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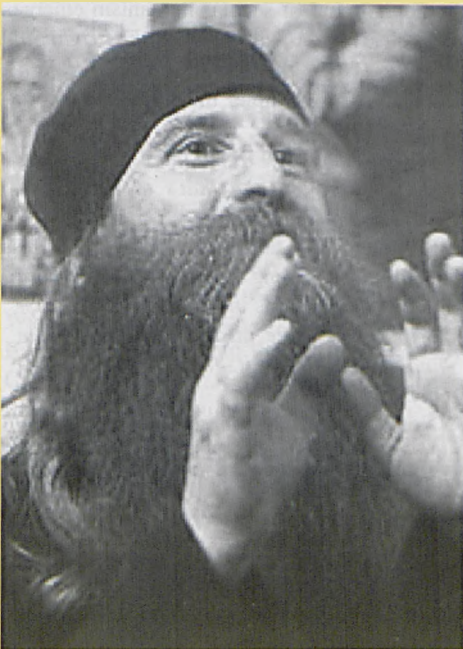
Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

Whipping Boys for Allah



A young Shi'ite Muslim boy grimaces as he bleeds after flagellating himself along with other boys during an Ashura ceremony in Bhopal, India. But this barbaric practice is not confined to faraway Islamic communities: boys in the UK have been, and possibly still are, indulging in religious self-flagellation

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A Romanian nun dies on a cross during an exorcism, with a towel crammed in her mouth. But father Daniel, pictured left, who orchestrated the ceremony, wonders what all the fuss is about. “God has performed a miracle for her; finally Irina is delivered from evil.”

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SECULAR humanists are often accused of not espousing a "positive" philosophy, of simply denying the existence of the supernatural while resigning themselves to a meaningless and joyless life. Indeed, I was once a guest on a radio talk show together with *Skeptic* publisher Michael Shermer, when the host incredulously observed that we seemed to be pretty happy people "for being skeptics".

I don't know where this stereotype comes from, other than the deeply entrenched prejudices of people who think that there is meaning in life only if somebody up there shows a keen interest in the details of their sexual practices. But I know how, once and for all, to debunk the myth: let us briefly examine the obviously humanistic philosophy embodied in the work of one of the most happy-going groups of people I've ever come across, the British comedians collectively known as "Monty Python" (Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin).

My analysis will be confined for the moment to the Monty Python (henceforth, MP) songs, leaving a detailed study of their movies and TV productions to a more appropriately academic authority.

Every philosophical analysis needs to start with good questions, and MP does just that in the appropriately titled *The Meaning of Life* (from the homonymous movie):

"Why are we here? What's life all about?"

Is God really real, or is there some doubt?"

And as any good philosopher would do, MP does not provide us with simplistic, canned, answers, but rather with alternatives to seriously ponder:

"Is life just a game where we make up the rules ...

Or are we just simply spiralling coils of self-

replicating DNA?"

Which shows an understanding of both the problem of relativism in morality and of Richard Dawkins' concept of the selfish gene. Monty Python does appreciate alternative, even religious, viewpoints, as we can evince from several passages of *Every Sperm is Sacred* (from the movie *The Meaning of Life*):

"I'm a Roman Catholic, and have been since before I was born

Guest contributor MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI finds a strong humanist philosophy in Monty Python



And the one thing they say about Catholics is they'll take you as soon as you're warm ...

You don't have to have a great brain ...

You're a Catholic the moment Dad came."

Which implies a view of sex that one can find developed at length in several Encyclicals by various Popes, or can be clearly summarized in MP's system as:

"Every sperm is sacred, every sperm is great.

If a sperm is wasted, God gets quite irate."

However, one could argue, make fun of God all you like, but in the end isn't it rather obvious that He is responsible for the beauty of creation, arguably one of the most important things that give meaning to our life? This is, of course, the well-known argument from design, presented at length, for example, by William Paley in his 1831 book, *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the existence and attributes of the*

Deity, collected from the appearances of nature. Naturally, David Hume had already debunked the argument in his 1779 volume, *Dialogues concerning natural religion.* Hume pointed out that one needs to consider not just the good stuff that God allegedly made, but also the rest. Which MP summarizes very eloquently (and in a lot fewer words than Hume) in *All Things Dull & Ugly*:

"All things sick and cancerous, all evil great and small, all things foul and dangerous, the Lord God made them all."

Never was the argument from evil against the existence of God more aptly presented. But MP does not limit itself to what Francis Bacon called the *pars destruens* of their philosophy. They go on with a *pars construens* by elaborating an alternative viewpoint based on what one could think of as the cosmic perspective. Consider, for example, the *Galaxy Song* (from *The Meaning of Life*):

"Whenever life gets you down, Mrs Brown ... Just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving and revolving at 900 miles an hour ... In an outer spiral arm, at 40,000 miles an hour of the galaxy we call the Milky Way."

But why – you may ask – would astronomy matter to our sense of everyday life? Obviously, because it helps to:

"... remember when you're feeling very small and insecure how amazingly unlikely is your birth."

Which doesn't mean the cosmic perspective avoids scathing social criticism:

"And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space because there's bugger all down here on Earth."

Despite such an apparently negative view of humanity, the optimistic character of Monty Python's brand of secular humanism emerges most clearly in *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* (from the movie *Life of Brian*). Consider, for example, the following exhortation:

"If life seems jolly rotten there's something you've forgotten and that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing."

So much for humanists being a joyless bunch! And the song doesn't lack deep philosophical meaning, as in:

"For life is quite absurd and death's the final word ... Enjoy it – it's your last chance anyhow."

Not to mention this quintessential, and rather mathematically accurate, summary of human life:

"I mean – what have you got to lose? You know, you come from nothing – you're going back to nothing. What have you lost? Nothing!"

Something to ponder the next time that road rage is about to overcome you.

Romanian nun killed in exorcism ceremony

A ROMANIAN nun died last month after being bound to a cross, gagged and left alone for three days in a cold room in a convent. Members of the convent in north-east Romania claim Maricica Irina Cornici was possessed and that the crucifixion had been part of an exorcism ritual.

Cornici was found dead on the cross after fellow nuns called an ambulance, according to police. A priest and four nuns were charged with imprisonment leading to death.

Police say the 23-year-old nun, who was denied food and drink throughout her ordeal, had been tied and chained to the cross and a towel pushed into her mouth to smother any sounds. A post-mortem is to be carried out, although initial reports say that Cornici died from asphyxiation.

Local media reports that the young woman had arrived at the remote convent three months before, having initially gone there to visit a friend and opted to stay. She grew up in an orphanage in Arad, in the west of Romania.

Mediafax news agency said Cornici suffered from schizophrenia and the symptoms of her condition caused the priest at the convent and other nuns to believe she was possessed by the devil.

"They all said she was possessed and they were trying to cast out the evil spirits," police spokeswoman Michaela Straub said.

Father Daniel who is accused of orchestrating the crime is said to be unrepentant. "God has performed a miracle for her; finally Irina is delivered from evil. I don't understand why journalists are making such a fuss about this. Exorcism is a common practice in the heart of the Romanian Orthodox church and my methods are not at all unknown to other priests."

If found guilty of killing Cornici, Father Daniel and the accused nuns could face 20 years in jail.

The clamour of opposition to religious hatred law intensifies

THE National Secular Society last month held talks with Home Office Minister Paul Goggins in a last-ditch effort to persuade the Government to rethink its Racial and Religious Hatred Bill.

NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood put the opposition case to Mr Goggins at a lengthy round-table meeting at the Home Office, but says he saw little sign of movement. Keith commented: "We tried hard to make Mr Goggins realise the extraordinary breadth and scale of opposition to this Bill." Indeed, he was able to show the Minister press reaction to the proposals: of 20 opinion pieces, editorials and commentaries published in the national press over the past week, only two were in favour of the new law, and both were written by members of the Muslim Council of Britain.

He added: "We made a strong case that it would be counterproductive and hinder community cohesion by pitting communities against each other. We branded the Bill draconian, pointing to the harsh seven-year maximum jail term combined with a worryingly feeble prosecution threshold.

"In contrast, the Government is claiming that the Bill requires a "high test" for prosecution, and this led to some lively debate at the meeting – and some rather helpful exchanges with lawyers after the meeting confirming that we were correct about some points about the detail of the Bill that government lawyers had flatly denied.

"Above all, we drew attention to the deteriorating climate for free expression in the UK and said this would be dealt a further severe blow by the Bill. Allowing arguments to fester does not get them resolved. The principal victors of the Bill will be extremists who will end up silencing their critics and social commentators."

The almost unprecedented united front of opposition ranges from left to right in the political and religious spectrum – from Polly Toynbee to Melanie Phillips, Anne Widdecombe to Shirley Williams, from the Evangelical Alliance to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. From Christian Voice to the National Secular Society, from the *Independent* to the *Daily Mail*, from the Christian Institute to the Islamic Human Rights Commission, from English PEN to Index on Censorship to the Muslim Parliament – a huge chorus of voices has been raised in opposition to the Government's plans.

The Home Office issued a press release last Friday listing the few organisations that it

claims are in favour of the Bill – which included the British Humanist Association.

But the BHA's executive director Hanne Stinson is outraged by the suggestion that her organisation supports the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. She has written to Home Secretary Charles Clarke demanding that the claim be withdrawn and an apology issued.

She said: "We support the principle of legislation but the Government's Bill rides roughshod over freedom of speech. We have proposed carefully worded amendments to the Home Office but every single one has been rejected. Without a radical change of heart by Charles Clarke and acceptance of our amendments or something very like them we shall oppose the Bill vigorously, as we have warned from the start."

Shortly after the meeting with Mr Goggins, the Government survived a backbench revolt over the Bill. An amendment from a coalition of Tory and Lib Dem MPs to block the Bill failed by 303 votes to 246. The Bill now goes to its committee stage.

Other voices raised last month against the proposals included the Professor of Law at the Open University (Gary Slapper). He said in the *Independent*: "The Racial and Religious Hatred Bill is a fundamentally misconceived, unnecessary, hazardous piece of draft legislation. It should be an entrenched principle of a free, democratic society that no ideas are sacrosanct. No set of ideas should be protected against trenchant public criticism. The law should not exalt those who say: "I do not want my credo questioned in public, as that would be an insult to me and my beliefs."

In her *Daily Mail* column, Melanie Phillips wrote under the headline "The British Inquisition (...or how the religious hatred Bill

threatens hard-won freedoms for which so many people have died)": "If this law is now passed it will shut down legitimate and vital debate about Islam. Months ago, I asked the now newly-knighted Sir Iqbal Sacranie, general secretary of the Muslim Society of Britain, whether he thought any of the public statements about Islamic terrorism would constitute an incitement to religious hatred. He replied: "There is no such thing as an Islamic terrorist. This is deeply offensive. Saying Muslims are terrorists would be covered by this provision."

Rod Liddle in the *Sunday Times* called the Bill a "witch's brew of idiocy". After exploring the various recent cases of child abuse carried out under the guise of "religion" (mainly African witchcraft-style religious beliefs), Mr Liddle wrote: "Unfortunately, we now have the Incitement to Religious Hatred Bill about to enter the statute books, so I am prohibited from suggesting that people who believe in witches, the demonic possession of children and exorcisms are either cretins from a Stone Age culture or psychologically deranged. Which is a shame, because that's what I'd hoped to do. In fact the Government, through its charismatic Home Office minister Paul Goggins, has announced that people who worship the great Satan himself should indeed receive protection from the Bill; so we mustn't whip up hatred when we see a wild-eyed person carrying a black bin bag, some chilli pepper and a small child. Each to his own; live and let live, etc. The Bill was introduced to secure the votes of Britain's Muslims, but if it gives succour to the followers of Beelzebub, all well and good."

In an editorial *The Daily Telegraph* opined: "This foolish and dangerous Bill is looking more and more like a minefield."

The *Times* editorial on the topic said: "The Government is in a bind. It does not want to scrap the existing blasphemy laws, but it understands that it is not acceptable that only some faiths are covered. The Muslim Council, not unreasonably, sees the proposed law as a piece of equality legislation. Nevertheless, that should not lead ministers to build a new law on poor foundations."

The London *Evening Standard's* leader on the topic: "The political clout of Britain's 1.6 million followers of Islam should not blind Parliament to the need for extremely careful consideration of the new Bill ... It is extremely hard to make bigotry a crime without silencing

(Continued on p5)

Pastors choose jail rather than apologise to Muslims

TWO Christian pastors who fell foul of Australia's notorious Religious Vilification law said they would choose jail rather than pay A\$68,690 – the cost of publishing an apology in two national newspapers, and on their website, for vilifying Muslims.

Judge Michael Higgins, of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal said that pastors Danny Nalliah and Daniel Scot of the Catch the Fire Ministries were of otherwise good character, but their passionate religious beliefs caused them to transgress the law.



'Witch' girl might have become another Victoria Climbié

RELIGION was at the core of a harrowing new child abuse trial at the Old Bailey in London, in which three people were convicted of torturing an eight-year-old girl they thought was a witch.

The court heard last month that the orphan was beaten, cut and had chilli peppers rubbed in her eyes to "beat the devil out of her", in Hackney, east London.

The child's aunt, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was found guilty of child cruelty charges while two others, Sita Kisanga and her brother Sebastian Pinto, were convicted of aiding and abetting the offence.

The trio, all from London, were remanded in custody and were told by Judge Christopher Moss that they faced jail sentences. The women were warned their terms were likely to be "lengthy".

The girl's aunt was convicted of four charges of child cruelty, while Kisanga, 35, of Hackney, east London, was found guilty of three charges of aiding and abetting child cruelty.

Pinto, 33, of Stoke Newington, north London, was found guilty of one charge of aiding and abetting.

The two women were found not guilty of conspiracy to murder.

The cruelty started at the beginning of 2003 when a boy told his mother that the girl had been practising witchcraft. It was an accusation the woman believed.

Jurors were told that the child was cut with a knife and beaten with a belt and shoe to "beat the devil out of her" during her ordeal at a flat in Hackney, east London.

During police interviews, the girl said Kisanga had cornered her in the kitchen and told her "today you die".

The court also heard the girl, now 10, was put into a laundry bag and believed she would be "thrown away" into a river.

Patricia May, prosecuting, said: "This child was treated as a scapegoat by family members, tormented, subjected to all sorts of assaults which must have caused her considerable pain, fear and distress."

The orphan was brought to Britain from Angola in 2002 by her 38-year-old aunt after her parents died. Detective Superintendent Chris Bourlet, head of the Metropolitan Child Abuse Command, said: "This was a distressing case involving a vulnerable child who suffered at the hands of adults who should have cared for and protected her."

Mary Marsh, director of the NSPCC, called

the case "horrific", saying it had "exposed beliefs held by some in the African community that can lead to child abuse".

The child was found covered in cuts and bruises on the steps to her block of flats in Hackney, East London, one cold November morning.

The street warden who spotted her while patrolling the Woodberry Down estate said she seemed "freezing cold and terrified."

The shocking story she told revealed a litany of abuse by her own relatives – all committed Christians. They believed the girl was a witch possessed by evil spirits, and thought beating her would help drive out the demons.

Now police fear other children, especially within the West African community in London, may be at risk from similar religiously motivated abuse.

At one point Kisanga pushed a kitchen knife into her chest drawing blood. On other occasions the women woke the girl during the night and rubbed chilli-peppers into her eyes – apparently to stop her carrying out witchcraft at night.

An expert in African religion, Dr Richard Hoskins of King's College, London, who advises the Metropolitan Police on religiously motivated crime, gave evidence at the trial. He says belief in "ndoki" – the word for witchcraft – is widespread in West Africa and among some migrant communities in London, fuelled by a massive growth in small fundamentalist Christian churches.

The abusers in this case – who worshipped

at such a church in Hackney – may have believed they were carrying out a form of exorcism, driving out evil spirits.

Dr Hoskins says there are a growing number of reports of children being abused as a result of accusations of witchcraft, and social services are currently investigating four other almost identical cases – although he says this may be only the "tip of an iceberg".

The Metropolitan Police are so concerned they have now set up a special unit specifically aimed at tackling religiously motivated child abuse, called Project Violet.

Bourlet admits they have no idea yet of the real scale of the problem but "the aim will be prevention, working with churches and communities – not to challenge their beliefs but to raise their awareness of child abuse."

The team of around five officers will gather intelligence on the problem and try and persuade churches to follow child-protection procedures.

The police are haunted by the case of Victoria Climbié who was also abused and then eventually murdered five years ago by relatives who similarly believed she was possessed by evil spirits.

There are striking parallels with this latest case and in the words of Dr Richard Hoskins: "It was sheer chance that this little girl was rescued in time.

"If she hadn't been, then the injuries and abuse would in all probability have escalated and she could well have ended up as the next Victoria Climbié."

Parallels with Operation Spanner in Muslim flagellation investigation

SOCIETY is entitled and bound to protect itself against a cult of violence. Pleasure derived from the infliction of pain is an evil thing. Cruelty is uncivilised."

– Lord Templeton, *British Appeal Court judge.*

IN 1987 Manchester police carried out Operation Spanner, an investigation into the activities of a group of men who willingly participated in sado-masochistic activities. An investigation was launched after the police obtained a video which they believed depicted acts of sadistic torture, and they launched a murder investigation, convinced that the peo-

ple in the video were being tortured before being killed. This resulted in raids on a number of properties, and a number of arrests.

The apparent "victims" were alive and well, and told the police that they were participating in private homosexual BDSM (bondage, domination and sado-masochistic activities). They insisted that they were willing participants in the activities depicted on the videos, but the police and Crown Prosecution Service insisted on pressing charges. Sixteen men were charged with various offences, including "assault with actual bodily harm" (ABH).

The trial judge ruled that consent was not a valid defence to ABH, and the defendants pleaded guilty. The case was appealed first to

the High Court, then to the House of Lords.

An attempt to overturn the convictions in the European Court of Human Rights in 1997 failed.

The legal rationale for the decisions were broadly speaking as follows: 1. (UK courts) A person does not have the legal ability to consent to receive an act which will seriously harm them, such as branding or other intense activities of an S&M nature. 2. (European Courts) Whilst a person has a general right of free will, a state may as a matter of public policy restrict that in certain cases, for example for the general public good. The present case was judged by the European Court to have fallen within the sovereign scope of the UK Government's right to determine its legality, and human rights legislation would not over-ride this.

In the Court of Appeal Lord Templeton said: "In principle there is a difference between violence which is incidental and violence which is inflicted for the indulgence of cruelty. The violence of sado-masochistic encounters involves the indulgence of cruelty by sadists and the degradation of victims. Such violence is injurious to the participants and unpredictably dangerous. I am not prepared to invent a defence of consent for sado-masochistic encounters which breed and glorify cruelty . . . Society is entitled and bound to protect itself against a cult of violence. Pleasure derived from the infliction of pain is an evil thing. Cruelty is uncivilised."

Would the men have walked free if they had insisted that their activities had *religious*, rather than sexual connotations?

The question, I believe, is a perfectly valid one, and arises out of a case brought to light by *New Statesman* magazine (June 6, 2005). It concerned a 14-year-old Muslim boy, Firoz Abbas, who was found by a London doctor to have more than 50 lacerations across his back. The boy had been taken to a north London hospital because his mother wanted a rash under the boy's arms investigated.

When the doctor asked for an explanation for the wounds, a sanguine Mrs Abbas said that he had inflicted the wounds on himself during a religious festival. The doctor called in the Child Protection Agency, and, in a subsequent investigation involving the family, and a joint police and social services investigation team, it came to light that Firoz had been whipping himself with a *zanjeer* – a long chain with a set of curved knives attached at the end. He had started using a *zanjeer* as part of a flagellation ritual at the Idara-e-Jaferiya mosque in Tooting, South London at the age of seven. His scars had built up over a period of years.

His brothers Hanif and Ijaz, who were 12 and nine at the time of the investigation in 2003, had also participated in the annual Shia

Muslim festival of Ashura, which marks the death of Ali Hussein, grandson of Mohammad. They too had dozens of knife scars on their backs.

At the Abbas home, police officers found video footage taken by the family during a ceremony in 2002. It showed Firoz and Hanif flagellating themselves. Other children were involved too. According to a report by the Crown Prosecution Service, which was asked to advise the investigation team, the youngest child at that particular ceremony was just six years old.

The parents of the boys were clearly proud that their sons had participated in the flagellation ceremony. Mrs Abbas told the investigators that she would not subject her children to harm, but the practice was a *religious right* (my italics). She would not discourage her children if they wanted to participate, even if it was against the law.

Letting children self-flagellate with knives *is* against the law. But, clearly unwilling to demonstrate the same zeal with which they set about prosecuting the Spanner men – all mature, consenting adults who did no actual harm to themselves – The Crown Prosecution Service in this case decided that it was "not in the public interest to bring a prosecution", even though it was an offence under Section 1(1) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 which deals with wilful neglect in a manner likely to cause a child unnecessary suffering or injury.

The CPS, according to the *New Statesman* report, was of the opinion that it *could* bring a prosecution, but there were problems. If the children did not want to give evidence against their parents, the authorities would have to rely on third-party evidence alone, such as the medical report and the photographic and video evidence (as they apparently did in the Spanner case). Furthermore, "the parents had co-operated fully, and it was, in fact, their co-operation which had then helped to stamp out this practice among children at the Tooting mosque".

Adult Shia Muslims are, of course, free to continue flagellating themselves if they wish. But what of Lord Templeton's words "I am not prepared to invent a defence of consent for sado-masochistic encounters which breed and glorify cruelty"? Is the Ashura ritual not a sado-masochistic encounter which breeds and glorifies cruelty?

Given the time and money the CPS spent bringing the Spanner men to trial, I would say that the Abbas case is a clear example of hypocrisy and political correctness. This view is re-inforced by the words of Bourlet, who was responsible for the Abbas case as deputy head of the Metropolitan Police's Child Protection Command, who said "The last thing we wanted to do was police mosques and peo-

ple's homes. It's impracticable, and you don't want to do that anyway ... the last thing we want to be doing is policing faiths, because it is not our role. Our role is to protect children."

Given that sado-masochism is the foundation upon which religion – Islam in particular – is based, it is no surprise that so many children are abused in religious environments.

Neither is it surprising that the Abbas case should bring to light yet another example of there being one law for the religious and another for everyone else.

– Barry Duke

Religious Hatred

(Continued from p3)

legitimate discussion of a religion's nature and application to the modern world ...

Hanif Kureishi, the novelist and a leading critic of the Bill, said: "The danger is that it is going to stifle the voice of criticism with regard to religion." Exorcism or female circumcision could go unchallenged as a result, he said. Monica Ali, a novelist, added: "What I'm absolutely certain about is the damage to freedom of speech that will come about as a result of self-censorship, which already operates but will be dramatically increased." Don Horrocks, of the Evangelical Alliance, said: "People should be very concerned about this unnecessary new law. It will stifle robust religious debate at a time when people need to be able to discuss ideas and concepts freely without fear of prosecution."

Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, Leader of the Muslim Parliament, said: "If this Bill becomes law we risk extending the blasphemy law by round-about methods. This law will not protect Muslims. In Australia, Muslims campaigned for similar legislation before becoming its main opponents once it had become law and it was apparent that it was simply a dangerous double-edged sword with evangelical Christians queuing up to litigate Muslims. UK Muslim groups appear not to have learnt this lesson.

"The Muslim concern for protection, equality, and social inclusion is real and genuine. However, this piece of legislation is driven by political motives to stem the haemorrhaging of Labour support amongst the Muslim community. The Home Office has already indicated that the burden of proof would be set so high that few prosecutions are expected. This law will be cosmetic and fail to prevent abuses hurled at Muslims. The way forward is not to proceed with the Government's proposal but to call for the support of the Liberal Democrat amendment changing the law on incitement to racial hatred to include reference to religion as a pretext for stirring up racial hatred.

Vatican declines to take action against priest accused of abuse

THE Rev Marcial Maciel Degollado, recently the subject of a Vatican investigation into accusations of sexual abuse, has stepped down as head of the Rome-based religious order Legionaries of Christ.

Maciel declined to accept re-election as head of the order, which he founded in Mexico in 1941. The order's US headquarters is in Orange, Connecticut, and it has a seminary in Cheshire.

Maciel, 84, cited his age and his "desire to see the congregation flourish under a successor" at a meeting of his order in Rome last month, according to *Zenit*, an Internet news service operated by the Legionaries.

No mention was made of the Vatican's recent reopening of an investigation into charges that Maciel had sexually abused young boys who were in his seminaries many years ago. The allegations first surfaced in the *Hartford Courant* in February 1997. Nine former members of the Legion – one now dead – said that Maciel had abused them when they were young boys or teenagers, aged 10 to 16, in seminaries in Spain and Italy.

Maciel's decision to decline re-election had no connection to the reports that the Vatican has reopened the investigation, a spokesman for the order told Associated Press.

Following the election of Pope Benedict XVI, the Vatican confirmed that it planned no canonical process against Marciel.

The decision not to start a canonical process comes after Msgr Charles J Scicluna, an official of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, travelled to Mexico and the United States earlier this year to interview adults who said they were abused by Father Maciel, now 85, when they were teenage seminarians of the Legionaries.

One of Maciel's accusers is Juan J Vaca, a psychology professor at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., and a former Legionary priest. In a January interview with CNS, Vaca said he was pursuing the case against Father Maciel although "my personal feeling at this

point is that I've lost all trust in Vatican officials."

Father Maciel founded the Legionaries in 1941 in his native Mexico. Currently it has about 600 priests and 2,500 seminarians worldwide, including more than 75 priests in the United States.

His work has been praised by Vatican officials, including the late Pope John Paul II.

Father Maciel received public congratulations from Pope John Paul last November at the end of a week of celebrations in Rome marking the 60th anniversary of the priest's ordination.

The late Pope praised Father Maciel's "intense, generous and fruitful priestly ministry" and said that the ministry has been "full of the gifts of the Holy Spirit".

The men making the accusations were known in the Legion as the "apostolic school-boys", due to their youth at the time of their recruitment.

Eight of them are professionally successful Mexicans or Mexican Americans, including two who helped establish the order in the US. The ninth was a Spanish-born former Legionary priest and university president who dictated a death-bed statement in 1995 accusing Maciel of abusing him as a youth.

The accusers said that Maciel molested more than 30 boys from the 1940s through at least the early 1960s. Several said he maintained a long-term sexual relationship with them, and that he told some of them that he had permission from Pope Pius XII to seek them out sexually for relief of physical pain.

The scenarios described were often the same: Maciel would summon a boy to his room at night where he would be in his bed, writhing in apparent pain, and ask the boy to rub his stomach. The sessions typically ended in mutual masturbation. One man claimed he submitted about 40 times, and when he resisted Maciel's attempts at anal penetration, Maciel summoned another boy.

Many of the former Legionaries interviewed said that Maciel had an obsession with light-skinned, fair-haired boys. One man said he had been instructed to "get the prettiest and smartest kids" when sent to recruit in Spain in 1963.

Maciel weathered a Vatican investigation between 1956 and 1958, during which he was suspended from his duties as head of the order.

One of the men, Saul Barrales Arellano, 62,

resisted Maciel's sexual advances five to ten times and would sometimes sleep in the doorway to Maciel's room to keep out others more willing to do the founder's bidding. He was sent to the Canary Islands during the Vatican investigation to keep him quiet, and then was expelled nine months later, just short of ordination.

The Legionaries of Christ pledge total fidelity to the Pope. In addition to the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they also vow never to speak ill of the Legion, Maciel or their superiors, and to inform on anyone who does. The former members recall being taught women were temptresses, and masturbation a mortal sin. They were told that if they left the order they would go to hell: "lost vocation, sure damnation" was the phrase that kept many from leaving for years after wanting to escape.

Disciplinary standards were medieval – students were given straps studded with hooks to wrap around their thighs to ward off impure thoughts, and the nights in the seminaries were often disturbed by sounds of students flagellating themselves.

As the survivors described it, it was a culture of mind-control, where every moment was to be accounted for throughout their entire lives. A system of total control denied them access to telephones, and all mail was monitored. Contact was curtailed with their families, the oath to inform made the boys spy on one another, and punishments were severe, including solitary confinement for over a month at a time.

The Legionaries have vehemently rebutted the accusations, saying in a 19-page statement that their founder is the victim of a plot by disgruntled former members to "fabricate these devastating charges" and destroy his reputation.

Suspended jail term for ex-Catholic headmaster

A FORMER Catholic school headmaster in Australia who indecently assaulted seven students in the early 1970s has received a suspended 36-month jail sentence.

The assaults took place at St Paul's Catholic College in Traralgon. One victim said that when he was an 11-year-old student at the college he was taken by Marist brother Gerard McNamara to a shed, where the head rubbed his genital area with heat balm.

Quotable quote

TRYING to teach a Muslim to think rationally is like trying to teach a hippo to fly.

– quote found on the anti-Islamic website, *Faithfreedom.org* (see centre page feature)

New Zealand morals campaigner faces jail for the indecent assault of an eight-year-old girl

ONE would need a heart of stone not to laugh at the downfall of Graham Capill, New Zealand's one-man megaphone for collective Christian paranoia, bigotry and outrage.

Fortunately, new Zealanders are not by nature stony-hearted, and their laughter and expressions of glee rang out from one end of the country to the other when it was revealed that the bigot who once declared that lesbian and gay couples "were more likely to abuse children" was himself a child abuser.

There was a great deal of anger too, of course. The 46-year-old founder of the Christian Heritage Party, and evangelist-turned-police-prosecutor had, for years, held centre-stage as the country's Peddler-in-Chief of "family values", and used his high profile position to denunciate anyone who he thought was deviating from the Christian straight and narrow. His hate-filled rhetoric, typical of ardent Bible-thumpers and God-bothers everywhere, did an immense amount of harm to the confused and the vulnerable.

Capill's world came crashing down earlier this year when he pleaded guilty to abusing a girl of eight on several occasions. At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, the father of ten is still awaiting sentence. He is assured of a term of imprisonment.

In his 12 years as leader of the Christian Heritage Party (CHP), Capill developed a keen sense of the hot-button topics that aroused the media and wider public.

Blue movies, erotic art, pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, gay parenting, shock rock and the child-smacking ban – Capill railed against it all from the pinnacle of his puritanical platform.

He complained to police about the erect penis on a Maori carving in Tokoroa, calling it "pornographic and totally obscene".

Murderers should be put to death and child molesters were "simply evil".

The "simply evil" Capill, who stepped down as CHP leader almost two years ago to join the police as a prosecutor in Christchurch, had nothing to say at his dramatic court hearing. It was left to his lawyer, Jonathan Eaton, to describe the burden of "deep shame and heart-



Graham Capill, who was knocked to the ground after leaving court

felt remorse" that followed the offence.

Capill aspired to "Godly government" and considered his stands against abortion, homosexuality, prostitution, euthanasia and pornography as nothing less than an attempt to "suppress evil".

Among the many things the God-crazed Capill raged against was the teenage lesbian love story *Dare, Truth or Promise* which won the NZ Post's Children's Book of the Year award in 1998. Capill called the award "a sad reflection on the warped moral values that children are now confronted with".

On learning of Capill's conviction, the author, Paula Boock of Wellington, said "Terms like 'paedophile' and 'warped moral values' are often directed at the gay and lesbian community. This is a timely reminder that we should be wary of people who present themselves as morally superior and stand in judgement on others."

Boock, who is in a same-sex relationship and has a four-month-old daughter, says good family values are practised in all sorts of homes, "and we shouldn't make assumptions based on whether a person is Christian, gay or a star-bellied sneech."

And Christchurch Deputy Mayor Carole Evans said: "Hypocrisy is my pet hate. Saying one thing and doing another, to me, is the lowest of the low."

Evans added that she could not feel an ounce of pity for Capill, who as a political leader lambasted a variety of minority groups. "He's a sexual perverter himself. How dare he say those things when he was guilty of doing just that. He has ruined the lives of other people. It is just shocking for a man of his stature. It's sick."

Capill suffered a further humiliation when he was leaving court. He was knocked to the ground by local man Daniel Andrew McNally. The Christchurch resident has since received a two-year jail sentence for the attack on Capill.

Judge David Saunders said imprisonment was the only option because of McNally's history of violent offending and the fact he was on bail when the incident occurred.

– Barry Duke

Co-op bank bars Christian group

THE Co-operative Bank has asked a fanatical evangelical Christian organisation to close its account. The bank said that Christian Voice's attitude towards gay people was incompatible with the bank's support for diversity.

Christian Voice responded immediately by accusing the the Co-operative Bank of discriminating against it on the grounds of religion. The group said is now waiting for other religious groups with similar opinions to be asked to close accounts.

Christian Voice has held an account with the Co-operative Bank for about three years.

According to a BBC report last month, the bank decided that the group's stance on homosexuality was so extreme, that it had asked the group to take its business elsewhere.

A spokesman for the bank said that Christian Voice's discriminatory pronouncements based on the grounds of sexual orientation was "incompatible with the position of the Co-operative Bank, which publicly supports diversity and dignity in all its forms for our staff, customers and other stakeholders."

The decision was based "purely on the issue of diversity" and "not on the grounds of religion", the spokesman stressed.

The evangelical organisation says it now expects the bank to inform other Christian, Muslim and Jewish groups that they will not be able to bank there on the grounds that they all share the same view on homosexuality.

Christian Voice's national director Stephen Green said: "The Co-op bank, for all its fine words, is discriminating against us on the grounds of conscience and religion."

Humanism updated

A NEW, revised, 80-page edition of Barbara Smoker's book *Humanism* (for secondary schools) has been published by South Place Ethical Society (see review on page 14).

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

The new ISBN is 0 9023 6823 0 (in the SPES series), and the cover price is £6.50, plus 50p p&p.

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

Both books are available directly from Barbara Smoker, 51 Farmfield Road, Downham, Bromley, BR1 4NF. Please make cheques/POs payable to B. Smoker.

Internet proves weapon against

WHAT was once an occasional event – silencing scholars – increasingly has become a way of life in most Muslim countries. Along with the appearance of open information – access to e-mail and the Internet, for example, in Muslim countries like Egypt and Indonesia – has come a more intense denial of intellectual freedom than at any time in recent history. Large numbers of the educated middle class are trying to leave, or have already left, their home countries.

– excerpt from *Islam and Freethought*, an article by Akbar Ahmed and Lawrence Rosen, which first appeared in the November 2001 issue of the American publication, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

The exodus of educated people from Islamic countries in which free thought and human rights are suppressed bodes ill for the countries they have left, but their leaving does have one very positive aspect: many of those who have slipped the straitjacket of their stultifying religion are helping others all over the world to reject Islam outright. And they are increasingly turning to the INTERNET to do so.

One such person is Abul Kasem, a former Muslim living in Australia, key figure in the establishment of the virulently anti-Islamic website called **Faithfreedom.Org**.

His site lays down this challenge: “I receive many mails from angry Muslims who sometimes beg me and sometimes order me to remove this site. None of that has any effect on me. I consider both pleading and bullying the signs of psychopathology, a personality disorder affecting all the followers of Mohammed.

“If you disagree with my site and want me to remove it, instead of acting as bully or as victim, I invite you to disprove my charges against Mohammed and Islam. If you can show that what I say is unfounded, I promise to remove this site, confess that I was wrong and that Islam is a true religion. I will also pay \$50,000 US dollars to anyone who can disprove my charges and prove Islam is a true religion in an objective (not subjective) manner. This is to thank you for showing me the right way. Hey, what is \$50,000 dollars compared to eternity? The challenge is: Disprove my accusations against Mohammed.

“I accuse Mohammed of being: a rapist; a paedophile (he had sex with a child); an assassin; a mass murderer; a ruthless torturer; a lecher; a misogynist; a narcissist; a thief and plunderer; a cult leader; a mentally deranged person (he was paranoid, heard voices, hallucinated, seeing jinns, Satan and angels, thought he had sex with his wives when he did not, suffered from depression and had suicidal tendencies).”

Kasem says that the arguments of those who

have so far tried to prove him wrong are based on the denial of the authenticity of the Islamic sources that “report the crimes of Mohammed”; and moral relativism and situational ethics, ie “In those days, paedophilia, assassination, rape, theft, massacre and lying, were common practice, so Mohammed is innocent because he did what everyone else did.”

“These are the only two arguments that Muslims present. I am sorry, but any rational person can see these are logical fallacies. These charges have no answer. You simply cannot disprove them because they are taken from pure Islamic sources, and as such they are considered confessions. You can’t acquit a criminal after he has confessed, unless he pleads insanity, which is my point. That is why I offered \$50,000 as the reward to anyone who can disprove those charges. If I had any doubts, I would not have risked my money, and also would not have dared to oppose a sadistic deity like Allah who likes to burn humans for eternity for disbelieving in him. I know for certain that Muslims have no answer. Mohammed was a liar and his Allah was fabricated by him.”

Kasem lists a number of issues that may make an ardent believer question his/her “religion of birth”, and may eventually turn him/her into an unbeliever. This list, he stresses, is not comprehensive. As current events unfold, there will be many new points to consider.

1. Four million diehard devotees from many Islamic Paradises beseech Allah in three languages (Bengali, Urdu and Arabic) for his blessings. Yet Allah keeps these countries the most corrupt, the least developed, the most crime-infested, utterly terrorised and amongst the poorest in the world. You start doubting if Allah ever understood any of those languages of prayer, especially his own language, that is, Arabic. This epidemic of prayer has been going on for centuries, but, to the total chagrin of the true believers, Allah continues to bestow prosperity on the infidels. You question the fairness of Allah.

2 When the mullahs are in power in one of the Islamic Paradises (eg Bangladesh) a great flood creates havoc there. The mullahs term this devastating natural calamity a test of *Iman* (faith) by Allah. Curiously, when a secular government is elected to power, the same mul-

lahs call the raging flood a punishment from Allah for the electorate choosing a secular government. You marvel at the capricious mind of Allah.

3 A 14-year-old boy is mercilessly flogged to death (in Iran) in the month of Ramadan for not adhering strictly to his fast.

3 A 16-year-old girl (in Iran) is raped by gangsters but she cannot prove her innocence as she lacks the resources to hire a competent lawyer. The mullahs hang her in public without giving her a right to appeal. Her rapists go scot-free.

4 Allah decides to send his soldiers to a kindergarten school to slaughter infidels’ infants (Beslan in Russia). This action of Allah shakes the very foundation of your belief. You assume the savage perpetrators of this infanticide were not true believers. When you consult the *Hadis* you are profoundly shocked to learn that wanton killing of infidels’ children is religiously sanctioned. You become fearful about the safety of your own child when he/she is enrolled in a childcare/pre-school/kindergarten.

5 You remember your past secret love life and suddenly learn from newspaper reports that a hapless widow in an Islamic Paradise is to be stoned to death for merely becoming pregnant and giving birth out of wedlock to a daughter. You thank yourself that none of those women with whom you had illicit sex became pregnant.

6 You sincerely fall in love with an infidel woman but you cannot marry her unless she embraces the “religion of tolerance”. You and your lover decide to flee an Islamic Paradise and immigrate to an infidel land just to exercise your fundamental human rights.

7 You and your wife for 12 years go on a holiday trip to a scenic beach resort (eg the state of Trengganu in Malaysia). You lodge in the luxurious beach hotel Club Med. Out of the blue, at the dead of night, the religious police harrass you, demanding to see your marriage certificate. Unable to produce the matrimony document, you and your wife are handcuffed and immediately whisked by the “guardians of Allah” to dingy cells. You and your distraught wife are separated and threatened with lashing unless you can produce your Islamic marriage. You desperately fax relatives to send you the original certificate. Until that arrives you and

oves a potent gainst Islam

your wife spend a few weeks on tenterhooks. While all the infidel guests at the resort sleep in peace you suffer this despicable indignation because you have an Islamic name. After you return to your home of infidels you promise not to set foot in an Islamic Paradise, ever again.

8 You visit Thailand, the land of smiles. Out of curiosity you visit a massage parlour or a Turkish bath. Inside the dimly-lit premise you spot your bearded but impeccably western-dressed *Tabligi* friends who were once your university mates. Astounded, you ask them what *Tabligi* work they are doing in such a sex joint. To your utter surprise your *Tabligi* friends tell you that Thai massage girls/prostitutes are *halal* for them. They claim that while they may have wives and children at *Dar-ul-Islam* (home country of Islam) they are now in a *Dar-ul-Harb* (the land of warfare) or the land of infidels, so it is permitted for them to have sex with Thai women, as these sex-kittens are like captives to the Muslims. You return home and check the *Sharia* book (Islamic Law) to check out their outrageous claim. To your complete disbelief you find that the *Sharia* fully supports your *Tabligi* friends' claims.

9 You attend the party of an infidel colleague and drink only orange juice because all other foods ostensibly look *haram*. But you have no courage to ask your host. When the host enquires if there is anything is wrong with you, you lie, saying that you have a stomach problem, or that you are not hungry. You become ashamed that you have to tell lies because of your faith.

10 When you tell your best friend that you like the Western life-style and enjoy its freedom he cuts you off from his list of guests. He stops phoning you, and when you enquire about his well-being he says he is busy and has very little time. Religion now stands as a barrier between you and your best friend.

11 Your infidel neighbour invites you to his Christmas party but you pretend to be sick because you know alcoholic drinks will be served. You note that despite being teetotaler throughout their lives most Muslims have very poor health and quite short life-span. You genuinely question why you could not drink a sip or two of *haram* drink while the infidels can easily indulge in such absolute *haram* practice, yet they enjoy far superior health than the Muslims.

You wonder why the infidels can enjoy wine, beer, whisky, port, Martini, Campari, Cinzano, Remy Martin, VSOP brandy, champagne, shandy, but you have to be contented only with Mecca Cola or orange juice!

12 Your father threatens to kick you out of his house because you went out dating with infidel boys or girls. You wonder why you cannot mix easily with the opposite sex.

13 When your child visits his infidel friend's house you give your child a strict order not to eat or drink any foodstuff as you suspect that they may not be *halal*. Your child is left agitated, sad, and confused when he observes that while he has to go hungry, all other children can happily eat the delicious food served. He does not understand why he has to adhere to dim-witted food habits.

14 When you plan to visit another city/town you desperately seek *halal* restaurants, even though they serve smelly, stale food in very unhygienic premises. You refuse to eat nutritious food served in a superbly hygienic, delightfully pleasant and plush and comfortable environment simply because these food outlets are patronised by the *haram-eating* infidels. You simply cannot find any logic behind this bizarre practice. Nevertheless, you follow the herd of believers as you do not want to lose your standing in the community (*Ummah*). Deep inside, you question your faith but are afraid to become an outcast.

15 When Allah's soldiers (in Iraq) behead dedicated aid workers, ordinary poor labourers, engineers, and doctors, and make "snuff" videos for the *Ummah* to watch the mercy of "the religion of compassion" you have great difficulty explaining this religion of compassion to your colleagues. You even try to hide your face when the neighbours learn that you belong to this religion of compassion.

16 When you are in an infidel land you try to conceal your "religion of forgiveness" by faking an infidel name to a stranger. You try to hide the passport issued in an Islamic Paradise. You show it only to the immigration officials. You wonder why you have to play such a hide-and-peek game.

17 Your family hates you for becoming friendly with the infidels. You become very sad, but later, you find out that they are simply following the commands of all-powerful

Allah. Consulting the Holy Scripture, you find out that a Muslim son must disown his own parents and *vice versa* if they or you do not adhere to Islam.

18 You go to a religious school and find that girls as little as 6 or 7-years-old are forced to wear the ugly *Hijab*. When the confused, innocent little girls ask the reason for wearing such tormenting apparel, you hear the *Hujur* (religious teacher) says Allah loves those girls who "cover" themselves. He also says that the infidel girls (those who do not wear *Hijab*) are prostitutes, harlots and characterless. You wonder how come Allah did not cover these little *Muslimahs* at birth – why Allah let them be born naked!

19 Your child goes to a *Madrassah* (a theological seminary) to memorise the Holy Scripture. When he returns home he/she complains about the beating he/she received at the hands of the '*Hujur*'. When you confront the *Hujur* for child-abuse he shows you the irrefutable proof that beating a child is allowed as per *Hadis*. You simply shake your head in disbelief, but the '*Hujur*' shows you the clear proof from the Holy Scriptures. You are truly dumb-founded.

20 You live in an Islamic Paradise which preaches "religious tolerance", "peace", "democracy", "freedom of thought" ... When you visit the religious congregation of the infidels to learn about their religion you are arrested, fined or imprisoned (eg, in Malaysia) for patronising the enemies of the "religion of tolerance". You question the Holy words "No compulsion in religion".

21 In an Islamic Paradise you date an infidel girl. While both of you are seated on a wooden bench in the local park, the "moral guardians" of Allah (religious police), checks your ID, arrest you, fine you and jail you. Your infidel girl-friend goes scot-free. You question how could there be two sets of laws in one country? You decide that this is nothing but religious apartheid.

22 In a "moderate" Muslim Paradise (eg, Malaysia) you visit a pub or a disco to have a good time with your infidel friends. There, you notice the religious police checking the ID of each patron. Wondering how come the "religion of tolerance" would not allow you such a simple pleasure, you sneak out of the *haram* premises.

23 Your religious-scholar friend tells you that Allah's religion has lots of good things for women. When you open the newspaper (in Pakistan) you read, "Let these women be warned," said a mullah to the dissenting women of Rawalpindi. "We will tear them to pieces. We will give them such terrible punishments that no one in future will dare to raise a voice against Islam." In desperation you consult the Holy Scriptures and find that the mullahs are completely correct.

(Continued on p10)

24 When you question your religion you fear for your life. When you make a movie that criticises the religion of "peace" you are beheaded Islamic style.

Kasem concludes: "Those are some of the issues all believers should ponder. Thanks to the advent of INTERNET, it is now possible to make these points. We must welcome well-designed, easily navigable websites that highlight the concerns I have mentioned above and shake the minds of believers, compelling them to re-think what they always thought to be the eternal truth."

Another Faithfreedom contributor is Ali Sina, whose essay regarding the "peacefulness" of Islam is posted on the site.

"Islam is a religion of peace". This is what our politically-correct politicians keep telling us. But what is politically correct is not necessarily correct. The truth is that Islam is not a religion of peace. It is a religion of hate, of terror and of war.

A thorough study of the Koran and Hadith (biography and sayings of the Prophet) reveal an Islam that is not being presented honestly by Muslim propagandists, and is not known to the majority of the people of the world including Muslims themselves. Islam, as it is taught in the Koran and lived by Mohammed, as is reported in the Hadith, is a religion of injustice, intolerance, cruelty, absurdities, discrimination, contradictions, and blind faith. Islam advocates killing non-Muslims and abuses the human rights of minorities and women.

Islam expanded mostly by Jihad (holy war) and forced its way by killing the non-believers. In Islam apostasy is the biggest crime, punishable by death. Mohammed was a terrorist himself, therefore terrorism cannot be separated from the true Islam. Islam means submission, and it commands from its followers to submit their wills and thoughts to Mohammed and his imaginary Allah. Allah is a deity that despises reason, democracy, freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

I reject Islam because of Mohammed's lack of moral and ethical fortitude, and because of the absurdities in the Koran.

Mohammed lived a less than holy life. His lust for sex, his affairs with his maids and slave girls, his paedophilic relationship at the age of 54 with Aisha, a 9-year-old child, his killing sprees, his genocide of the Jews, his slave making and trading, his assassination of opponents, his raids and lootings of the merchant caravans and unarmed villagers, his burning of trees, his destroying water wells, his cursing and invoking evil on his enemies, his revenge on captured prisoners of war, and his torturing of them disqualify him as a sane person, let alone a messenger of God.

An unbiased study of the Koran shows that far from being a "miracle", that book is a hoax. The Koran is replete with scientific heresies, historic blunders, mathematical mistakes, logical absurdities, grammatical errors and ethical fallacies.

The Koran tells Muslims to kill the disbelievers wherever they find them (2:191), murder them and treat them harshly (9:123), slay them (9:5), fight with them (8:65), strive against them with great endeavour (25:52), be stern with them because they belong to hell (66:9) and strike off their heads; then after making a "wide slaughter among them, carefully tie up the remaining captives" for ransom (47:4).

This is how the pagans are to be treated. As for the Christians and the Jews, the order is to subdue them and impose on them a penalty tax, after humiliating them (9:29), and if they resist, kill them.

The Koran is alien to freedom of belief and recognises no other religion but Islam (3:85). It condemns those who do not believe to hellfire (5:10), calls them *najis* (filthy, untouchable, impure) (9:28), orders Muslims to fight them until no other religion except Islam is left (2:193) to slay or crucify or cut the hands and the feet of the unbelievers and to expel them from the land with disgrace.

It stresses that the disbelievers shall have a great punishment in the world hereafter (5:34) and figuratively depicts a horrendous chastisement for them stating that they will go to hell to drink boiling water (14:17), that they will be engulfed in smoke and flames like the wall and the roof of a tent and if they implore relief they will be granted water like melting brass that will scald their faces, (18:29), and that "garments of fire shall be cut and there shall be poured over their heads boiling water whereby whatever is in their bowels and skin shall be dissolved and they will be punished with hooked iron rods" (22:19).

It also prohibits Muslims to associate with their own brothers and fathers if they are non-believers (9:23), (3:28).

As for the women, the book of Allah is emphatic that they are inferior to men and if they disobey their husbands the latter have the right to beat them (4:34). Their punishment for disobeying their husbands does not end there, because after they die they will go to hell (66:10). The Koran emphasises the superiority of men by confirming that men have an advantage over the women (2:228). It not only denies women's equal right to their inheritance (4:11-12), it also regards them as imbeciles and decrees that their testimony is not admissible in the court of law unless it is accompanied by the testimony of a man (2:282). This means that a woman who is raped cannot accuse her rapist unless she can produce a male witness. Mohammed allowed the Muslim men to marry

up to four wives (although he himself had a score of them) and gave them licence to enjoy their "right-hand possessions" (women captured in wars), as many as they can capture or afford to buy, even if the woman is married before being captured (4:24).

In a world that has become technologically so advanced that even some poor nations that cannot feed themselves boast having nuclear and biological weapons, small misunderstandings can have catastrophic results. Religion has always been a major source of misunderstandings among humankind. For religion, many people are ready to die, kill and destroy everything. Islam encourages that aggressive spirit explicitly. Only a Muslim can believe that he would go to Paradise if he kills other human beings. Only a Muslim has no regard for lives that he destroys because their faith is not right.

Islam is a cult created by a psychopath. It cannot be reformed. It must be eradicated. Islam must be eradicated not because the Koran says Earth is flat or the shooting stars are missiles that Allah fires at the Jinns who climb to heaven to eavesdrop on the conversation of the exalted assembly. These stupid tales could even amuse us. Islam must go because it teaches hate, it orders killing of non-Muslims, it denigrates women and it violates human rights. Islam must go, not because it is false but because it is destructive, because it is dangerous; a threat to peace and security of humankind. With the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Islamic countries, Islam has become a serious and real threat to the survival of our civilisation.

Holland expels Muslim clerics

DUTCH Immigration and Integration Minister Rita Verdonk last month ordered three imams accused of being a threat to public order and national security out of the Netherlands.

The trio have been accused of preaching a militant anti-western message at Al Fourkaan mosque in Eindhoven, and allowing young people to be recruited for Jihad.

They will be expelled if they do not leave the country voluntarily, Verdonk has vowed.

She has given them a month in which they can challenge her order but they cannot stay in the Netherlands pending the outcome of any appeal.

The Dutch intelligence service AIVD said earlier this year that the imams "contributed to the radicalisation of Muslims in the Netherlands". The Justice Ministry claimed the imams tried to recruit, or tolerated the recruiting, of Muslims for Jihad, or holy war. They are also accused of using their sermons to urge Muslims to "isolate" themselves from the rest of Dutch society.

PRIMITIVE humans needed to explain their environment and the events that affected it and them. They did so by supposing the existence of gods. Gods were invisible beings who ordered this world, and they needed propitiation. This was achieved by adulation in the form of praise or prayer, by tribute, ie offerings of corn or treasures or by sacrifice. Sacrifice could be simply a chicken or pig – or to effect a greater degree of propitiation, humans. Captured enemies were handy, but *in extremis* it might have to be one of their own tribe – a chosen virgin, for example. Praise was, of course, accompanied by earnest pleas for assistance in all of human activities: agriculture, warfare, finding a spouse, pregnancy etc.

In the course of time these parochial little gods ceased to be local and took on the care of human activities such as war, love, and agriculture, and in this they were joined by goddesses. Eventually these became supplanted or unified into one god, eg Ra, Apollo, Jehovah, Baal or Mithras. It would be the tribe or nation's own deity and would fight for them and not for the enemy over the hill who had their own particular god. Victory in battle enabled the conquering tribe or nation to persuade the vanquished that their god had been useless; that he was a figment of their imagination and they should now adopt the true God (notice the capital letter).

This take-over by big religions of little ones did not, by any means, rest on conquest. The success of men like St. Cuthbert or St Patrick and of the Christian missionaries of the 19th-century rested on argument and persuasion. The same also applied to the spread of Islam and, more so, Buddhism. The reason was, in part, that the big religions included in their dogma moral codes that were more appealing and forceful than those of their predecessors, as well as explanations of the world that seemed more convincing.

Built into every religion from the very beginning of human reasoning was an explanation of the existence of the world. Surviving primitive religions of, for instance, Native American tribes or Australian aboriginals, indicate how bizarre some of these explanations were. The Abrahamic group of religions with their version of the creation, as described in Genesis, is slightly less absurd. So, at least, it seems to most educated 21st-century Europeans. Yet, 200 years ago this myth was taken as most certainly true, being the word of God. It is a depressing fact that creationism is still fervently believed by a tiny minority in Britain and there are, regrettably, even persons in high places who are prepared to allow its teaching 'as an alternative theory'. In the US this minority is not tiny, it is sizeable.

Realisation that the biblical tale of creation was a myth began to dawn long before Charles

Honesty and Atheism

Darwin wrote *Origin of Species*. Fossils of hitherto unknown species had let the cat out of the bag a century before, and before that astronomers were becoming increasingly puzzled as to how such a story could be true. The creationist is undaunted by the evidence. Asked how he explains the presence of dinosaurs or the finding of marine molluscs halfway up Mt. Everest, he will simply say: "God put these fossils there to test our faith!" Such an answer is risible, and it is, alas, an indication of a closed mind.

'It is not just the improbability of religion which repels me; it is the glaring fact that, throughout the last 2000 years, religious devotion has been, and still is, the cause of major conflict,' writes DENYS DROWER

Most religious people nowadays seek to accommodate the reality of geology and evolution by attributing our development and that of all other species to the continuing work of the Almighty. Here, however, we have several problems. For instance, why did God make so many mistakes – so many 'bosh shots'? Creatures are created and then, suddenly, wiped out; often very violently. A few such "mass extinctions" have occurred during the development of Homo Sapiens. If the creation of Man was the ultimate object, why did God take so long about it? The believer will provide the standard cop out – that the actions of God are often difficult to understand and must be taken on trust. God knows best.

Bound into each religion is society's moral code. Parallel to the moral code come the penalties for flouting its rules. There will be earthly punishments of course, but those which follow the miscreant's death will be infinitely worse. Faithfully observing the moral code will seldom, if ever, find reward on earth, so the religion promises the virtuous divine and everlasting pleasures after death; most religions offer the hope of continued existence after death and this is often a significant reason for being religious.

The humanist realises that following a moral

code is essential if a well-ordered and happy society is to survive. Jesus of Nazareth was by no means the first to preach "Love thy neighbour as thyself". The weakness in the humanist position which I, as a committed humanist, readily acknowledge is that there are only two sanctions for breaking the moral code: (i) censure and, if appropriate, punishment by our fellow beings when one is found out, or (ii) self condemnation through the exercise of conscience. The religious thus have an added incentive over the rest of mankind in the shape of terror of the afterlife should they transgress.

The moral code therefore becomes a reason for religion. The other motives are:

- 1 Belief in an afterlife, coupled with the concept of a Heaven and other delights.
- 2 Terror of the thought of dying.
- 3 Acceptance of thousands of years of traditional teaching.
- 4 Belief in the infallibility of holy books such as the Bible or the Koran.
- 5 Belief in myth, including miracles.
- 6 Belief in the God's love of all men.

Miracles can be defined as events that disobey the laws of nature. Such supernatural events are only recorded as miracles where they reinforce or enhance the supposed power of the deity. There is, I contend, no such thing as the supernatural. Reported supernatural occurrences fall into two categories:

A Phenomena that are true but which we cannot yet explain because our knowledge of the natural world is still incomplete.

B Phenomena, which never actually occurred but are the result of imagination, hallucination or legend.

The strongest motive for the devotee to continue in his chosen religion is usually described as "Faith". Faith has often been defined as "firm belief in concepts that are, at best, highly implausible" (or words to that effect).

I was brought up in the Christian tradition of the Church of England. While, in general applauding the moral code with which it endowed me, I could not, at quite an early age, believe the general myth I was being fed. However it is not just the improbability of religion which repels me; it is the glaring fact that, throughout the last 2000 years, religious devotion has been and still is the cause of major conflict between peoples, often of the same race or country. In addition it has been the cause of needless feelings of guilt, hatred and intolerance of others.

An essential activity in all religions is prayer. The churches often describe prayer as Worship. The primitive tradition still exists that the Almighty needs to be lauded all the time. Why such an all-powerful being should demand constant and repeated flattery is unclear.

(Continued on page 12)

Blinded by Damascus Road Dust

ONLY those who are totally devoid of tender feelings will not occasionally experience a mini-twinge of sympathy with Christian believers in the land of Paine, Darwin and Bradlaugh, writes BILL McILROY. Understandably, they clutch at any straw for support. But they will find scant comfort in an article entitled *Victorian Skeptics on the Road to Damascus*, published in *Christianity Today*.

In a prelude to his study of Victorian atheists "eventually being overwhelmed by the intellectual cogency of Christian orthodoxy", Professor Timothy Larsen asserts that believers and unbelievers alike were "stunned" by Antony Flew's change from atheism to something or other. Perhaps I lead too sheltered a life, but cannot recall encountering anyone in a state of shock over Flew's turn-around.

Professor Larsen is associate professor of theology at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. The objectives of the courses offered at this seat of learning "are to help students understand the content of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God ... to lay the foundation for a biblical view of the world and life ... to know, love and obey God, and to provide a basis for living the Christian life in this world."

Furthermore, Professor Larsen sorrowfully informs his readers that "Professor Flew has only converted to theism, not Christianity." Of course "unborn-again" theists are beyond the evangelical pale in a Christian madhouse like the United States. Certainly the God-fearing Bible-belt folk will not forgive Flew's association with the Moonies.

Professor Larsen makes exaggerated claims about "a veritable haemorrhage of conversions at the top leadership of popular organised freethought". Most of those about whom he writes could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as leaders of the freethought movement. And they returned to Christianity, rather than undergoing conversion.

F R Young had a brief flirtation with the secularist movement before becoming a Unitarian minister. J H Gordon had a religious upbringing. He became a secret unbeliever, but after losing his position on a Carlisle daily paper returned to faith. George Sexton, a "leading popular skeptic who converted" became a spiritualist, not an evangelical Christian.

Joseph Barker was the most notable (and predictable) defector on Professor Larsen's list. A vacillator all his life, he embarked on a preaching career with the Methodist New Connection. Later he became a Unitarian. After a spell with the Christian Brethren he joined the Primitive Methodists.

If Joseph Barker was a religious weathercock, he was consistent in implacable opposi-

tion to political and social reform. His *bête noir* was birth control, acceptance of which was pioneered by secularists during the last half of the nineteenth century. Once an active Chartist, he became an opponent of male suffrage. He sided with the pro-slavery States in the American civil War.

Professor Larsen makes much of minor figures who defected and returned to religion (not always evangelical Christianity). He ignores the large number who quietly abandoned religious faith. They were not being secretive by choice. Honest expression of doubt and disbelief would have meant ruination, family disruption and social ostracism.

Even in death, atheists of the Victorian era (and much later) were not safe from pious relatives and the dog-collar fraternity. Lifelong unbelievers were buried in the odour of sanctity. Tales of deathbed conversions were two a penny.

The case of naturalist and poet Richard Jefferies is but one example of religious bodysnatching. In his autobiographical *The Story of My Heart* he wrote that "the last traces and relics of superstition acquired compulsorily in childhood" passed away from his mind. When he lay dying from tuberculosis at

the age of 38, his wife read passages from the Bible at his bedside. He was too weak to respond, and in Sir Walter Besant's fanciful account (*Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, 1888) Jefferies died "listening with faith and love to the words contained in the Old Book."

When Henry Stephens Salt and others who knew Jefferies well challenged the conversion story, Besant confirmed in writing that it was fictional. He justified the deception "because it gave consolation to the widow", and confirmed that the poet's views never changed from the time he wrote *The Story of My Heart*. Despite Besant's retraction, evangelical Christians, particularly General Booth of the Salvation Army, continued to repeat the deathbed conversion falsehood. In his *History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*, John M Robertson observed: "The case of Jefferies was that of hundreds of men of letters."

Professor Larsen's vision is somewhat affected by dust from the Damascus Road. He fails to see (or admit) that the vast majority of freethinkers remained true to their principles. And he is welcome to any consolation derived from the subsequent careers of erstwhile secularists. Far more important is the scientific advance and social progress that was achieved in the teeth of Christian opposition.

Honesty and Atheism (continued from page 11)

A devout Christian is expected to believe an absurd collection of myths. Leaving aside the proposition of the virgin birth which, though extremely unlikely, is at least just possible, the resurrection and ascension really will not do. To believe this tale one must accept the concept of a Heaven into which Jesus ascended. Where exactly is this place? How big is it? He didn't just go there in spirit – he took his whole body. If humans may go there too, in what form? What about people who lived and died before Christ existed? To swallow all this nonsense the punters must be given some sort of sweetener – and they are: Redemption!

Jesus, as far as I remember, never said that he was going to die in order to expiate all the sins of everyone thereafter, providing they believed in him. This wheeze was dreamed up after his death when the principles of this new religion were being formulated by its founders. It was a splendid idea; tell everyone that if they believed in Christianity their sins would be forgiven and they would all go to Heaven!

A necessary ingredient in this extraordinary concept is that humans have a Soul. Exactly where and what the soul is and of what it consists no one has ever said. No trace of it has ever been discovered. There are those who would point to a work of art or a symphony as proof of its artist's or composer's soul. This won't do; the genius was in his brain, that magnificent organ that has developed over the centuries in many species and in the case of *homo sapiens* has put his place in front of all other creatures.

My realisation that there was no such thing as a soul confirmed my atheism. I do not assert that there cannot be some force driving the universe along. I do not begin to understand the Big Bang theory and the beginning of Time. But the God that man has created in his own image is so capricious, so irrational and so improbable that I certainly do not believe in his existence.

I mentioned above the Humanist's duty to establish and live by a moral code. A century ago the working masses in this country were, by and large, taught the Ten Commandments both at mother's knee and at school, often Sunday school. At the present time belief in Christianity throughout the country has dwindled to the point where the dos and don'ts in life are only picked up in the school playground. It is a strange and dubious form of morality that results: one that often condones theft, racism, bullying and violence. The challenge for society now is to find some way of inculcating the "love thy neighbour" attitude into children in such a way that it will stick. The new philosophy must once again be taught from the mother's knee and the primary school.

"HARDCORE" Christian fundamentalists are arbitrarily preventing internet users in schools and libraries from accessing sites they regard as "unsuitable" and "objectionable".

The activities of these sinister censors was revealed in the *Fundy Post*, an internet newsletter circulated internationally by New Zealand freethinker Paul Litterick, Secretary of the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists.

Fundy Post reported that a student at Takapuna Grammar School tried to access the anarchist website www.infoshop.org on one of his school's computers, as he had done several times before. This time, however, he found access to the site was blocked by software installed by the school and provided by a company called Watchdog.

The student made his concerns known to senior management at the school and to the anti-capitalist group Radical Youth, who did a bit of research and published the story on the Infoshop site.

The Fundy Post has been watching Watchdog for some time; it is not just at Takapuna Grammar that information is censored by this company.

Last year, Watchdog was awarded a contract by the Ministry of Education to provide internet filtering services to public schools, paid out of Ministry funds but free of charge to the schools that choose to take up the service. Not only does Watchdog have filtering services for many schools on individual contracts, it now offers a service that few could refuse: free internet filtering, courtesy of the taxpayer.

"In my other life as a Macintosh geek," wrote Paul Litterick, "I once attended a demonstration by Watchdog of their service, to staff and parents of a West Auckland primary school. It all seemed very reasonable at the time: the filtering works by comparing words and internet locations typed into school computers with a database administered by Watchdog. Fair enough, you might think; we need to protect the kids from all the nasty stuff on the INTERNET. However, as that old Roman bloke said, *quis custodiet ipsos custodes* - who guards the guardians? In this case, it seems, nobody. Watchdog maintains the database, apparently without oversight from any public body.

"So, the obvious question arises: who are the guardians? Watchdog describes itself as a company founded on Christian principles. What kind of Christians are they? Not surprisingly, they are the hardcore variety. Watchdog openly supports such organisations as Focus on the Family (the NZ arm of Dr James Dobson's anti-gay and anti-abortion organisation) and Radio Rhema, the evangelical broadcasting service.

"Ah yes, but, you might be saying, just because they have 'Christian values' does not

Who guards the guardians?

necessarily mean they are not providing a responsible filtering service. Perhaps, but it is instructive to see how these Christian gentlemen go about their work.

"A little digging around in the technical pages of the Watchdog website reveals that the filtering services are based on the R3000 technology made by 8e6 Technologies. The R3000 uses a database, organised into categories, of objectionable web sites; Watchdog uses the same categories and the same list of blocked sites.

"A little more digging reveals that the 8e6 Technologies is not just some faceless corporation. It used to be known as Log-On and it formed a partnership with the American Families Association to market internet filtering services for families.

"The AFA is one of America's leading anti-secularist, anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-everything organisations. Here's what is has to say about the software: 'The American Family Filter is built on the Christian principal of holiness and living a pure life ... American Family Filter stands apart from other blocking software, employing a uniquely Christian approach to our content filtering. We adhere to a higher standard, because American Family Filter is a ministry first and foremost, and therefore we are accountable to a Higher Authority for the product we produce.'

"Log-on's X-Stop filtering technology was the subject of a successful claim by the American Civil Liberties Union against a public library which had installed it.

The technology violated users' rights under the First, Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the United States Constitution. X-stop went far beyond the usually accepted definitions of impropriety, to block sites such as The National Journal of Sexual Orientation Law, which describes itself as devoted to 'legal issues affecting lesbians, gay men and bisexuals'; The American Association of University Women, which describes itself as a national organisation that 'promotes education and equity for all women and girls'; and the AIDS Quilt site, for people interested in learning more about HIV and AIDS. It even blocked The Religious Society of Friends, better known as the Quakers.

Log-on did not change its spots when it became 8e6 Technologies. On its website, 8e6 gives examples of the sites it blocks, which include www.infidels.org, a leading secularist information source, and the Queer Resources Directory at www.qrd.org/qrd/

"Watchdog also provides a unique New

Zealand service for its clients. Users can request that particular sites be added to the block list. As Watchdog says: 'We will respond to your request within one working day and the site will be blocked should it match our criteria'.

"Yes kids, it's fun, it's new! You can denounce websites you don't like to your internet service! If they don't like the websites either, then nobody can see them!

"What sorts of sites match Watchdog's criteria? One such is Happy Clapping Homos at www.happyclappinghomos.com/ a site run by Scott Stevens in Wellington which satirises the activities of homophobic organisations in New Zealand. Craig Young of GayNZ tried to access Happy Clapping Homos from a computer in a public-funded organisation which serves adults.

"Watchdog blocked access. The website information that Watchdog returned showed that Scott's site had been categorised under 'Gay Porn'. If you go there looking for porn of any kind, you are going to be disappointed: there is none of that heaving, thrusting, throbbing stuff going on.

"So why should it be blocked? Perhaps because Happy Clapping Homos supported the students at a Wellington school who protested against Destiny Church hiring the school hall for homophobic ranting on Sundays.

"Watchdog claims that it blocks more than 2000 new sites every day. One it does not block is the Destiny Church.

"Returning to Takapuna, one of Watchdog's standard blocking categories is Anarchy, which is described as 'information regarding militias, weapons, anti-government groups, terrorism, overthrowing of the government, killing methods, etc'.

"Infoshop, the site the Takapuna Grammar School student tried to access, does not advocate violence or provide information on how to commit violent acts, but was obviously too 'anti-government' to pass the censor.

"New Zealand education has entered the Twilight Zone. Students can use the internet for study, but can only visit sites approved by a company run by fundamentalist Christians, who comb the records of sites visited by students to find new ones to ban and who encourage denouncement of sites they have not found themselves.

"They can do this because they have helped create a climate of fear where the internet is regarded as a lurking menace; they have used this fear to make profits and to impose their bigotry on students in our schools. Thanks to the Ministry of Education, this censorship is now available free of charge.

"As that well-known anarchist and anti-Christ, Mr Johnny Rotten, once said, 'Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?'"

Dominionism

MUCH as I appreciated Carolyn Baker's article on "Dominionism" and feel that she has expressed something of the real danger that modern states face in the light of religious fundamentalism of different kinds, I feel I have to make a couple of points regarding something that Ms Baker considered very important in her opposition to Christian fundamentalism of the kind exhibited by her parents.

More than once she referred to the saying: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing", closing her article with another repetition of the saying and giving as her reference the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew or Old Testament of the Christians. My mother taught me the correct form of this saying and I have remembered it from a very young age. The correct version is: "A little learning is a dang'rous thing" and comes not from the Book of Proverbs but from Alexander Pope's long poem *An Essay in Criticism*. My mother meant it in the way Pope meant us to understand it, that one needed to learn a great deal to be less than dangerous, and constantly urged me to learn.

The Book of Proverbs has many references to knowledge, probably more than any other book in the Bible. However, knowledge there is looked upon benignly, not with the suspicion shown by Ms Baker's parents.

How important is it that we should quote the saying correctly and understand its meaning? Well, I would have to say that if we examined Ms Baker's parents closely we would find that it is likely that they feared learning rather more than knowledge. After all knowledge of all sorts is part and parcel of the average life and cannot be viewed as threatening, whereas "learning" is an entirely different matter.

My mother encouraged me to learn but didn't like it when I did eventually go to university, studied theology and rejected the simplistic religion that she had tried to inculcate in me. She then considered that it was not too little learning that was dangerous but too much. And I daresay Ms. Baker's parents would have adopted the selfsame view.

Learning is a dangerous thing for the religious mind, because learning gives freedom from superstition and delusion, those things

that religions thrive on. Eventually I learned enough to give up religion and its theology but, of course, there are things such as references to knowledge in the Book of Proverbs that one does not forget!

By the way, and I apologise for being pedantic, but Ms Baker also refers to the human "veil of tears". I'm afraid that again from an early age I learned that the correct expression is "this vale of tears", ie a reference to what some consider to be the unhappy world in which we live.

In this case Ms Baker might draw some consolation from the fact that I have observed the same error in a book by a leading atheistic Canadian philosopher. *Quelle dommage!*

DR TERRY THOMAS
Abergavenny

Religious Hatred law

FEMINISTS Against Censorship has been disturbed to see an overall lack of activism against the Government's proposed Incitement to Religious Hatred Law, despite its obvious dangers.

BEFORE writing this review, I looked in a children's bookshop to see what they had to offer on the subjects it covers. I found one biographical book on Darwin, one book on the theory of evolution, and an entire section – literally dozens and dozens of titles – on every crackpot religion under the sun.

As well as cutely illustrated retellings of religious myths and fables, there were scores of vaguely propagandistic tomes with titles like *My Muslim Community* and *I Am a Christian*. I even found a children's introduction to Judaism which not merely described but actually defined kosher butchery as that in which the animal is killed painlessly. So never doubt the need for this new, fully revised fourth edition of Barbara Smoker's 1973 textbook. It is aimed at teenagers coming to the subject via school education in comparative religion, and as such, it provides a vital service in its presentation of views that remain largely outside the curriculum.

The author begins by defining the book's title, explaining just what a humanist is and believes in, though it remains a term I would not care to use myself. For one thing, as Smoker herself notes, it invites confusion in that such Christian thinkers as Thomas More are often termed "renaissance humanists". For another it opens the door to speciesism, though Smoker is for the most part careful not to. And for still another, it sounds as though it is trying just a little too hard to offer positive qualities (ie to describe what the bearer *is*) rather than the colder but cleaner negative label "atheist" (which is content merely to say something very important about what the bearer *is not*). Smoker more than adequately addresses this distinction, and makes a good case for her

Book Review

choice; still, I'll stick with atheist.

The book proper kicks off with an historical survey, ranging from the ancient Greeks through the Renaissance and Enlightenment and on to the dawn of scientific method and the golden age of 19th-century rationalism.

MATTHEW CONIAM reviews Barbara Smoker's updated *Humanism*

Taking in all the important landmarks in science and philosophy, it is amazing the volume of ideas it manages to cram into a few easily accessible pages.

Later chapters take on thornier issues such as the argument from design, the application of modern cosmology to philosophical problems and the little matter of how humanist ideas might realistically be fitted into the school curriculum while maintaining a balanced religious education. This is followed by a brief round-up of other delusional belief systems (ghosts, astrology, mysticism and the often dangerous gibberings of the "New Age" fringe) before the vital conclusion that "reality is far more amazing than all of them put together".

The final sections consider ethics and humanist morality, showing how a rational outlook replaces religion's intolerance, inflexibility ("although all moral codes begin with a utilitarian basis, religions tend to ossify them"), and hatred with kindness, open-mindedness and willingness to adapt to changing times and circumstances.

Smoker emphasises the essential decency and humility of the humanist position and its implied duty of care to others and to the environment. This contrasts with religion's appeals to self-interest and tribalism, reliance on intimidation and fear-mongering and increasingly calamitous certainty that all natural resources (including those with their own interests and the capacity to experience terror and physical agony) are ours to do what we want with.

There's certainly little to quarrel with here in the abstract. Nonetheless these pages are, for me, the least satisfactory, since a Darwinian view of human nature shows clearly that cruelty and injustice can only escalate in a society run on strictly liberal principles. Of course those principles in themselves are morally preferable to dogmatic or repressive systems. But the humanist hope of a mass rejection of greed and aggression and consequent adoption of secular values strikes me as a pipe-dream every bit as unhelpful as religious prattling about "evil".

A glance at any night's television news should be enough to convince us that we have some very difficult choices to make, that we have put them off too long, and that an informed realism, shorn of all untenable optimism about malleable human nature, is our only hope. Humanists have to meet the challenge, because if we leave it to the religious then it's too late already.

Overall, however, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It should certainly be in every secondary school (and children's bookshop), but it also has real value to adults in search of a single volume that clearly and concisely covers all of the key questions and debates.



To begin with, of course, such a law makes no sense, since so many religious doctrines directly offend others. How could such a law be enforced?

Secondly, even if there are few prosecutions, as is likely, such a law would have a chilling effect on any serious discussion of religion as well as humorous comment. Indeed, would we even be able to question our own faith in public without fear of prosecution?

A Government minister said: "We don't expect many prosecutions. We expect this will be a line drawn in the sand that indicates to people that they can go no further: therefore their behaviour will change."

Moreover, as religion is so influential on law and society in general, the public has every right to chime in when we object to such influence.

But perhaps most importantly, this law smacks of being a political sop intended to placate Muslims who are justly concerned that the Government has involved itself in an ill-thought-out "war on terror" that increasingly has the odour of a fundamentalist right-wing crusade and which has led to the mistreatment of numerous Muslims who are being deprived of all due process in its name.

If the Government really wishes to protect and respect Muslims and other religious groups, it could begin by returning their civil liberties.

AVEDON CAROL,

Feminists against Censorship,
BM FAC London WC1N 3XX

Omnivores

I BELIEVE the issue of whether humans are natural omnivores or not is largely irrelevant. I think this commits the error of the naturalistic fallacy which says we must do what we are evolutionarily equipped to do. I submit, however, that morality boils down to a concern with the welfare of others, so whether we should eat meat should be decided on the basis of concern with the welfare of animals (as well as humans). The question is do we need to eat meat or can we afford to benefit animals by not eating them? Now one problem is that if no-one ate beef, pork, chicken or dairy products, what would happen to the animals concerned? It seems to me that their existence depends on their being eaten. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs from the point of view of the welfare of the animals any more than it would be satisfactory if there were humans whose survival depended on the existence of slave labour camps, but as far as I know there is no way round it. (Fish,

however, do not depend for their existence on being eaten by humans, so not eating fish is good for the fish).

But nature forces these cruel choices on us and it is equally unsatisfactory for animals, to eat other animals but there is nothing we can do about that.

Such is the creation of the Lord God.

ROBERT CORFIELD
West Midlands

Seeing Red

BILL McLroy's letter (*Points of View*, June) made me see red. Because he's right. We seem to be pushed around, excluded, deprived of basic rights and then asked to pay for the privilege. But writing individual letters will get us nowhere. Isn't it about time we had an organised letter writing campaign? It seems to work for religious groups. And hundreds of letters on the same subject might get a reply. A campaign for equal rights in education and a demand for secular ceremonies to include us all. Perhaps even a National Anthem for the whole nation?

DORRY LEWIS
Surrey

Lost objects

LIKE Denis Watkins (*Points of View*, June) I sometimes mislay articles – probably because I've so many of them in my dwelling. The lost article might be say, a key or a wallet, or even a pair of gloves or a hat.

When this problem occurs, I sit and think for a minute or two and commune with my inner self, thereby attuning with the cosmic mind – which knows all things – past, present and future (Some might say contacting God.)

The result is always positive, and I can always find the missing article within a very short time of my meditation – perhaps two or three minutes. I lost a portable ash tray some months ago. My intuition (inner self) told me I had left it in a public place – a cafe or a pub, but I think my intuition also told me that such an object would not be worth pursuing, and it were just as well lost to me. It hasn't come back.

I don't think any imagined picture of pope or archbishop either dead or alive could have pointed out to me how and where to find any of my lost property very quickly, if at all.

And I wouldn't have much faith in consulting such things as toasted cheese sandwiches, or moss-grown rocks for information as to the best thing to do at any given time.

FREDERICK BACON
Notts

Bad Taste bear

The Bad Taste Bear on last month's cover of the *Freethinker* was terrific, but I was surprised to read that he is known as "Christian".

I thought everybody knew his name was

"Gladly." Why else would Christians sing that jolly Easter hymn, "Gladly the cross-eyed bear"?

GRAHAM NOBLE
Fareham

Bad Taste quip

YOUR delicious variation of "give a man a fish..." (*Freethinker*, June) brought to mind another version: "Give a man fire, and he will be warm for a day. Set a man on fire and he will be warm for the rest of his life."

Evil, I know, but funny nonetheless.

OLIVER SMITH
Amsterdam

Weird creatures

NONE of my textbooks throws any light on the "fish nestlings" to which Barbara Smoker refers (June *Points of View*). What sort of creatures were they?

PUZZLED BIOLOGY STUDENT
London

Barbara Smoker replies: A hybrid created by a missing comma.

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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. No meeting in August.

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.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Summer programme available.

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. E-mail: info@devonhumanists.org.uk. Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk.

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: 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. GALHA Film Festival, July.

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

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

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

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgore Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, August 4, 8pm: Hanne Stinson: *Religious Hatred and Other Matters*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Tuesday, July 12, 4 pm. Summer Social at 36 Oakdene Gardens, Pudsey.

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

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

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, July 28, 8pm: Members' Annual General Meeting.

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.

North Yorkshire Humanist Group. Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets first Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

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, August 3, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

Sheffield Humanist Society. Information: 0114 2309754. Literature and information stall at the following events, 11 am to 5 pm. Saturday, July 9, Sharrow Festival, Mount Pleasant Park, Sitwell Road and London Road, Sheffield. Saturday, July 16, Green Fair, St Mary's Community Centre, St Mary's Gate, Sheffield.

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

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

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

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

E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. E-mail: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

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

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

E-mail: brianmeclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freesevers.com

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

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