to have escaped most of the states voting for this resolution," said Roy Brown, president of the IHEU. "The Islamic states would do well to practice tolerance and respect for diversity at home before preaching about it at the UN."

Mr Brown said that "attempting to silence criticism of Islamic abuse of human rights while failing to condemn those who kill in the name of Islam speaks volumes for what this issue is really about."

"There is a disturbing trend around the world of using the pretext of 'tolerance for religion or belief' to outlaw criticism of religious beliefs," said Matt Cherry, executive director of the Institute for Humanist Studies and president of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the UN in New York City. "Restricting the right to discuss and criticise religious beliefs is actually a violation of freedom of religion or belief. True tolerance includes letting your critics speak, even if it offends your most cherished convictions."

## Muslim clerics in Spain risk a backlash by issuing a fatwa against Osama bin Laden

Muslim clerics in Spain have issued what they say is the world's first *fatwa*, or Islamic edict, condemning Osama bin Laden as an "apostate," as Spaniards yesterday paid respects to victims of multiple train bombings a year ago.

"The terrorist acts of Osama bin Laden and his organisation al Qaeda ... are totally banned and must be roundly condemned as part of Islam," the *fatwa* said, citing Islam's holy book, the Koran, as its authority.

"Inasmuch as Osama bin Laden and his organisation defend terrorism as legal and try to base it on the Koran ... they are committing the crime of *istihlal* and thus become apostates that should not be considered Muslims or treated as such."

The Arabic word *istihlal* refers to the act of making up one's own laws.

The Islamic Commission of Spain is the main body representing the country's one million-member Muslim community and about three-fourths of the nation's mosques.

It issued the *fatwa* to coincide with the first anniversary of the March 11, 2004, train bombings by Muslim terrorists, who said they had acted on al Qaeda's behalf in revenge for Spanish troop deployments in Iraq. The bombings killed 191 persons.

The commission's secretary-general, Mansur Escudero, said the group had consulted with Muslim leaders in other countries, such as Morocco — home to most of the jailed suspects in the bombings — Algeria and Libya, and had their support.

"We felt now we had the responsibility and obligation to make this declaration," Mr Escudero said. "I hope there is a positive reaction from Muslims."

Such an edict appears to be unprecedented. A search of news databases by the *Washington Times* uncovered only one instance of a *fatwa* against bin Laden — an edict by a rival Muslim group in Afghanistan in 1999 that led to a series of bloody clashes.

Muslim leaders have generally avoided condemning bin Laden.

Public opinion polls show that the terrorist leader remains popular throughout the Islamic world, making Muslim critics likely targets for revenge.

## International CO day, 2005

SINCE the early 1980s, May 15 has marked International Conscientious Objectors' Day, with events taking place all around the world.

This year CO Day focuses on the situation of COs in Greece.

In London CO Day will again be marked at a gathering at Tavistock Square at 12 noon, supported by the National Secular Society and other groups.

The Quaker Peace Group will be holding a similar event in Manchester in the Peace Garden, St Peter's Square, at 1pm





GARY Schwartz, author of *The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Scientific Evidence of Life After Death* (Atria 2003), has collected "extraordinary data in many experiments over many years" that support the hypothesis that consciousness is independent of the brain and survives the death of the brain.

That the spirit survives the death of the body is something that many people on our planet already believe, so it is not clear exactly what impact this data will have on the billions of people who already strongly believe in immortality or reincarnation. True, most people come to such beliefs by being taught them from birth onward and by growing up in communities where such beliefs are constantly reinforced. Many of these people also have anecdotal evidence to support their belief. But Schwartz thinks his scientific data might have an enormous impact. Presumably, one impact would be that even skeptics would come to accept what he calls "the living soul hypothesis." Schwartz devotes the entirety of chapter 18 of *The Afterlife Experiments* to "How Our Lives

Might Change" if "science proves human souls live forever." He claims that "if you knew, once and for all, that consciousness stayed with us forever," then "you would realize and believe that ... your time here on the earth is for the purpose of learning advance lessons of love and compassion, and for you to honor the many gifts you have received by learning how to give to your family, friends, community, and the world as a whole".

Thus far, believing in the living soul hypothesis hasn't led to a widespread adherence to the noble values he lists. Why would scientific proof make things any different? It's not as if the believers in spirits *doubt* that they will live forever or be reincarnated, so why would these data change things? For example, Schwartz seems to think that if we had scientific proof of the afterlife, we wouldn't exploit the earth's resources with abandon. Yet, thousands of years of very strong belief in the afterlife by the majority of our species has not produced a very loving attitude towards the planet. We can't blame the atheistic materialist for destroying our environment. The vast majority of the destroyers are strong believers in the afterlife hypothesis. The vast majority of those who are raping the earth and exploiting our natural resources to the detriment of humankind believe in spirits and do not doubt that they will live forever. Why would they stop being selfish and destructive once the scientific proof is in that there is an afterlife? The destroyers now rationalize their behavior to justify it. Even if they had scientific proof of the afterlife, it is likely that they would find a way to justify continuing their current behavior, lifestyles, and values.

I sympathize and agree with the values Gary Swartz wants to encourage: finding meaning and purpose in our lives, "realizing that we have the potential to be compassionate human beings with a supreme capacity to love".

But I don't see how scientific proof of the afterlife is going to increase the implementation of these values. Many people already believe with all their heart and soul in the afterlife, and they seem to think that that is what gives meaning and purpose to their lives. Yet, they still persecute their earthly neighbors, allow the destruction of the planet, and spend a great part of their lives worrying about and striving for material treasures. Most people may not be *philosophical materialists* – who believe there is no spiritual reality – but most are still *crass materialists*, defining their happiness according to their wealth, power, status, or accumulation of material possessions.

So, I'm not as optimistic as Schwartz is about the possible effects of finding scientific proof for the afterlife hypothesis. Some of his speculations, in fact, seem silly. For example, he writes: "If you had been cruel to a person,

who then died, how would you feel if you knew scientifically and without doubt that he or she would still be around? Would you want to face him or her when it was your time to 'cross over'?" What is the offended spirit going to do? Kill the offender? Haunt him? We're going to live forever whether we're nice or cruel. In any case, I would hate to think that the main thing that motivates people to be kind

**Would scientific proof of an afterlife make people behave in a more humane way?**  
**ROBERT TODD CARROLL** very much doubts it

to others is that they might haunt you in this life or harass you in the next.

I would hope we'd be kind to others because we'd like them to treat us kindly and until shown otherwise they don't deserve to be treated unkindly. We really don't have any right to be cruel to anyone. Being kind to others has beneficial consequences, regardless of scientific proof of the afterlife. Kindness resonates and not only makes the kind person feel good, the kindness is often reciprocated. Anyone who has observed the difference in happiness and well being between kind and unkind people knows the benefits of kindness far outweigh the drawbacks. In short, of all the reasons I can think of for being kind to others, the last one that would occur to me is fear of being haunted by a ghost or of having to meet my victim spirit-to-spirit for a face-off in the afterlife.

Some of Schwartz's speculations are downright scary. For example, if science proves the afterlife hypothesis, then, asks Schwartz, "Is it possible that mediums may serve as deceit detectors, giving us messages from beyond that confirm who is lying to us?" If they do ever serve as "deceit detectors", one hopes the mediums will be more reliable than the polygraph.

Writes Schwartz: "As people everywhere become skilled at receiving information from the departed, help from the other side could in principle give each of us, directly or indirectly, the ability to discern who is being fair and honest with us, and who is being unjust and deceptive" (242). Perhaps this could happen if the "info-energy systems"—Schwartz's term for soul—are omniscient. Otherwise, why trust information just because it comes from a spirit? For all we know, the dead lie just like the living do.

Schwartz admits that some of his speculations "may sound laughable and unworthy". For example, he posits the possibility of dead peo-

## Making a meal of religion

CARDIFF City Council has shelved plans to provide all Muslim pupils in the city with halal food in their school lunches.

Cardiff City Council's Liberal Democrat administration blocked a Plaid Cymru motion calling for all schools to supply pupils with halal food.

It was estimated that extending the choice of meals to all schoolchildren could increase the school meal bill by £107,000.

Liberal Democrat councillor Alexandrina Evans told Muslim News: "I agree that all children of ethnic groups should have the food of their religion, but unfortunately this is not economically viable."

She added: "Perhaps sometime in the future the Council could find a way, when providing new kitchens, to accommodate these religions, but I think this will be a long way in the future."

Plaid Cymru Leader, Councillor Delme Bowen, who backed the motion on the supply of halal food, said he was concerned that the council was trying to kick the issue into the long grass.

Conservative Leader, Councillor Gareth Neale, warned that the council could find itself in court if it decided to serve halal meals but not kosher ones.



ple being called as witnesses in criminal trials, "especially if they are the victims in cases of murder". Maybe we shouldn't give convicted murderers the death penalty, says Schwartz, because "the victim might not be in a hurry to see his murderer in the afterlife". Schwartz wonders who should receive credit if a patent is obtained by someone who got the discovery from a creative dead person. He notes that suicide might increase if people have no reason to fear death. We'll have to change our view of the mentally ill: "The diagnosis of delusion and hallucination will have to be reconsidered". It might be "necessary to have skilled mediums added to integrative mental health teams to help differentially diagnose and treat people in general, and also help those who are especially fearful of seeing aspects of spiritual reality". Yes, it is possible that skeptics might be declared mentally ill, suffering from *spiritphobia*, a morbid fear of spiritual reality. As Schwartz says, it is tempting to dismiss these "startling possibilities" by "simply labeling them as weird or

worthless". One such idea is what he calls "spiritual education".

Children, he notes, often report seeing ghosts and angels. Maybe they're really seeing spirits and should be encouraged to "cultivate these experiences" so that by the time they are adults "these latent talents [of seeing spirits] might be developed into meaningful skills that could substantially aid society" (246). I presume that dead medical doctors would assist the living in separating those cases of true delusion caused by brain disease or neurochemical disorder from the spiritual prodigies, so that the former might get the proper treatment.

Finally, Schwartz is hopeful that scientific proof of the afterlife might bring religious institutions together. However, strong belief in the spirit world hasn't united religions in the past. Schwartz offers no reason to think that having scientific proof of the spirit world will have a significant effect on institutional harmony between Muslims and Christians, or Jews and Muslims, or Hindus and Sikhs, or

Muslims and Baha'i, or Hindus and Muslims, and the many other religious groups trying to annihilate each other. In short, if Schwartz is right, nothing will be any different from now. How much more useless could a discovery be than one that will probably go by unnoticed?

• **Robert Todd Carroll** is a full-time teacher at Sacramento City College, where he has been a member of the philosophy department since 1977.

He teaches classes in Logic & Critical Reasoning; Law, Justice, & Punishment; History of Modern Philosophy (Descartes to Kant); and the Introduction to Philosophy.

In 2004, he began teaching a new course called *Critical Thinking About the Paranormal and the Occult*.

Carroll is the author of *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, a collection of strange beliefs, amusing deceptions and dangerous delusions. Published in paperback by John Wiley and Sons Inc, it is available through Amazon.co.uk, price £9.76.

## Computers banned in new 'faith-based' school

"MANY universities these days are quite a hive of corruption and vice ... at university you find yourself vulnerable to promiscuity."

This is the view expressed by the head teacher of an independent "faith-based" school run by a Christian sect called the Exclusive Brethren.

Head-teacher Geoff Holding, in an interview with the Brighton and Hove *Argus*, was explaining why pupils at Ashton Park School near Pulborough in Sussex are discouraged from attending university, using computers and visiting places of entertainment.

The school was set up last year by the South Downs Education Trust, which previously provided home schooling support for Exclusive Brethren. According to the *Argus* report, "the school regards computers in many fields as a misuse of physical and natural phenomena created by God". Holding told the paper that "computers don't have the capacity to make moral judgments".

Pupils are also discouraged from watching TV, listening to radio, using mobile phones and visiting places of entertainment, such as the cinema.

Said Holding: "I wouldn't have a TV or a radio, and I wouldn't need to go to a place of entertainment. There is plenty to do without that."

The school, which has 54 pupils from year 7 to 12, opened last September, and received full Ofsted accreditation last month. It is paid for by voluntary contributions from sect members and through fund-raising. It receives no state subsidy.

Holding said: "We like to take our children up to year 12. By that time they need to go out

and work." There was no need for them to attend university because "many universities these days are quite a hive of corruption and vice. That's my own feeling."

The school holds that "any activity that would promote interest by students in higher education (university or college) would be viewed very unfavourably."

The Brethren, founded in the 19th century, have about 15,000 members in Britain and around 42,000 followers worldwide.

When children leave school they often take jobs in family companies.

Holding said: "The facts are that a lot of Brethren run their own businesses. There is plenty of scope for our children."

Meanwhile, the school inspectors, Ofsted, have criticised a privately-run Islamic school for an over-emphasis on religion to the detriment of other subjects.

The Institute of Islamic Education in West Yorkshire was criticised for inadequate delivery of the national curriculum and poor assessment of pupils. Inspectors said: "Methods employed, such as the memorisation of text, are better suited to the *madrassah* [Islamic] curriculum."

The report said: "Teachers showed limited understanding of pupils' aptitudes, needs and prior attainments. Pupils' books are rarely marked. This contributes to overall poor public examination results at the age of 16." The inspectors, who visited the school in Dewsbury last month, said that the over-emphasis on religion meant that secular studies were neglected.

Muhammed Mulk, head of the school's secu-

lar section, blamed poor pupil motivation. He told the *Times Educational Supplement*: "Parents send their children here for an Islamic education. They don't want their sons to take exams. Our teachers tell them that education is important, but the boys do not bring books or pens to lessons and their attitude is very negative."

The school failed to meet requirements for registration as a private school. It must now draw up an action plan for meeting these requirements.

The National Secular Society offered this advice to the authorities: "Close the school!"

### Christian bullies infiltrate academy

THE Air Force Academy in Colorado is having to address complaints that evangelical Christians wield too much influence at the school and harass non-Christian cadets, according to an Associated Press report.

There have been 55 complaints of religious discrimination at the academy in the past four years. In one case, a Jewish cadet was told the Holocaust was revenge for the death of Jesus and another was called a Christ killer by a fellow cadet.

The school now requires staff members and cadets to take a religious-tolerance class.

Former Virginia Governor James Gilmore, who heads the civilian board that oversees the Air Force Academy, said evangelical Christians don't "check their religion at the door".

And Tom Minnery, an official at the nearby headquarters of Focus on the Family, complained that there's "an anti-Christian bigotry developing" at the school.



IT IS no exaggeration to state that the Johannesburg Unitarian Fellowship is one that we remember with loathing. As children we were treated with, at best, disregard, but usually with contempt, by this group of "freethinkers".

The group, smaller now than it was when first founded in the late 1950s, succeeded in incurring the lifelong enmity of everyone under 20 who ever set foot in it.

We, along with our brother, were dragged by our parents to virtually every service from when it was founded until we left Johannesburg in the mid-sixties. We vowed never to set foot in it again – as did the children of another family who were unfortunate enough to follow in our footsteps.

Unitarians pride themselves on their liberalism, their open-mindedness and their freedom from dogma. However, while there was probably no subject under the sun on which any two of the Johannesburg Unitarians would have agreed, liberalism and open-mindedness were conspicuous only by their absence in that congregation.

Anyone unable to understand English who somehow stumbled into one of their services would have assumed that he or she had encountered a meeting of an obscure sect that had broken away from the most dour congregation of 18th-century Protestants on the grounds that they were too fun-loving.

A typical "service" was as follows: A group of perhaps ten or a dozen people sat silently while one of their number gave a solemn reading. They would then play some solemn music from a scratchy long-playing record through a cheap, portable gramophone before a lengthy sermon was given by another member. This

was followed by more solemn music while everyone sat with heads bowed. There was never any congregational singing. All this time, we children did our best not to smile, cough or fidget.

We were expected to sit in silence through all this, understanding nothing – indeed, in a period of seven or eight years, not one word of one service was explained to us. The services might just as well have been in Greek or Russian for all that they meant to us.

There was never any variation from this

## GRAHAM AND CHARLOTTE LIVINGSTONE remember with loathing their enforced visits to Unitarian Fellowship Meetings

dour approach – not even at Christmas. (In any event, Christmas or even Jesus would have been difficult subjects for the Johannesburg Unitarians, no two of whom would have been able to agree on who or what Jesus was).

On the one occasion when a speaker made a funny remark, our mother frantically stopped us laughing – apparently the Unitarian Fellowship was such a holy of holies that it was immoral for children to laugh.

Nor did the adult members of the church politely agree to differ in the spirit of liberalism, open-minded discussion and intellectual superiority they were so quick to lay claim for themselves. Often something that was said from the lectern was bitterly attacked by the rest of the congregation – not to the speaker's face, but at social gatherings attended by the few who were on friendly terms with one another.

A member once attacked a sermon in the Fellowship newsletter. After that, the editorship of the newsletter was taken away from him – and he left the congregation in a huff.

Apartheid was raging outside while the congregation, reduced to perhaps ten by then, met in the gloomy, rented rooms in the grotty buildings of downtown Johannesburg. But apartheid and the plight of the poor in South Africa was the last thing on the minds of most of the congregation.

Our parents were members of the South African Liberal Party, but there was only one other member of the congregation who had any interest in civil liberties, and not too long afterwards he left the congregation in disgust to become a millionaire hotelier. (He did not

mind, however, hosting the group's Xmas dinners at his establishment.) The rest of the group, with perhaps one other exception, were either totally indifferent to politics or as reactionary a group of racists as it would have been possible to find in South Africa at that time.

What the Johannesburg Unitarians indulged in was a self-congratulatory, intellectual exercise which had no impact on their moral or social behaviour. At no time did the group make a statement on any social issue or give a donation to charity. One of their number, who became their lay preacher, was giving sermons in other churches at the same time as he was giving talks to our fellowship. People who had heard him speak at different venues pointed out that his services on alternate Sundays represented diametrically opposing viewpoints – and that it was hard to believe that it was the same person speaking. He also gave perjured evidence in a court case against the interests of a family who had shown him unreserved hospitality – and then arrived for Sunday lunch at their home soon afterwards as if nothing had happened.

Much of the blame for the ordeal we suffered as children must lie with our parents, who were well-meaning but self-effacing to the point that they were dysfunctional. Our father, in particular, knew that it was a waste of time our coming to church services at which we understood nothing – and we remember his quoting a prominent UK Unitarian saying that no church group would survive if it did not have a Sunday school.

Our parents should have done what they could to make attendance at the fellowship meetings meaningful to us, but that would have been rocking the boat. Instead they just continued to attend each and every service, dragging their unwilling children behind them. This unhappy state of affairs went on until Graham, who was the oldest, was well into his teens and church attendance (involving long bus rides from an outlying suburb) started seriously interfering with his homework.

Eventually, after a prolonged battle involving furious rows with our mother (in which our father chose not to intervene) Graham stopped going – and our brother followed suit as soon as he could thereafter.

Charlotte, however, was forced to continue to attend for several years. When she complained that she understood nothing, she was given sweets to shut her up. Eventually she also refused to attend. From that time on, we swore that we would never again attend a Unitarian Fellowship meeting.

It is a pity that churches which prey on people's insecurities and do so much damage to society do not have the same effect on their young members as the Unitarian Fellowship had on us.

## Buddhist art sparks cathedral row

A DISPUTE erupted last month over a decision to display a piece of Buddhist art work at Salisbury Cathedral. Christian group, Salisbury Church.Net, claimed it broke religious laws about worshipping idols.

But the cathedral's Canon Chancellor, Edward Probert, said he was happy to promote "greater understanding of other faith traditions." The "mandala", made out of millions of grains of sand, was laid out by Tibetan monks. The ancient geometric image was one of many displays for the city's arts festival.

But John Ferguson, from Salisbury Church.net, said: "We believe that it is the commission of the church to tell people about Jesus – that's what Jesus told us to do. He didn't tell us to tell people about other religions or other faiths".



# Raped women have only themselves to blame, says Muslim teacher

"EVERY minute in the world a woman is raped, and she has no one to blame but herself, for she has displayed her beauty to the whole world," Sheikh Feiz Muhammad told a packed public meeting in the Bankstown, New South Wales, Town Hall last month. "Strapless, backless, sleeveless — they are nothing but satanical. Mini-skirts, tight jeans — all this to tease men and to appeal to (their) carnal nature."

There was pressure on Muslim women to unveil, the sheikh said, and this was because "they want you to be available for their gross, disgusting, filthy abomination! They want you to be a sex symbol!" The woman who wore the *hijab* was hiding her beauty from the eyes of "lustful, hungry wolves", he said.

Sheikh Feiz Muhammad teaches at the Global Islamic Youth Centre in Liverpool, NSW. His long, ranting speech, damning and ridiculing Western culture (if you allow your wife to watch the "devil" of daytime television, he advised men, you will come home from work and find she is being "negative" towards you) was greeted with frequent applause.

Commenting in *Melbourne Age* on the sheikh's speech, Pamela Bone, the newspaper's associate editor wrote: "At its worst the sheikh's speech can be seen as at least a justification for rape. A non-Muslim religious leader making public comments far milder than the above would be forced to resign. If a Muslim leader's words are to be simply overlooked (perhaps nothing better can be expected?) is this itself not a kind of racism?"

"My first conclusion is that multiculturalism is valuable and worth protecting. We are, irrevocably, a multicultural society, and most people like it that way and want it to continue to work. There is also, despite some disgraceful attacks on mosques and on individuals, a lot of goodwill towards Muslims. There are many Muslim leaders who are preaching moderation, and who would likely be embarrassed by the sheikh's speech. We want a society in which people of all religions and cultures can get on together. But there also have to be some core values, and — notwithstanding the views of a minority of unreconstructed football players — one of those values is the equality of women.

"The second is that laws against religious vilification are a mistake. Yes, laws against racial hatred, because no one has any choice about their race. But unless we are to accept that human beings are incapable of overcoming their social conditioning, we do have a

choice about what we believe. Beliefs are about ideas, and ideas must be open to debate, to criticism and even ridicule. We are entitled to find some beliefs of any religion absurd and to say that we do.

"The third conclusion is that Feiz Muhammad is simply wrong. There is no evidence that women in societies where they are forced to cover are less subject to violence, sexual or otherwise. There may be less reporting of rape (when the word of four honest Muslim men is required to prove the rape and if it is not proved the woman is then liable to be punished for adultery, it is rather less likely to be reported); but there is overwhelming evidence across the Muslim world of violence against women, in the form of honour killings, stonings, or beatings for minor infringements of religious codes.

"The home is exactly where women in any society are most likely to be assaulted. But a British study of family violence (reported by Geraldine Brooks in her book about Islamic women, *Nine Parts of Desire*) found that women married to men of Muslim background were

eight times more likely to be killed by their husbands than any other women in Britain.

"What is really angering the fundamentalists is that Muslim women not only in the West but across the Muslim world are coming out, challenging male interpretations of their religion, demanding an end to their oppression.

"Yes, these women are still a minority, and they have a far harder struggle ahead of them than Western feminists ever did; but they are making gains (Morocco has brought in family law reforms; in Saudi Arabia it has just been announced that women may apply for driving licences).

"The argument of some moderate Muslims and well-meaning cultural relativists is that non-Muslim feminists have no business criticising the treatment of Muslim women, and that any change must come from within. As Emma Bonino, a member of the European Parliament, said recently: 'I remember how important it was for those of us fighting for basic rights and equality in Italy to receive support from women in other European countries who were further ahead in the same fight'."

## Muslim woman who led a prayer service is condemned for 'violating centuries of tradition'

A WOMAN who led an Islamic prayer service in New York has drawn sharp criticism from Muslim religious leaders in the Middle East who complained that it violated centuries of tradition.

Amina Wadud, a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, led the service at Synod House at the Cathedral of St John the Divine, an Episcopal church in Manhattan last month.

"The issue of gender equality is a very important one in Islam, and Muslims have unfortunately used highly restrictive interpretations of history to move backward," Wadud said before the service. "With this prayer service we are moving forward. This single act is symbolic of the possibilities within Islam."

About 80 to 100 people attended the service, and the group appeared evenly divided between men and women. Most women wore the traditional Muslim headscarf and long, flowing robe. The event was meant to draw attention to the inequality for women in Muslim spiritual life and Muslim life in general, said Asra Q Nomani, an author and former *Wall Street Journal* reporter who organised the service.

"We are standing up for our rights as women in Islam. We will no longer accept the back door or the shadows," Nomani said. "At the end of the day, we'll be leaders in the Muslim world."

There was a brief outburst from some protesters outside the building at the start of the service, but they were kept from entering by a heavy police presence. One young US-born, bearded activist, who only gave his name as Nussrah, said Wadud was not representative of Muslims.

"She is tarnishing the whole Islamic faith," he said.

Some critics have accused Nomani of using the event to publicise a book she has written about women and Islam.

Three New York mosques had refused to host the service, Nomani said. It was moved to Synod House after a site that had earlier been selected for the service, an art gallery, received a bomb threat.



WHY are so many so sad that the pope has died? Isn't Heaven, with its soft clouds, harps and endless reunions, every believer's dream? Would they rather he stayed suffering in this "vale of tears"? Besides, he loved to travel; this is the ultimate trip!

Now, let's get past the panegyrics glutting the media and explore the real legacy of this mortal man who played god to so many adoring fans.

John Paul was unmatched in honouring religious hysterics for "miracles", rather than the real heroes: doctors, research scientists and engineers who effect verifiable results in their quest to make our lives healthier and happier.

A prime example of how easy it is to attain sainthood is Mother Teresa. This woman told her patients that it was good to suffer – that pain was "Jesus kissing you." Although her charities collected millions of dollars, that money was not used to assuage the suffering of the poor. Minimal healthcare with substandard medical supplies was the order of the day at her clinics. When Teresa was ill, however, she went to the world's best hospitals. No kisses for MT! (Those donations were held in bank accounts earmarked for the Vatican, assuring her that halo.)

John Paul assumed his office with full knowledge of the Church's paedophile problem. It was hardly a recent development, having been brought to the attention of the Vatican over 1,000 years ago. Did the new pope put an end to sexual abuse by priests? No, he concealed the problem just as his predecessors had done. When he could no longer deny that the Church harboured sexual predators, did he offer the riches of the Vatican to help settle the claims? No.

Clergy paedophiles are not peculiar to the Church in the United States, yet our country's victims were the first to successfully overcome the powerful protection of their oppressors. What about those in Third-World countries who are at the mercy of priests and nuns? They lack the knowledge of the successful prosecution of other cases because of poor media coverage; they haven't the funds for litigation or the ease of access to legal aid – nor can they hope for moral support from their brainwashed peers!

As long as it is before birth or at death's door, "life is precious" to the Vatican's

# The Real Legacy of John Paul II

men of God. The quality of the time that lies between the two is of no interest to them. How could they possibly comprehend the day-to-day existence of ordinary people?

Have they changed a diaper, sponged a fevered child through the long night, attended a PTA meeting; explained to a creditor why the payment is late; looked in the cupboard and found nothing to eat; watched a soulmate die slowly and painfully; cared for a dying parent, in the saddest of role reversals? No.

Most of these men in frocks were whisked off to seminary as mere children themselves – deprived of a "normal" home life, not permitted to interact with girls during their youth and adolescence. As men, forced to forsake their bodily urges, most could not. Their choices were limited: abandon their vocation; visit prostitutes; avail themselves of the live-in housekeeper; masturbate; find comfort in the liquor cabinet ... or, for those so disposed, prey upon the innocent children who were sent to serve them.

The paternalistic Church will do anything to increase its numbers. What better way than to forbid contraception? This is best exemplified in Central and South American "Catholic" countries, where women produce children until their bodies give out. With more mouths to feed, the grinding poverty is inescapable.

In the US, contraception is treated differently. We all know "cafeteria Catholics" who choose the doctrines they can live with and skip those that do not fit their life-styles. Do you really think that "God" is responsible for fewer children per family in America every decade since women gained control of their reproductive freedom?

The Church's misogyny goes far beyond the issues of ordination and contraception. In June of 2000, a special UN conference convened to evaluate the sta-

tus of women's rights maintained that the Roman Catholic Church actually worked to oppose and even reverse the social progress of women throughout the world.

Why would the Vatican concern itself with whether or not there is job training to empower women, quality childcare for working mothers, respite help for family caregivers (usually women)? At a disad-

**Two women atheists – one in the US, the other in the UK – offer their views on Pope Paul II. The**



**first piece is by LORIE POLANSKY**

**Pennsylvania State Director of American Atheists. The second is by BARBARA SMOKER, past President of the National Secular Society**



vantage is exactly where these men want women to stay!

(Please don't bother to tout Catholic Charities. Fourteen percent of the Catholic Church's income is from donations; sixty-seven percent is from government sources.)

Nothing emanates from the Vatican without careful deliberation and planning. Why did John Paul aid in the downfall of the Soviet Union? Well, wouldn't it be



# Legacy of Pope Paul II

another jewel in his mitre if the Church stepped in where the Communist Party had been? Fortunately, the universities, media, and other targets for takeover have successfully resisted Vatican control.

The Vatican wields considerable influence at the United Nations. It has impeded the funding of sex education, family planning and abortion. While disease and starvation due to overpopulation are decimating entire countries, the Catholic

Church insists that more children share in the suffering.

Some US lawmakers, including Pennsylvania's own ultra-Catholic Senator, Rick Santorum, seem to forget that we are a secular nation. (They are more concerned that Iraq be secular, than to hold fast to our own roots!) They bombard Capitol Hill with bills "objecting to any effort to expel the Holy See" from the United Nations.

Does anyone remember when this country was afraid to elect John F. Kennedy, our first and only Catholic President? Now it is virtually impossible for a secular candidate to get elected to any office! Voters want guarantees that they are voting for a god-fearing individual! More time is spent trying to prove who is holier than in doing the jobs they are elected to do.

The Vatican's biggest industry (aside from indoctrination) is worldwide financial and banking services. A select group of 1,000 spoiled men live in luxury on an annual budget of \$175 million – while condemning most of their followers to a poverty-stricken existence.

John Paul enjoyed the trappings of his office for 26 years, all the while digging in his heels and doing his best to halt progress. Now his progress has been halted. *Consummatus est!*

– Lorie Polansky

## John Paul and Benedict

TWELVE DAYS after the demise of Karol Wojtyla, I visited a local Catholic church to pick up a copy of their weekly newsletter. The editorial begins: "As he reached his last breath the Holy Father uttered his final word. 'Amen', and bowing his head he gave up the spirit." A miracle, indeed! – for he was by then physically incapable of uttering any word.

The spin-doctors hardly needed such obvious fiction when they had on their side the televised fact of millions of pilgrims to the lying-in-state and to the biggest, most celebrity-spangled funeral ever staged.

However, it is instructive to analyse the motives of those millions. Many – perhaps most – were there out of mere curiosity and the urge to be present at this special occasion with such a great gathering of the world's rulers, royals, and religious luminaries. Even those with genuine tears in their eyes (hand-picked by the television cameras) were there out of an emotional veneration for the messenger while generally rejecting his message – for we know, statistically, that very few Western Catholics obey his strictures on, for instance, contraception.

As for the preponderant Polish mourners, their prime motive was nationalist rather than religious, since he is seen as restoring to them their own sovereign country. But one of their number, interviewed on the box, denied that John Paul was their national hero – he was their national redeemer: and the Christ-like terminology was symptomatic of the general emotional confusion.

After half a century of oppression by foreign

powers – first the Nazi occupation and then the Soviet "liberators" – Poland spearheaded the collapse of communism in 1989, and the Pope was credited with its impetus. It is true that his support for the rebellion of trade-unionist Lech Walesa (who was himself present at the papal funeral, and who surely deserves more credit than the Pope) awakened the Catholic chauvinism that galvanised the Polish people to mass defiance of their oppressors; but totalitarian Marxism was on the verge of collapse anyway, throughout eastern Europe, from the internal failures of its fiscal and social regime.

The young Karol Wojtyla had been a courageous opponent of both dictatorships, and only escaped imprisonment under the Nazis by becoming a labourer in a stone quarry. In 1942, as an act of rebellion, he joined Cracow's underground seminary, to embark on secret part-time training for the priesthood; and in 1946, equally against the new regime, he was ordained. It is ironic that his staunch opposition to totalitarian regimes was to culminate in himself becoming the world's most pervasive totalitarian despot of all time.

In 1962, now the Archbishop of Cracow, he attended the Second Vatican Council under Pope John XXIII; but was later refused permission to travel to Rome to meet Pope Paul VI – who had invited him, as a supposed expert on sexual matters, to discuss with him the issue of birth-control. He therefore had to send his views on the subject to Rome in writing – and in retrospect this may have been of momentous significance.

Paul VI, known in his pre-papal (Cardinal Montini) years as an intellectual progressive, had been groomed to succeed the equally intellectual (but less liberal) Pius XII; but the 1958 conclave unexpectedly elected a pastoral "stop-gap" pope, John XXIII, who was to open the floodgates of reform. Finally elected pope in 1963, Paul was thus forced into a conservative role, attempting to stem the flood and reconcile John's reforms with the "infallible" doctrines of the past.

His biggest headache was the report of the Birth-control Commission John had set up. Though it gave Paul the opportunity to OK the contraceptive Pill, as opposed to the mechanical methods of contraception which had been infallibly banned, he delayed doing so because of the new collegiality (decentralised decision-making) – including the written views of the Archbishop of Cracow, from which Paul actually quoted in his 1968 prohibitory encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

By the time that came out, many fertile Catholic women in the developed world, assuming the Pill was about to be sanctioned, had jumped the gun – and few of them were willing to go back to Vatican roulette. This weakened papal authority for good.

The encyclical thus had far-reaching effects, both calamitous and salutary.

Following the death (murder?) of the gentle John Paul I in September 1978, after a pontificate of only 33 days – a puzzling blunder on

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the part of the Holy Spirit, who is supposed to guide the cardinals in the election of popes – the October conclave was determined to go for a robust younger man, to avoid the expense of so many gatherings. Thus it was that, on the eighth ballot, the compromise choice of Karol Wojtyla made him the first Polish pope ever and the first non-Italian for more than four centuries; but there were murmurings that, aged only 58, he could well remain in office too long – and how right they were! His pontificate of twenty-six-and-a-half years was the third longest of the supposed 264, blocking many much-needed reforms.

He was a consistent pro-lifer – not only implacably opposed to contraception, abortion, and voluntary euthanasia, but also (unlike many other pro-lifers) to war and capital punishment. Right up to the end he rebuked Bush and Blair for the war in Iraq, and he opposed the retention in some American states of the death penalty. Other enlightened strands of his papacy included his goodwill gestures towards other religions and his castigation of capitalist greed and Third-World debt – though he berated the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America as being too Marxist. However, he proved ineffectual on the more liberal of his policies, while all too effectual, especially in the developing world, on the sexual issues of contraception, abortion, gay sex, divorce, and the use of condoms to help prevent the spread of Aids. Also, ecclesiastically, on the celibacy of priests and the exclusion of women from the priesthood.

What now? The newly elected Pope Benedict XVI (erstwhile Cardinal Ratzinger, pictured right) is just as conservative, so his

reign is unlikely to feature many radical reforms. Collegiality, democratic consultation and decentralisation, ushered in by the Second Vatican Council, only to be eroded by John Paul II, will be further eroded by his successor. However, he will probably make priestly celibacy optional, because of the practical problem of too few “vocations” to the priesthood in most countries, not to mention the scandal of paedophilia among sex-starved priests; but he is unlikely to sanction the ordination of women, even to relieve the critical shortage of priests. Faced with the appalling escalation of Aids in Africa, he could allow condoms to be used for therapeutic purposes, but the liberalisation of other sexual and social proscriptions (contraception, abortion, gay sex, divorce, and voluntary euthanasia) is extremely doubtful during his pontificate. He will find it difficult to stem the present flouting of them by Catholics in developed countries, which is bound to spread



Pope Benedict XVI

to poorer areas of the world, and authoritarian attempts to discipline them could mean wholesale defections from the Church.

On the positive side, his choice of the name Benedict indicates that he intends to oppose war, as did the last pope of that name in 1914 – though, in view of the intransigence of powerful political rulers, with no greater success.

– Barbara Smoker

## US court rejects religious discrimination case

A HOMOPHOBIC Christian educator has lost her religious-discrimination case against United Methodist-affiliated DePauw University in Indiana.

Earlier this year, the Indiana Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal filed by Janis Price, education programme coordinator at DePauw, who claims the university violated her First Amendment rights and created a hostile work environment. The university had cut her pay, stripped her of all her titles, suspended her teaching duties, and placed her on probation for making Christian magazines available in her classroom.

The DePauw instructor maintains that the punishment doled out to her by the school's vice-president for academic affairs, Neil Abrams, was because of her Christian beliefs. She clearly recalls Abrams telling her that he “could not tolerate the intolerable”.

“When I asked him specifically what he meant by that”, she explained, “he answered it was that he could not tolerate my Christian faith in general, and specifically, he could not tolerate my position on homosexuality – which, of course, is the biblical position that homosexuality is a sin.”

The material at the heart of the argument were copies of *Teachers in Focus* magazine,

from Focus on the Family, the right-wing organisation that disseminates ludicrous Christian propaganda. The issue which created the brouhaha contained an article about homosexual activism in schools. Price had for many years made the magazine available to students in her classes, but hadn't required they read it.

A student, Angela Morris, complained last year to university officials about the politically incorrect magazine. On May 7, 2001, Price was called before Abrams, and told about the complaint. Price said Abrams pulled out the copy of the magazine article and read parts of it aloud. He asked her several times whether she believed what the article said, and each time she said she did. According to Price's lawsuit, she asked Abrams how she was to tolerate others' beliefs if her own beliefs weren't to be tolerated. “We cannot tolerate the intolerable,” Abrams said. Price was later called back into Abrams' office where he accused her of “professional intolerance” and the “deliberate creation of a hostile environment”.

In January, a three-judge panel of the Indiana Court of Appeals overturned a jury verdict in favour of Price.

DePauw University is a college founded in 1837 in Greencastle, Indiana, on Methodist principles.

### Catholic Church refuses funeral for gay bar owner

THE head of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego has apologised to the family of a gay nightclub owner, John McCusker, less than a week after McCusker was denied a Catholic funeral because of his “business activities”.

McCusker, 31, suffered a heart attack earlier this year while skiing. The owner of two gay bars in San Diego was then denied a Catholic funeral on the grounds that he was “in the adult entertainment business”.

Family and friends of the dead man were outraged by the church's action, and Bishop Robert Brom later tried to make amends by saying he would preside at a Mass for McCusker.

“I deeply regret that denying a Catholic funeral for John McCusker at the Immaculata has resulted in his unjust condemnation, and I apologise to the family for the anguish this has caused them,” he said.



*And the three men I admire most  
The Father Son and Holy Ghost  
They caught the last train for the coast  
The day the music died.*

– Don McLean, in his enigmatic  
and enduringly popular  
song, *American Pie*

THE last time I tried to get my head around the idea of “the Holy Ghost” was at the beginning of the 1970s when Don McLean’s catchy song *American Pie* broke into the charts in South Africa. It was a very brief break. Within days of its introduction on radio, the authorities declared it “blasphemous” and it was never played again. However, record store sales, thanks in part to the ban, were phenomenal, and contributed much to making McLean a millionaire on the strength of that song alone.

The ever-watchful South African censors had taken particular exception to part of the lyric that referred to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost catching the last train to the coast. This, they thundered, suggested that the Three-For-The-Price-Of-One had taken leave of the planet, abandoning humanity to godless communism.

I remember at the time being intrigued by the idea of the Holy Ghost, and immediately began honing up on the subject. At the end of several hours of reading religious texts in the local public library, I remember thinking to myself: “Holy shit, this stuff is wholly shit!”

So I relegated the Holy Ghost to the furthest recesses of my mind, and there it remained gathering dust until last month, when it came back to haunt me following a flurry of news items concerning religious education guidelines in Norfolk.

According to a BBC report, “new guidelines for religious education in Norfolk suggest terms such as the Holy Ghost should be banned from lessons because they could confuse pupils.

“The Norfolk Agreed Syllabus for religious education recommends that teachers use the term Holy Spirit, to avoid comparisons with ghost stories.

“Marian Agombar, who compiled the list, said the document provided advice to teachers, but it was not statutory.

“The guidelines also suggest teachers avoid terms such as the ‘body of Christ’ and the ‘blood of Jesus’ because Christians are not actually eating flesh and blood.

“In addition, when lecturing on Judaism, teachers are advised not to refer to the first 39 books of the bible as the Old Testament because it suggests the books are out-of-date.

“Ms Agombar said: ‘We’ve heard stories of children taking these stories home and becoming confused, particularly the little ones.’

“The document was a very small part of a large document which provided advice to teachers in the classroom, she added.

“Head of Notre Dame Roman Catholic School in Norfolk, John Pinnington, said: ‘Updating language generally is good and if it’s done with caution and respect it could be a good thing. But I’m just concerned about its motives, and if they are to demystify life? Life has its mysteries and all religions are part of a mystery based on God. It would be a shame to demystify everything’.

“Norfolk secretary for the National Union of Teachers, Tony Mulgrew, said: ‘I’m sure there’s a lot of good ideas in this document, but it does all sound a bit silly. I’ve heard that they plan to change the name of the Old Testament because it makes it sound old. Will they change the New Testament too, because that’s not new, is it? We probably need to look at the whole document, but it does sound over the top.’”

Wondering whether, more than 30 years on,

**The Holy Ghost is one of Christianity’s most bizarre entities. Is it a bird, is it a wind, or is it a flame? BARRY DUKE wastes a sunny spring day in search of the answer**

my aging braincells might yet make sense of the Holy Ghost, I turned this time to *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopaedia. Here is its definition:

**The Trinity is God according to the doctrine of most branches of Christianity and some related groups. The doctrine says that though God is the only god, God exists in three distinct persons, usually referred to as God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Historically, this Trinitarian view has been affirmed as an article of faith by the Nicene Creed (325) and Athanasian Creed (circa 500). Although the term does not appear in the New Testament, those that profess this doctrine maintain that the concept is clearly seen in many places therein, most explicitly in the accounts of Jesus’ baptism (see Luke 3:21-22). These creeds were formulated and ratified by the Church of the third and fourth centuries in reaction to heterodox theologies, some involving the nature of the Trinity, and Christ’s position in it. The creeds have been retained in some form by most Protestant denominations.**

The Nicene Creed, which is a classic formulation of this doctrine, used “*homouousia*” (Greek: *of same substance*) to define the relationship among the members of the Godhead. The spelling of this word differs by a single Greek letter, “one iota”, from

the word used by non-trinitarians at the time, “*homoiousia*”, (Greek: *of similar substance*): a fact which has since become proverbial, representing the deep divisions occasioned by seemingly small imprecisions, especially in theology.

All very well, but no indication there as to what *precisely* the Holy Ghost is, and what it is supposed to do.

I then uncovered an excerpt from *Christianity, A Journey from Facts to Fiction* by Muslim scholar and author, Mirziz Tahir Ahmad.

In deconstructing the concept of Trinity, he points out that in many sects of Christianity today, Jesus is worshipped as the “Son of God”.

“Yet they all agree that the same Jesus whom they worship used to worship God the Father and Him alone.

“In vain I have often enquired from knowledgeable Christian scholars the reason why Jesus should have worshipped God the Father if he himself was an inseparable part of God, and was so completely merged with Him as to create a sense of unity, despite there being three persons. Did he ever worship the third constituent of the Trinity, that is the Holy Ghost? Did he ever worship himself? Did the Holy Ghost ever worship Jesus? Did the Father ever worship either of the remaining two. If not, why not? Perhaps the answer to these questions would compel Christians to confess that a distinct superiority is certainly established of God the Father, over the remaining two constituents of the Trinity. From this, it emerges that the three constituents of Trinity are not identical in their status. Hence they are ‘Three in three’ – if at all they are three, but they are not ‘Three in One.’

“Sometimes when Christian scholars are confronted with the question of Jesus, whom they believe to be the Son of God, having worshipped God the Father, they claim that it was the man who worshipped God the Father, and not the Son Jesus who did so ... Were there two conscious beings possessing the same body of Jesus, one possessing human consciousness and the other that of the Son of God?

“Again, why did the man bypass and completely ignore the Son of God in him and never worship Christ as such? The same man Jesus, the co-partner of Christ, should also have worshipped the third constituent the Holy Ghost, which he never did.

“Worship is an act of mind and soul that is expressed sometimes in bodily symbols, but it remains an act rooted in the mental and emotional entity of the person. Hence it has to be determined who worshipped when Jesus Christ worshipped God. We have already dealt with the scenario, with all its intricacies, in which it

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is Christ, the Son of God, who worshipped. Conversely, if it was the man who worshipped God the Father, and if He never worshipped Christ, then why on earth do the Christians defy this holy example of Jesus himself? Why should they start worshipping Christ beside God, while Jesus the man never worshipped his co-partner Christ, despite being so close to him?

"Let us now examine, from a different angle this time, the formula of 'Three in One' in the Trinity as three distinct persons who are absolutely and completely identical to each other. In this scenario we are not talking about a single person with different features combined in one but of three separate forms, rather like triplets – the kind of triplets which are so completely identical that their similarities do not end with likeness of form alone, but also extend to the entire thinking and feeling processes. They share their thoughts, feelings and experiences identically. In this case one has to admit that two out of the three constituents of Trinity are superfluous. If they are done away with, it will not in the least effect the remaining constituent of the Trinity which will remain complete in itself."

By this time my head was spinning, and I had begun seriously regretting my pursuit of the Holy Ghost. If a learned Muslim had more questions than answers, what chance did a mere hack have of solving the mystery? But, by now, I was too deeply drawn into the web, and persisted in my quest until finally I hit paydirt of sorts in the form of a lengthy sermon

on the subject by the famous English preacher, the Rev C H Spurgeon.

It was delivered At New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, on January 21, 1855. Here, in part, is what he had to say on the subject:

"First of all, we shall have some little instruction concerning the proper personality of the Holy Spirit. We are so much accustomed to talk about the influence of the Holy Ghost and his sacred operations and graces, that we are apt to forget that the Holy Spirit is truly and actually a person – that he is a subsistence – an existence; or, as we Trinitarians usually say, one person in the essence of the Godhead. I am afraid that, though we do not know it, we have acquired the habit of regarding the Holy Ghost as an emanation flowing from the Father and the Son, but not as being actually a person himself.

"I know it is not easy to carry about in our mind the idea of the Holy Spirit as a person. I can think of the Father as a person, because his acts are such as I can understand. I see him hang the world in ether; I behold him swaddling a new-born sea in bands of darkness; I know it is he who formed the drops of hail, who leadeth forth the stars by their hosts, and calleth them by their name; I can conceive of Him as a person, because I behold his operations. I can realise Jesus, the Son of Man, as a real person, because he is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. ... Nor do I find it difficult at times to realise the person of my Jesus sitting on his throne in heaven; or girt with clouds and

wearing the diadem of all creation, calling the earth to judgment, and summoning us to hear our final sentence. But when I come to deal with the Holy Ghost, his operations are so mysterious, his doings are so secret, his acts are so removed from everything that is of sense, and of the body, that I cannot so easily get the idea of his being a person; but a person he is.

"The Holy Ghost has actually made different appearances on earth. The Great Spirit has manifested himself to man: he has put on a form, so that, whilst he has not been beheld by mortal men, he has been so veiled in appearance that he was seen, so far as that appearance was concerned, by the eyes of all beholders. See you Jesus Christ our Saviour? There is the river Jordan, with its shelving banks and its willows weeping at its side. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, descends into the stream, and the holy Baptist, John, plunges him into the waves.

"The doors of heaven are opened; a miraculous appearance presents itself; a bright light shineth from the sky, brighter than the sun in all its grandeur; and down in a flood of glory descends something which you recognise to be a dove. It rests on Jesus – it sits upon his sacred head, and as the old painters put a halo round the brow of Jesus, so did the Holy Ghost shed a resplendence around the face of him who came to fulfil all righteousness, and therefore commenced with the ordinance of baptism. The Holy Ghost was seen as a dove, to mark his purity and his gentleness, and he came down like a dove from heaven to show that it is from heaven alone that he descendeth. Nor is this the only time when the Holy Ghost has been manifest in a visible shape. You see that company of disciples gathered together in an upper room; they are waiting for some promised blessing, and bye-and-bye it shall come. Hark! there is a sound as of a rushing mighty wind; it fills all the house where they are sitting; and astonished, they look around them, wondering what will come next.

"Soon a bright light appears, shining upon the heads of each: cloven tongues of fire sat upon them. What were these marvellous appearances of wind and flame but a display of the Holy Ghost in his proper person? I say the fact of an appearance manifests that he must be a person. An influence could not appear – an attribute could not appear: we cannot see attributes – we cannot behold influences. The Holy Ghost must, then, have been a person; since he was beheld by mortal eyes, and he came under the cognisance of mortal sense."

So, there you have it. The Holy Ghost is an actual person. Or a bird. Or he/she/it could be a flame mixed up with "a mighty wind" – which would explain why the damn thing has, over the centuries, generated so much hot air.

## Christians use despicable tactics in a bid to sabotage *Heart of the Beholder*

VINDICTIVE fundamentalist Christians in the US have embarked on a dirty tricks campaign to prevent the screening of a film which shows just how vindictive Christians can be.

*Heart of the Beholder* tells the true story of how a husband and wife team who owned a chain of video rental stores had their lives destroyed by an unscrupulous gang of evangelical Christians because they dared to stock *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

"For years we have been frustrated in our efforts to get *Heart of the Beholder* made," said Darlene Lieblich, the film's Executive Producer. "In 1998, the development executives at Alec Baldwin's El Dorado Productions liked our pitch but before our script even reached El Dorado Productions, they were inundated with faxes and emails protesting against the film. Because the level of harassment was so strong before they had even agreed to make the film, they felt it would only get worse once they went into production, so they dropped the project.

"This harassment has been repeated over and over wherever our film went until we were

finally forced to make it on our own."

When Lieblich and her team announced that they would make the film independently, Christians pulled out all the stops in an effort to sabotage production. Hate e-mails, many containing computer viruses, were sent to their offices, and earlier this year a religious hacker broke into their files and accessed their film festival strategy, promising, in a gloating message, to inundate festival organisers with protest e-mails.

Christians have also begun a campaign to have the organisers of the Cannes film festival reject *Heart of the Beholder*. Zealots are being asked to sign a letter reading:

"The filth and blasphemy portrayed in this film should NEVER be rewarded or recognized. Instead, it should be thrown in the garbage where it belongs."

The film has now been completed, and the *Freethinker* is now engaged in discussions with Lieblich and her team to see how it might be made available on DVD in the UK. Full details of the film can be found on [www.beholder.com](http://www.beholder.com).



ONE day, Leslie Scrase, a former Methodist Minister and missionary and still devoutly religious, was reading the Bible in his flat. He had been doing just that for years. But on this fateful day, while reading the story of Christ walking on water, he was struck by a realisation at once simple and profound – that he didn't believe it. And once he accepted that, it followed that he did not believe in miracles, and was, therefore, no longer a Christian.

His pilgrimage had begun, and this rewarding short memoir charts Scrase's journey from vocation to the conviction that "the whole thing was one big con trick". Scrase's main conclusions – that we live in a world with no supernatural or spiritual realm, that one's religion has no connection with one's moral outlook, and that the only question we need ask ourselves is "What do I believe?" – are, it seems to me, inarguable and vital.

As he explains it, he had always had certain doubts, nagging existential questions that the Bible does not explain and its official representatives run shy of answering. He was troubled by the Christian church's history of murder, pillage and persecution, often for the most trivial of reasons. He couldn't understand the exact mechanics of how Christ's death "saved" the rest of us from the effects of our sin (and

was in any event nagged by the feeling "that calling ordinary, decent folk 'sinners' was pushing it a bit").

**MATTHEW CONIAM reviews**  
***One Man's Pilgrimage: From Christian Ministry to Outright Atheism* by Leslie Scrase,**  
**£9.50, available direct from the author**

He saw acts of extraordinary pettiness committed by devout Christians, and some of the serious harm that a blindly dogmatic view of society can cause.

He was troubled by the problem of evil, and by the rampant injustice that God could, presumably, put right. And especially by the fact that, as he puts it, "when you actually come to examine the Christian church you soon find that there is almost nothing of any significance on which Christians actually agree". But still he held firm to his inner conviction that so enduring and all-encompassing an edifice simply could not be without foundation – until the day he realised that it could, while reading about a man walking on the surface of the sea.

As well as some fascinating detail on the rise and fall of Methodism in the twentieth

century, the book also provides a vivid picture of missionary work. Obviously it is rare to find such histories recounted from an atheist perspective, and I was fascinated to read of the unease with which he (and nobody else, it seems) observed how the missionaries in India relaxed in comfort while the people "still lived in mud huts and poverty".

Scrase is especially useful when he debunks the "sentimental tosh about churches" to which I, along with many other atheists, can be prone.

Here in England most of our parish churches and cathedrals were built at a time when our population lived in mud huts and in poverty. People sometimes go into old parish churches and talk about the wonderful atmosphere. The fact is people were forced to help with the building, forced to contribute and forced BY LAW to go to attend church. All those beautiful churches that are supposed to be places of serenity and peace are actually heavy, dominating, burdensome expressions of power and authority.

This is a short, simple book, but a highly readable and ultimately a rather touching one, with many rewarding observations.

**• If you would like a copy of the book, write direct to the author at 15 Blindlane Close, Bradpole, Bridport, Dorset DT6 3FE**

AND the Lord spoke to Noah and said, "In one year, I am going to make it rain and cover the whole earth with water until all flesh is destroyed. But I want you to save the righteous people and two of every kind of living thing on the earth. Therefore, I am commanding you to build an ark."

In a flash of lightning, God delivered the specifications for the ark. In fear and trembling, Noah took the plans and agreed to build the vessel.

"Remember," said the Lord, "you must complete the ark and bring everything aboard in one year." Exactly one year later, fierce storm clouds covered the earth and all the seas of the earth went into a tumult.

The Lord saw that Noah was sitting in his front yard weeping. "Noah", he shouted. "Where is the ark, for Christsake?"

"Lord, please forgive me", cried Noah. "I did my best, but there were big problems. First, I had to get a permit for construction, and your plans did not meet the local government regulations. I had to hire an engineering firm and redraw the plans.

"Then I got into a fight with the health and safety people over whether or not the ark needed a fire sprinkler system and flotation devices. Then my neighbour objected, claiming I was abusing the residential area protection scheme by building an ark in my front yard, so I had to get permission from the city planners."

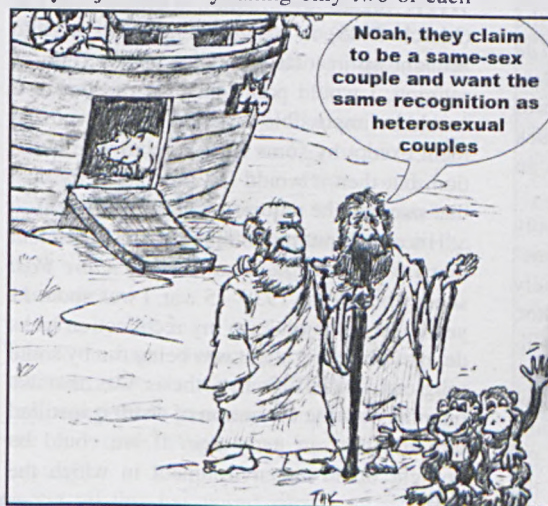
"Then I had problems getting enough wood

## Noah updated

for the ark because there was a ban on cutting trees, to protect the spotted owl. I finally convinced the Forestry Service that I needed the wood to save the owls. However, the Fish and Wildlife Authorities won't let me catch any owls. So no owls."

"The carpenters formed a union and went out on strike. I had to negotiate a settlement with their national committee before anyone would pick up a saw or a hammer. Now I have 16 carpenters on the ark, but still no sodding owls."

"When I started rounding up the other animals, I got sued by an animal rights group. They objected to my taking only two of each



kind aboard. Just when I got the suit dismissed, the Environmental Protection Authorities notified me that I could not complete the ark without filing an environmental impact statement on your proposed flood.

"Right now, I am trying to resolve a complaint filed with the Equal Opportunities Commission that I am practising discrimination by not taking non-believers aboard. It's even been suggested that I discriminated against woodworm."

"The Inland Revenue have seized my assets, claiming that I'm building the ark in preparation to flee the country to avoid paying taxes.

"And I just got a notice from the authorities that I owe them some kind of user tax and failed to register the ark as a 'recreational water craft'. Finally, some comedian got a court injunction against further construction of the ark saying that, since God is flooding the earth, it is a religious event and, therefore, unconstitutional. Lord, I really don't think I can finish the ark for another five or six years."

The sky began to clear, the sun began to shine and the seas began to calm. A rainbow arched across the sky. Birds sang gratefully in the trees, bees hummed and dogs' tails began wagging cheerfully. Noah looked up hopefully. "You mean You are not going to destroy the earth, Lord?"

"No," said the Lord sadly. "I don't have to. It's clear the government already has."



### Media coverage of the Pope

I GREW up an Anglophile in Luxembourg, an arch-conservative Catholic country, because of England's admirable opposition to "popery". But nowadays when I watch BBC World I sometimes wonder whether I have by mistake pushed a RAI (Italian) button, or even whether the Vatican has introduced a programme of its own among my 40-50 channels.

Things are, of course, as bad on CNN. And for quite a while now all the available TV programmes have been flooded with news about the dying/dead Pope – that odious politician, whose every sneeze and fart was heard around the world year after year.

At the same time the existence, opinions, feelings and arguments of atheists were ignored, unbelievers muzzled. How is one to respect the media in view of such blatant bias? The present grotesque deluge of "popish" news on TV has made me lose my last shred of respect for Western TV news.

After the Polish Pope had begun voicing his reactionary, misogynistic views, Graham Greene exclaimed in an interview "That awful Pope! What would he do without television?"

What gets me most is the lack of indignation of the so-called masses, the literate citizens of the West, who all along were fully informed regarding the shameful acts and words of the late Pope. Most discouraging to me is the silence – due to stupidity, lack of compassion, intellectual cowardice? – of women in the West. Their acclamations of the Pope remind me of the German saying: "The dumbest calves choose their own butchers."

NELLY MOIA  
Luxembourg

### Buddhism and Hinduism

I WELCOME the thoughtful comments by Frederick Bacon on my article on Buddhism, and will take them on board (April *Points of View*). I wish, however, that Ms Appleton had done some homework before launching her ill-informed attack.

Of course the *Bhagavad Gita* is part of the *Mahabharata*. It is also an *Upanishad*. The *Penguin Dictionary of Religions* (1995) refers to the BG as a *Upanishad* under both entries of *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads*. V Roebuck (*The Upanishads*, 2003) also refers to it as an *Upanishad* on page xvi.

Ms Appleton states that it is "quite simply not true" that Buddhist scriptures are "divinely inspired". I did not say they are divinely inspired, and agree entirely that they are not. However, many of the scriptures are considered to be divinely inspired. There are hundreds of thousands of Buddhist texts, and of course they can't all claim divine inspiration. But a great many do, including some of the ones I referred to. The *Tantras*, *Sutras*, the

*Tipitaka* and innumerable others were believed to have been originally delivered as discourses by the Buddha himself. I refer Ms Appleton to Juliane Schober (ed) *Sacred Biography and Buddhist tradition of South and SE Asia* (1997).

Nowhere did I say that "all suffering is the result of good or bad deeds". Suffering is the result of bad deeds. To quote Donald Lopez, a highly respected authority, who has written at least five books about Buddhism. (*Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics, page 3): "Karma is the law of the cause and effect of actions, according to which virtuous actions create pleasure in the future, and non-virtuous actions create pain. It is a *natural law*, accounting for all the happiness and suffering in the world." (My italics).

It is highly irksome to be misquoted a third time. I did not once "talk of a convenient shortcut to nirvana". The word I used was "enlightenment" – which is not the same thing. In the Buddhist scriptures there are a number of references to such shortcuts. See Lopez text No. 41 for example: *Both Sudden and Gradual Enlightenment*. See also text No. 8: *Rebirth in the Land of Bliss* (translated by Gomez from Tibetan). Throughout Buddhist history there have been tensions and disagreements about the different paths to enlightenment. Like most religions Buddhist teaching is sometimes contradictory – a point I was trying to bring out.

As far as spelling goes, there are many variations, especially in the older translations. "*Upanishads*" for example is sometimes spelled "*Upanisads*". Both the Chambers and Oxford dictionaries offer "Sanskrit" as an alternative to "Sanskrit". Ms Appleton is right, however, and I should have used the far more common "Sanskrit". But not a "glaring error" surely. I have been reading some very old texts in the British Library.

DAVID SIMMONDS  
Essex

### Interesting experiment

WITH regard to Matthew Coniam's article (March 2005) in which he imagines a child brought up in total ignorance of any form of religion, I would point out that, of course, it would be impossible to set up such an experiment except by some form of complete isolation, but then it would fail the "perfectly normal manner" he requires for his experiment.

His article put me in mind of an experiment that I read about in an article in *Picture Post* shortly before the 1939–45 war. I was about 11 years old at the time, so my recollection lacks details. The experiment was being run by some religious cult. Their hypothesis was that we only die because the notion of death is instilled into us from an early age. If we could be brought up in an environment in which the

concept of death was never mentioned and the individual was never faced with seeing anything that was dead, then he (or she) would not expect to die and as a consequence would live for ever. In this article, the cult centred somewhere in South America (as I recall) had a new-born baby that they intended to bring up in this way. I wonder what became of the experiment. The individual would now be getting on for 70. Does anyone else remember this article?

CHARLIE ABLETHORPE  
Leigh-on-Sea

### Upsetting the Vatican

SO, the Vatican is upset by a book (*The Da Vinci Code*) which is full of "facts" about religion which turn out to be mostly made up ... mmmmm.

Now to another point. The *Freethinker* sometimes prints reports concerning appalling treatment of people at the hands of the religious (eg "Pregnant girl gets 150 lashes", *FT* April).

I am sure others, like me, want to know more about these cases and how we might help (letters of appeal etc). I am aware Amnesty International does great work on this, and if they are already taking the case could you not put that reference at the bottom of the article? I am sure that many of us are otherwise left feeling helpless in the face of such horror.

Perhaps a new campaigning face for the *Freethinker*?

DORRY LEWIS  
Surrey

Editor's note. Good point. In future we will try to provide such information.

### Secular symbols, religious signs

I SUGGEST the mathematical symbol  $e$  is better than  $\pi$ , for the latter would lead to silly remarks about running round in circles, religious people believing that their path is of course straight.

The exponential number  $e$  (2.718...) is found in all growing systems, in life itself, and in evolution. It is the basis of our natural world. I suggest it captures the essence of atheism: that there is simply no point in the hypothesis of some omnipotent supernatural god;  $e$  does such a beautiful job of explaining so much so elegantly, so logically and so simply.

PETER LANCASTER  
Essex

AT FIRST I thought that Tom Boyce's idea of using  $\pi$  as a secular symbol was excellent, until I realised that mathematically speaking  $\pi$  is described as an Irrational and Transcendental number. Not what freethinkers want to be associated with! My I suggest a question mark be used instead, as we do





seem to be a questioning lot?

**John B Corcoran**  
Merseyside

TIM Boyce, in suggesting pi as a secular symbol, forgets that this number is both irrational and transcendental. Though these are mathematical terms, their ordinary meanings preclude the use of this symbol to indicate secularism.

Religious symbols generally represent a person or event in the history of that religion. Secularists would be hard put to arrive at an agreed event or person in the history of secularism. Perhaps we should settle for a symbol indicating what secularism stands for – not an easy idea to symbolise. Then again, do we need to do any such thing?

**BARRY THORPE**  
Cheshire

I DISAGREE with Tim Boyce (*Points of View*, April). Symbols are regressive: by making elitist and divisive statements they promote not the rational mind but the emotional.

Being an atheist without need for emotive symbols (although I like the Mac logo's homage to Alan Turing), I would prefer nothing – which could be used by secularists needing an identifier. Nought, that is, or zero. It is common to the symbols for male and female, it could be a ring symbolising openness, or the sun or the full moon (not useful associations). How about ball? A yawn?

**GRAHAM NEWBERY**  
Southampton

WHILE reading Rudolf Koch's *The Book of Signs* (1930, a collection of primitive and medieval symbols) I discovered something which might interest *Freethinker* readers. In chapter two he shows over 40 different symbols of the cross. In have selected 3:

- ✚ The Latin Cross or "God's Mark"
- ✙ The Patriarchal Cross or the Cross of Lorraine
- ✙ The eight-ended cross of the Russian Orthodox Church

In chapter 12 he shows 12 botanical signs. I have selected three:

- ✚ Pernicious, suspect
- ✙ Poisonous
- ✙ Very poisonous, deadly

**MARTIN KIRBY**  
Nottingham

### Amending the Gospels

THOSE who would dispute any suggestion that during the course of history the Christian gospels have been subject to many amendments and interpolations need look no further

for a modern example than Nicholas King's recently published work, *The New Testament Freshly Translated*.

When the book was introduced during a recent radio discussion (Radio Ulster, *Sunday Sequence*, March 28) it was revealed that Mr King's new translation portrays Jesus referring to his followers as, "fellow Christians". While such an utterance, if it were true, would provide a convenient continuity between Jesus and the Christianity yet to come, it was not until after Jesus' crucifixion that the titles "Christian" and "Christianity" were coined.

Unfortunately, Mr King's qualified apology for this anomaly will have little effect, since the book is now destined for the public domain where it could mislead many readers.

If a spurious allusion such as this can be falsely attributed to Jesus in the cold light of the 21st century, who knows what changes and modifications might have been made during the murky obscurity of Christianity's early development?

**JAMES A McKENNA**  
Belfast

### Recycled atoms

IN HIS book *A Short History of Nearly Everything* Bill Bryson wrote: "Atoms really get around. Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming you."

"We are so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms – up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested – probably once belonged to Shakespeare."

If that is true, then the Second Coming of Jesus is already a thing of the past. Using the Shakespearian analogy, he is now being recycled for the fourth time. So where has he turned up?

Were there a billion atoms of him in Muhammad? Does that make him the founder of two religions? And if so, how many millions of Moses' atoms were recycled in Jesus? Does that make Moses the founder of three closely-related religions all at loggerheads with one another?

And where are they now, all those billions of atoms? In Ariel Sharon or Osama bin Laden or President Bush, the Pope or some unknown Christian or Muslim fundamentalist? Or have they, over the centuries, seen the light? Are they now all together in Richard Dawkins?

Anyway, at least we can tell all those knock-on-door evangelists with absolute authority that the Second Coming of Jesus has been and has gone, and we are now living in the end time. (Well, that is probably true anyway).

But all this has posed another question, a

more personal one this time. Who am I? I wrote a book once about my ancestors, but who are my ancestors? And who will my descendants be? Not just my great, great, great grandchildren that's for sure.

No. As I look into the dim and distant future I can see a multitude of different people, all of them bearing billions of my atoms, atoms that have visited the stars and "been part of millions of organisms", and there is nothing that the poor beggars can do about it.

When I peg out my atoms will be inflicted on all sorts of people who would do anything to avoid them if they knew their history.

Oh wow! Now that really is a doctrine of immortality that gives comfort. In fact, it gives much more than comfort. It makes me feel almost cheerful as I approach one year nearer my own demise.

**LESLIE SCRASE**  
Dorset

## 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. June 7, 7.30pm. Mike Jelley: *Is there a Place in Heaven for My Cat or Dog?* July 5, 7.30pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

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

**Central London Humanist Group:** Contact Jemma Hooper, 75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX. E-mail: [rupert@clarity4words.co.uk](mailto:rupert@clarity4words.co.uk). Tel: 02075804564.

**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 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.

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

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. Email: [info@devonhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk). Website: [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.devonhumanists.org.uk).

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

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

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

**Essex Humanists:** Meetings on the third Sunday of each month. Details: 01268 785295.

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

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Friday, May 20, 7.30pm. Panel of speakers on *The Impact of Religion on Homophobia*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Perth Group:** Information: [perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk](mailto:perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk)

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Tuesday, June 7, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting, informal discussion and supper at 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley.

**Isle of Man Freethinkers.** Information: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: [murielgarland@clara.co.uk](mailto:murielgarland@clara.co.uk). Website: [www.iom.freethinkers.co.uk](http://www.iom.freethinkers.co.uk)

**Isle of Wight Humanist Group.** Information: David Broughton on 01983 740421 or email [davidb67@clara.co.uk](mailto:davidb67@clara.co.uk)

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Website: <http://home-pages.stayfree.co.uk/Iss>. Public meeting: Sunday, 6.30pm.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, May 26, 8pm. David Porter: *The Boundaries of Politics*.

**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. Wednesday, June 1, 7.30pm. Ian Crowe: *Penal Policy*.

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

E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto:BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net).

**Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282. Website: [www.wmhumanists.co.uk](http://www.wmhumanists.co.uk). Email: [rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk). Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

**West Kent Secular Humanist Group:** Information: Ken Allen . Tel: 01892 863002.. E-mail: [ken@kallen14.fsnet.com](mailto:ken@kallen14.fsnet.com).

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

E-mail: [brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com)

website: [www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.com](http://www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.com)

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

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