

£1.25

The

Vol 125 No 9
September 2005

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

Hanged for being lovers in a land where religion rules

In an act of unspeakable barbarity, the authorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran executed two teenagers for the 'crime' of homosexuality – and sparked protests around the world

– see p3 report



ISNA/PHOTO: MASSHAD

British nun protests at filming of *The Da Vinci Code* – p5



Photo: Kirsty Wigglesworth, AP Photo

Sister Mary Michael, protesting outside Lincoln Cathedral

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FEMINIST debate here – what little of it there is – seems to be mainly about whether Big Brother is empowering to, or patronising of young women. Many of the same young women would rather die (metaphorically speaking) than own the title of feminist.

In other places women are dying, literally, for the feminist cause. Did Western feminists in the 1970s – so silent these days! – think they had it hard? They had to put up with scorn and ridicule from the media and hostility from conservatives who said they were out to destroy the family. But no one, so far as I can remember, was murdered.

Here are a few examples – of many – of what women in some countries are up against: in northern Afghanistan in May, three women workers at a micro-credit organisation (which gives loans to women to start up small businesses) were stoned to death by warlords; in India, a woman social worker in Madhya Pradesh state had her hands chopped off by a man furious because she was counselling villagers against child marriage.

In Pakistan, the head of the Human Rights Commission was stripped and beaten in public after she organised a series of sporting marathons in which women could compete. (One marathon was attacked by 900 men from the Islamist Alliance, armed with batons and petrol bombs. President Pervez Musharraf, who talks constantly of curbing Islamic militants, has since reversed his Government's policy of allowing mixed-gender sporting activities in public.)

In Iraq, a wave of attacks on women has

been carried out by the new insurgent groups. Said a 23-year-old university student: "They dropped acid in my face and on my legs. They cut all my hair off while hitting me in the face many times, telling me it's the price for not obeying God's wish in using the veil."

**Guest contributor
PAMELA BONE of
the Age, Melbourne,
argues that more
feminism is needed for
world security**



Those searching for the "root causes" of terrorism might do well to listen to the terrorists themselves. The leadership of al-Qaeda has said many times that its aim is to set up a global Islamic state. They want a worldwide Islamic theocracy ruled according to *sharia* law; a world in which women must conceal their faces, where they may not work or be educated, may not go in public without a male relative; a world in which women are under the total control of men. They want a world in which women do not have the option of rejecting them.

A YouGov poll published in London's *Daily Telegraph* last month found that 32 per cent of British Muslims believed that "Western society is decadent and immoral and that Muslims should seek to bring it to an end". But men were far more likely than women to say this.

As well, the proportion of Muslim men who said they felt no loyalty to Britain (18 per cent) was more than three times higher than the pro-

portion of women who said the same.

In Western countries, young Muslim women tend to do better in education than young Muslim men. Muslim women, it seems, are more likely than men to appreciate Western democracy. And men are more likely to resent it, at least partly because our laws prevent them from controlling women to the extent some – not all – would like to. An Iraqi-Australian woman I talked to thought it funny that a friend of hers could threaten her husband that she would go to the police if he attacked her. "He doesn't dare hit her now," she laughed. This same woman said Australian women have no idea how lucky they are.

There may be many reasons for the hatred Islamic extremists have for the West, but high among them is the freedom of women. The West is "decadent and immoral" because in it women are free. The Islamists fear that Western influences will trigger an Islamic feminist revolution.

Too late. The revolution has already begun. Across the Middle East women are organising and demonstrating, demanding their rights, challenging the interpretations of their religion that say they are worth less than men. At great risk to themselves, women in Afghanistan and Pakistan have recently held large protests against the widespread violence towards women that exists in their cultures. Last month brave women in Iraq were holding protests against the proposed constitution now being drafted, which assigns laws on marriage, custody and inheritance to religious authorities. In Canada it was women immigrants from Muslim countries who protested most about proposals to set up an Islamic court there.

Far from this being an era of post-feminism, what is really needed is a new wave of feminism across the world – or, if you object to that word, a new global focus on women's rights.

Of course there are Muslim women who will say they are contented under *sharia* laws, just as here there were women's groups opposed to the feminist reforms that are now taken for granted. There have always been women who collude with their own oppression and perpetuate the traditions that keep them subordinate. But they are wrong, because everywhere that women are oppressed there is backwardness and poverty.

The best thing the West can do to bring about reform in Islamic countries is to engage with the progressive movements in those countries, and while many of those progressives are men, it is women who are the main drivers of reform.

Yes, Muslim feminists are still a minority, but they are a growing minority. And they are the bravest women in the world, and deserve every support and encouragement we can give them. It is not too great an exaggeration to say the future of world security depends on them.

Dinosaurs blamed for secularising American youngsters

A BIBLICAL creationism museum in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas is attracting thousands of visitors – with more arriving by the day. The Museum of Earth History in Eureka Springs, which features several cast replicas of dinosaur fossils dug up in North America, is a joint effort of the Oklahoma-based Creation Truth Foundation and Eureka Springs' Great Passion Play Outdoor Bible Theme Park. Its founder, Dr Thomas Sharp, says he hopes the facility will help Christian parents train their sons and daughters to be "Bible-believing, kingdom-minded" young men and women.

Sharp observes that contemporary society is seeing "an incredible secularisation" of Christian youth by the time they reach age 15, and he says extensive research convinces him that the process starts in the early elementary school years. This secularisation process begins "with the spinout of the dinosaur story, because you've got death and pain and suffering being promoted by this dinosaur story before man ever walks on the scene".

Sharp believes the concept of pain and death having existed before Original Sin is in conflict with the Genesis account of creation and the fall of man, and that this conflict can have a cascading negative effect on the faith of young believers. "The dumbing down process in the culture is impacting on Christian children between the ages of three and 12, and the dinosaur icon is being used to deliberately disseminate disbelief about the authority of scripture to that age group."

Sharp points out how believers have watched the faith of younger generations being eroded by this "dinosaur icon", and other ideas put forth by secular scientists. "And, unfortunately and tragically," he says, "the greater church community and many of the families that make up the church community have not properly taken care of the problem."

According to Sharp, the Museum of Earth History is addressing the issue by presenting the creation message as never before, in both a biblical and scientific context that is garnering national attention. He notes that more than 40 international media organisations have done stories about the museum, and between 250 and 350 people visit it daily.

Hanging of two youths highlights Iran's contempt for human rights

WORLDWIDE protests took place on August 11 following the execution in the Iranian city of Marshad of two teenagers who the authorities said had sexually assaulted a 13-year-old boy, but who in fact were guilty of nothing more than being lovers.

In France, a coalition of 20 gay organizations said that the July 19 hangings of the two Iranian youths for homosexual acts "illustrates perfectly the policy of repression and homophobia which persists in Iran," and said that "the execution of two youths who were under age at the time of the 'crimes' they were charged with is itself a crime under international humanitarian law, since Iran is a signatory to the International

Conventions on Civil and Political Rights and on the Rights of the Child, which both forbid executions of minors."

The executed teenagers were Ayaz Marhoni, 18, and Mahmoud Asgari, 16. Officials claimed that they had sexually assaulted a 13-year-old boy, but reports out of Iran claim that they were lovers who had been the victim of an "honour killing" after "one of the boys' family members outed the couple." The teenagers spent more than a year in prison, and received 226 lashes before their execution.

Soon after coming to power in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini established the death penalty for homosexuality.

As the *Freethinker* was going to press, news emerged from Iran that two gay men – Farbod (or Farid) Mostaar and Ahmad Chooka – had been tried and sentenced to death for homosexuality in the Iranian city of Arak. Sources say that the men are to be killed for consensual homosexual acts with each other.

If you would like to protest against the barbarism of the Iranian regime, you can add your name to an online petition at <http://www.petitiononline.com/1021ir/petition.html>, or write to the Iranian Ambassador in London at **16 Prince's Gate, London SW7 1PT. Tel 0207 225 3000. Fax 0207 589 4440. Email info@iran-embassy.org.uk.**

Robin Cook – a principled atheist in a cabinet of Christians

FORMER Home Secretary Robin Cook, who died last month after a fall, "hid his atheism to help his career", according to a front page report in the *Observer* of August 14.

Jamie Doward, the paper's religious affairs correspondent, revealed that Cook "held back from speaking out about his deeply held atheism because he believed it would derail his hopes of resurrecting his political career".

Cook, Doward revealed, "quietly outed himself as an atheist in a recent book, but the full extent of his beliefs – and the reasons he was keen to keep them out of the public eye – have until now remained obscure."

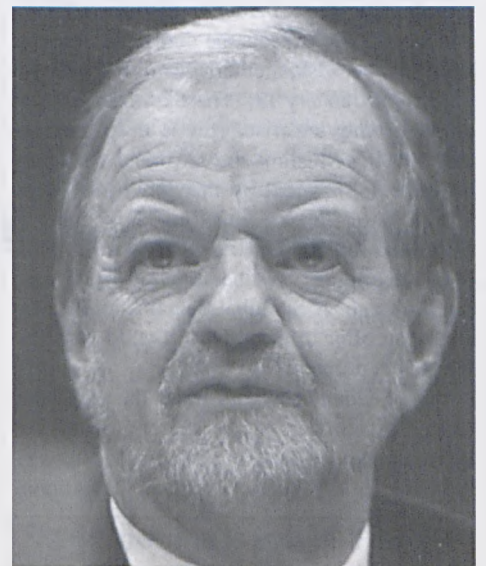
"Now it has emerged Cook held private talks with the National Secular Society, offering encouragement to the atheist organisation. But despite his admiration for the society, he declined all invitations to become an honorary associate, for political reasons."

According to the NSS's executive director, Keith Porteous Wood, "Cook said that we were

playing an essential role and 'I only wish I could do more'. He said: 'It is not just that I am very busy, but much of what I am doing is not popular with my colleagues in the party'."

That revealing explanation suggests Cook believed he was still set to return to a Labour cabinet once the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stood down. "The impression I got was that to join us openly would hamper, if not rule out, his return to high office," Keith Porteous Wood said.

Cook's reluctance to wear his atheism on his sleeve has also been interpreted as a sign he felt isolated in the Blair cabinet which is dominated by religious believers. "I was naturally disappointed, but frankly not surprised, that even someone of his seniority didn't feel able



to be open about this issue in the atmosphere of 'religious correctness' that dominates Mr Blair's administration," Keith said.

Sikh protesters wreck Slough wedding

A SIKH couple had to abandon their wedding when a group of protesters raided the Slough hotel where the event was being held and seized a "holy" book.

The 40-strong group wrestled the Guru Granth Sahib book from the priest and took it to a nearby temple.

The Sikh protesters claimed the book should not have been taken out of a temple, and to take it near alcohol and cigarettes was disrespectful. It is the second time the group has disrupted a wedding over religion, according to a BBC report. Two weeks earlier they staged a similar "confiscation raid" in Ilford, Essex.

Leaders of the group – the Respect to Guru Granth Sahib Ji Campaign – said they would not tolerate use of the book in social venues as it is defiled by contact with alcohol and cigarettes.

A Thames Valley Police spokeswoman said: "As a result of what happened there is a lot of work for the police with the Sikh community. Our community and race relations officers will be working hard in Slough in the future."

Setting the record straight

IN yesterday's *Guardian* (p3) we reported that followers of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi believe that major changes in society can be achieved with one percent of the square root of the British population practising transcendental meditation. This should have read the square root of one percent for advanced meditation, as the accompanying box made clear.

– *Corrections and Clarifications, Guardian, August 16, 2005.*



The Right Time for an Islamic Reformation

Islam is a broad church that certainly includes millions of tolerant, civilised men and women but also encompasses many whose views on women's rights are antediluvian, who think of homosexuality as ungodly, who have little time for real freedom of expression, who routinely express anti-Semitic views and who, in the case of the Muslim diaspora, are – it has to be said – in many ways at odds with the Christian, Hindu, non-believing or Jewish cultures among which they live.

“In Leeds, from which several of the London bombers came, many traditional Muslims lead inward-turned lives of near-segregation from the wider population. From such defensive, separated worlds some youngsters have indefensibly stepped across a moral line and taken up their lethal rucksacks.

“The deeper alienations that lead to terrorism may have their roots in these young men's objections to events in Iraq or elsewhere, but the closed communities of some traditional Western Muslims are places in which young men's alienations can easily deepen. What is needed is a move beyond tradition – nothing less than a reform movement to bring the core concepts of Islam into the modern age, a Muslim Reformation to combat not only the *jihadi* ideologues but also the dusty, stifling seminaries of the traditionalists, throwing open the windows to let in much-needed fresh air.

“It would be good to see governments and community leaders inside the Muslim world as well as outside it throwing their weight behind this idea, because creating and sustaining such a reform movement will require above all a new educational impetus whose results may take a generation to be felt, a new scholarship to replace the literalist *diktats* and narrow dogmatisms that plague present-day Muslim thinking. It is high time, for starters, that Muslims were able to study the revelation of their religion as an event inside history, not supernaturally above it.

“It should be a matter of intense interest to all Muslims that Islam is the only religion whose origins were recorded historically and thus are grounded not in legend but in fact. The Koran was revealed at a time of great change in the Arab world, the seventh-century shift from a matriarchal nomadic culture to an urban

patriarchal system. Mohammed, as an orphan, personally suffered the difficulties of this transformation, and it is possible to read the Koran as a plea for the old matriarchal values in the new patriarchal world, a conservative plea that became revolutionary because of its appeal to all those whom the new system disenfranchised, the poor, the powerless and, yes, the orphans.

“Mohammed was also a successful merchant and heard, on his travels, the Nestorian Christians' desert versions of Bible stories that the Koran mirrors closely (Christ, in the Koran, is born in an oasis, under a palm tree). It ought to be fascinating to Muslims everywhere to see how deeply their beloved book is a product of its place and time, and in how many ways it reflects the Prophet's own experiences.

“However, few Muslims have been permitted to study their religious book in this way. The insistence that the Koranic text is the infallible, uncreated word of God renders analytical, scholarly discourse all but impossible. Why would God be influenced by the socio-economics of seventh-century Arabia, after all? Why would the Messenger's personal circumstances have anything to do with the Message?

“The traditionalists' refusal of history plays right into the hands of the literalist Islamofascists, allowing them to imprison Islam in their iron certainties and unchanging absolutes. If, however, the Koran were seen as a historical document, then it would be legitimate to reinterpret it to suit the new conditions of successive new ages. Laws made in the 7th century could finally give way to the needs of the 21st. The Islamic Reformation has to begin here, with an acceptance of the concept that all ideas, even sacred ones, must adapt to altered realities.

“Broad-mindedness is related to tolerance; open-mindedness is the sibling of peace. This is how to take up the ‘profound challenge’ of the bombers. Will Sir Iqbal Sacranie and his ilk agree that Islam must be modernised? That would make them part of the solution. Otherwise, they're just the ‘traditional’ part of the problem.”

Is Rushdie right? Roy Saich, of the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist group, said: “In religious terms perhaps he is, but is it necessary to concede that the great majority of human beings need the ‘opium’ of religion and cannot accept a naturalistic view of life? Humanists continue to hope that people can be persuaded to be both sensible and humane. Ending ‘near-segregation’ may help achieve that, but more ‘faith’ schools and giving religion ‘special status’ in society works against our efforts. Why should ‘governments and community leaders’ promote even a reformed Islam? Are humanist beliefs not worth considering by everyone?”

IN an article in the *Times* of August 7, the renowned novelist Salman Rushdie said: “When Sir Iqbal Sacranie, head of the Muslim Council of Britain, admitted that ‘our own children’ had perpetrated the July 7 London bombings, it was the first time in my memory that a British Muslim had accepted his community's responsibility for outrages committed by its members.

“Instead of blaming US foreign policy or ‘Islamophobia’, Sacranie described the bombings as a ‘profound challenge’ for the Muslim community. However, this is the same Sacranie who, in 1989, said that ‘Death is perhaps too easy’ for the author of *The Satanic Verses*. Tony Blair's decision to knight him and treat him as the acceptable face of ‘moderate’, ‘traditional’ Islam is either a sign of his government's penchant for religious appeasement or a demonstration of how limited Blair's options really are.

“Sacranie is a strong advocate of Blair's much-criticised new religious-hatred bill, which will make it harder to criticise religion, and he actually expects the new law to outlaw references to Islamic terrorism. He said as recently as January 13, ‘There is no such thing as an Islamic terrorist. This is deeply offensive. Saying Muslims are terrorists would be covered [ie, banned] by this provision.’ Two weeks later his organisation boycotted a Holocaust remembrance ceremony in London commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz 60 years ago. If Sir Iqbal Sacranie is the best Blair can offer in the way of a good Muslim, we have a problem.

“The Sacranie case illustrates the weakness of the Blair government's strategy of relying on traditional, essentially orthodox Muslims to help eradicate Islamist radicalism. Traditional

SPES Annual Reunion 2005

THIS event takes place on Sunday, September 25, at 2.30pm at the Conway Hall.

The Keynote Speaker will be Ms Azam Kamguian of the Committee to Defend Women's Rights in the Middle East.

She is to speak on Secularism and Women's Rights in the Middle East.

Kindred humanist organisations will bring greetings.

All secularists/humanists/friends are welcome. There will be refreshments and entertainment.

Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL
0207 242 8034/7

Email: library@ethicalsoc.org.uk

Organised religion heads for oblivion in the UK

RELIGIOUS belief is declining faster than attendance at services in the UK, according to a new study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which found that parents' beliefs, practices and affiliations have the biggest impact on children.

The catchphrase "believing without belonging" – found in much European research over the past decade, and endlessly repeated by religious propagandists – is wrong, at least in its usual interpretation, said a team led by Dr David Voas of the University of Manchester.

Far from religious belief being relatively strong and robust, fewer people now have real faith than passively "belong" to a religion. While ethnic minorities are increasingly important to religious life in Britain, the trend for them is similar, albeit from a much higher starting point. However, one factor which might yet very slightly slow the decline, says the report, is that religious parents have more children than others.

Unlike most previous research, the study looks at people over a 14-year time period and includes detailed information from parents, partners and children. It found that when it comes to religion, parents are the most important influence. The report argues that institutional religion now has a "half-life" of one generation. In other words:

- Two religious parents have roughly a 50-50 chance of passing on their beliefs;
- One religious parent does only half as well as two together;
- Two non-religious parents will successfully pass on their lack of faith.

However, whatever the parents' beliefs, roughly one child in 12 (particularly girls) will opt for a denomination not adhered to by either parent. And women in their 20s are more likely than men to attend church, particularly when only one of their parents did the same. Dr Voas said: "How children are brought up has an enormous impact on whether they will identify with a religion. Once people become adults, their religious affiliation is less likely to be affected by influences around them."

His team also found that even where evidence appears to demonstrate that religious allegiance has been passed down from one generation to another, this conceals a lot of differences among individuals. He said: "Many people start or stop regular church attendance but the chance of churchgoers stopping is much greater than the possibility of non-worshippers starting to go to church."

Secularisation has also changed the environment in which children are raised, says the report, reducing the likelihood of their socialising with religious people.

Among those with non-traditional beliefs, those people most likely to call themselves spiritual are those who once went to church, often only as children. Older people mostly describe themselves as religious, though not necessarily orthodox, whilst the middle-aged see themselves as spiritual rather than religious. Younger people most often hold their beliefs as part of a view of life which they do not even recognise as spiritual.

The survey found that the importance of belief in God fell by 5.3 percent to 32.5 percent between 1991 and 1999. This compared with a fall of 3.5 percent in the proportion of people who attended church services over the same period, and a 2.9 percent decrease in the proportion who said they were affiliated to a particular religion.

A Church of England spokesman rubbished the findings, saying: "Such claims are clearly not based on Church of England statistics that show a small but significant increase in average Sunday, weekly and monthly church attendance.

"Dr Voas seeks to undermine the accepted theory of large numbers of people believing but not belonging. Nothing in his report, how-

ever, alters the fact that 72 per cent of the population said they were Christian in the latest Census, and more than 77 per cent claimed a religious affiliation."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, said that "the C of E spokesman had claimed, rather desperately, that the study had not released 'proper evidence' and 'there is nothing to back up the claims. Our recent statistics show that congregations are actually increasing'. I doubt if this classic 'shoot the messenger' outburst will have impressed the author of the report, Dr Voas. He is a leading academic in this area and his work is scrupulously researched and referenced, and widely published in respected journals.

"A Home office report shows religion to be now only the ninth most important attribute of people's identity and two major surveys have shown that two-thirds of secondary school children identify themselves as agnostic or atheist. If, despite this, and after 60 years of decline in attendance in their own pews, the Church of England 'reacted with disbelief at the suggestion that faith was declining', as was reported, I leave readers to draw their own conclusions about their judgment."

Da Vinci Code film horrifies Christians

CONTROVERSY over Dan Brown's best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* has increased considerably since filming of the book began in Europe this summer.

The film, starring Tom Hanks and Audrey Tatou, has been attacked by Catholic and other Christian groups, and in England Sister Mary Michael, a 61-year-old Roman Catholic nun, prayed for 12 hours in protest outside historic Lincoln Cathedral.

That's where Hanks and director Ron Howard were shooting the adaptation of a novel whose plot questions much of Christian theology.

"When I die," Sister Mary Michael said, "and I have to stand before almighty God – as everyone else will, whether they believe it or not – and he says to me, 'What have you done to defend me?' I can say, 'Well, I tried to come forward at Lincoln Cathedral.'"

The scene was shot at Lincoln Cathedral rather than Westminster Abbey because Abbey officials refused the film-makers' request to use their location. They cited the book's "contentious and wayward religious and historic suggestions". So film crews at Lincoln Cathedral recreated Westminster's elaborate screen, the altar, and the grave of Isaac Newton.

Lincoln officials decided it was worth the increased tourism, not to mention a reported donation of £100,000 from the makers of the film.

"It's given us an opportunity to talk to peo-

ple about *The Da Vinci Code*, about Westminster Abbey and about Lincoln, and sometimes about the faith that we represent," said John Campbell, an official at Lincoln Cathedral.

The Da Vinci Code has two notable characteristics – record-breaking sales of more than 25 million books worldwide in 44 languages, and a plot that has been condemned by Catholic leaders as heretical.

"It could popularise even further certain distortions of the Christian faith which we think appear in the book," said Monsignor Frank Maniscalco of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Those include "the fallacies about Jesus' life, questions over his divinity, and that he has descendants".

• See William Harwood's review of *The Da Vinci Code* on page 12.

Quotable quote

"MAN is the religious animal. He is the only religious animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbour as himself – and cuts his throat, if his theology isn't straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother's path to happiness and heaven."

– Mark Twain

Religion on Women

SEVERAL years ago, Martin Marty and others edited a prestigious series of important studies, published by Chicago University Press, on the rise of fundamentalisms across world religions. These books saw striking resemblances between the wave of fundamentalisms that were appearing in the Catholic and Protestant Rights in the West, in various Muslim fundamentalisms, in right-wing Judaism – particularly in Israel – and rightist forms of Hinduism, Confucianism and other Asian religions. All these movements seemed to have in common a rejection of modernity and efforts to re-establish the public role of religion, if not religious states, to counter what was seen as evil secularity, with its lack of established public values.

What the Marty books overlooked was perhaps the most striking similarity of all between these fundamentalist movements: namely their efforts to re-establish rigid patriarchal control over women and their hostility to women's equality, autonomous agency and right to control their own sexuality and fertility. This hostility to feminism or women's autonomous agency, particularly in sexuality and reproduction, links all these right-wing groups together. One can cite the extraordinary diatribe of Pat Robertson, who in a 1990 fundraising letter, opined that "feminism makes women leave their husbands, kill their children, destroy capitalism, practice witchcraft and become lesbians." Even the current Bush administration responded less-than-favorably when Jerry Falwell, backed up by Pat Robertson, suggested that the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon represented God's punishment of America for allowing the existence of such evils in this country as feminism, gays, abortion providers and even the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

The Vatican is hardly less obsessed with women's equality and reproductive rights, as the epitome of evil modern secularity and the cause of civilization's demise. At the 1994 UN conference on Population and Development at Cairo, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing, and the five-year follow-up meetings to these two conferences, the Vatican distinguished itself by tireless efforts to oppose any language that would declare that women's rights are human rights and that women's autonomous decision-making about their own sexuality and reproduction were integral elements of such rights.

Muslim fundamentalism not only swept Afghanistan with the Taliban, but has major influence in Islamic states from Algeria and Egypt to Iran and Pakistan, and has made war on women the major center of their campaign against modernity and what they regard as irreligion. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, women were banned from even primary school

education, paid work and virtually any public presence. Even the windows of their houses had to be blacked out lest they be viewed going about their housework by men looking in from outside.

Why this war on women in the name of true religion? Women seem to have become the scapegoats for male fears of loss of control in society. In a world where anonymous global forces control and decide the economies of nations, control over women seems to become the place where men can imagine that they are reclaiming order against chaos, their dignity, honor and security in a world where there is little available on the macro level. With life out of control for many men, rigid control of the women in their homes enables them to imagine that they are still in charge.

But such a war on women is totally counterproductive from the point of view of any real emergence from poverty and underdevelopment for those impoverished societies most prone to such fundamentalist takeovers. Studies have long shown that women's development is absolutely key to betterment of society as a whole. The education of women is statistically closely linked with smaller families, better health and education of children, and emergence from poverty. An Egyptian study found that if women with no education had finished primary school, poverty would have been reduced by one-third. UN agencies have duplicated this study in several other countries.

Economic stability, political moderation and democratic order are closely linked with the higher education and public participation of women. The attack on women has every likelihood of increasing the gap between poverty and wealth, between the underdeveloped and the developed worlds, that fuels the anger of the fundamentalist backlash but is misguidedly channeled into attacks on women, not to mention attacks on public buildings such as the World Trade Center.

For me, one of the areas of particular concern is the potential for alliances between right-wing religious movements, one might say "ecumenical deals" of convenience between Christians – Protestant and Catholic – Jews, Muslims and others, all of whom make fallacious connections between criticisms of modern injustices and anxieties over loss of values with an effort to turn back the clock on women's emergence as equal human beings in society.

One can cite various efforts to make such alliances. In the US, some right-wing Focus on the Family-type Protestants have long hoped for an alliance with conservative Catholics. Such an alliance has been impeded by the very different authority structure of the two religious groups and the not-too-distant memory among Catholics of the anti-Catholicism of

fundamentalist Protestantism. Before September 11, George Bush clearly saw the placating of conservative Catholic demands against birth control, abortion, foetal tissue use and other such sex- and gender-related issues as the way to cement support for his next presidential election bid. The Bush administration courted and was photographed surrounded by smiling Catholic prelates.

American theologian and historian, ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER, spells out the dangers to women of religious fundamentalism



Another such ecumenical deal was sought by the Vatican with conservative Muslims at the Cairo Population and Development conference in 1994. Hoping to create a common Catholic-Muslim front against birth control, abortion, women's equality and recognition of diverse forms of the family, the Vatican adopted rhetoric that pilloried Western feminists as assaulting the cultural traditions of the Third World. In this effort, the Vatican posed as a defendant of cultural pluralism against Western cultural hegemony, an unlikely role given its own history as the epitome of Catholic or universalist religio-cultural hegemony.

This alliance fizzled out partly because Muslims had reason to doubt the Vatican's sudden support of cultural pluralism, and also due to the somewhat different agendas of Muslims in population and development issues. Although some Muslims share a desire to subordinate women to an authoritarian male-dominated family and curb what they see as Western sexual promiscuity among women and youth, they are not against birth control either in principle or in terms of contraceptive methods. Although generally against abortion, they adhere to a medieval Aristotelian view that the foetus is not ensouled until the 120th day of gestation and thus early abortion is not

Women's War

Women

murder. Oddly enough, this is a position that was shared by medieval Catholics and was changed only in modern times in favor of the strangely disincarnate view of the fertilized egg as a full human being.

But such right-wing Christian and Muslim alliances against women's development and reproductive rights are still possible. Despite the horrendous treatment of women by the Taliban, George Bush recently suggested that the "Alliance against Terrorism" should not make women's rights a central issue since this would "offend Muslims".

Right-wing "ecumenical deals" between Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims often employ rhetoric that draws on a post-modern critique of liberalism, modernity and universalism in order to serve a reactionary, pre-modern agenda. One finds an appeal to cultural relativism or pluralism to thwart efforts to establish a standard of universal human rights, particularly when these explicitly include women. Post-colonial resistance to Western colonialism, which historically denigrated the traditional cultures of colonized regions such as the Middle East, Africa and Asia, is evoked to suggest that any principles of universal human rights are cultural colonialism and Western hegemonic dominance. Feminism is billed as a purely Western, and of course culturally decadent, movement that is foreign to the cultural traditions of Africa, Asia or the Middle East.

Western liberals, who themselves invented and support such post-modern critique of Western cultural hegemony, are often at a loss to respond when such principles are used against them to support pre-modern social patterns that subordinate women. As I have mentioned, the Vatican made an appeal to exactly this kind of anti-Western rhetoric in its bid for a Catholic-Muslim alliance at Cairo. Such right-wing ecumenical deals typically feature males of both religious cultures shaking hands with each other, excluding women of either group from speaking for themselves. Western feminists are demonized, while women of the non-Western culture are pictured as vulnerable innocents liable to corruption from said evil Western feminists.

I had an experience of such an appeal to the myth of sacrosanct traditional culture to reject feminism ten years ago when I was teaching and lecturing on feminist theology in South

Africa. At one of the Bantustan universities, an African Anglican priest in elegant cleric dress and speaking the Queen's English rose to declare that feminism could not be accepted in Africa "because it is against our culture".

"And culture cannot be challenged," he declared in ringing tones. Earlier one of the African women had warned me against such an argument and given me a good response. I repeated her words, saying to the African priest, "Well, white racism is a part of white culture. Does that mean it can't be challenged or changed?"

This demonization of feminism as Western totally ignores the fact that, for more than two decades, women of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East have been creating their own contextualized forms of feminism and speaking about their rights and demands in their own voices. This globalization of feminisms was evident at the Beijing world conference on women, where representatives of women's movements from every nation gathered and networked with each other. This kind of networking across women's movements in every country and culture could well represent the alternative to the kinds of ecumenical deals of men against women that are being hatched by the Vatican and right-wing Protestants and Catholics.

Religion Counts is an initiative that aims at a progressive ecumenical alliance between Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and supports women's equality and reproductive rights. It met in Rome in January 1999 and issued the "Rome Statement on the International Conference on Population and Development", which sought to explore common principles on women, sexuality and reproductive rights across the world's major religions.

The United Nations and international media too often pay attention only to right-wing or fundamentalist religion. The media typically assumes that feminist Christians or feminists in other religions are marginal and don't really represent their own religious traditions. It is right-wing men in leadership positions who are treated as the authentic spokespersons for the religious tradition. Thus religion is unwittingly portrayed only in its conservative or fundamentalist expressions against secularism, thus reinforcing the right-wing religious polarity of religious values versus secular lack of values. Religion Counts seeks to mobilize and ally the progressive voices across the religious traditions and to make these progressive voices players in public culture and decision-making. This has remained a very small initiative, but I think it represents an important alternative that needs to be cultivated.

Secularity is being portrayed as a failed modern experiment that has resulted only in valueless anomie. I think this is far too simple.

There were and are in secular liberalism valuable principles that need to be vindicated, but that is the subject for another time. For the moment a key way to combat the claim that religiousness is authentically represented only by patriarchal, misogynist religious traditions is to vindicate the progressive, egalitarian principles within religious traditions themselves. This is essentially what Christian and Jewish feminisms have been doing for the last 30 years. Christian and Jewish feminists have mined their own traditions to show their potential for an egalitarian reading. Muslim feminists today are also developing a similar strategy of pro-women, pro-egalitarian re-reading of the core religious values. For Muslim feminists, such as Riffat Hassan, a Pakistani leader of Muslim feminism, the Koran is essentially an egalitarian scripture. Hassan and other Muslim feminists do close readings of the Koran to show that mistreatment of women, their segregation, imposition of the veil, and denial of education, political and business involvement is nowhere found in the Koran. Rather these traditions come from the incorporation of Arab or other local customs. In some cases the arguments for women's inferiority were actually imported from Christianity.

Hassan, for example, has done her major work on the texts for the creation of humanity, male and female, in the Koran. She has shown that the Koran lacks the tradition of Eve's creation from Adam's rib and her sin as the cause of the Fall. These concepts do not exist in the Koran, which contains only the story of Genesis I of the creation of the human, male and female, equally and at the same time. The stories of Adam's rib and the apple were imported into later Islamic commentaries from neighboring Christianity and, as in Christianity, used to argue for women's inferiority and punishment. In a tradition that sees the Koran as the norm for what is truly Islamic, such arguments carry weight.

These more progressive and feminist voices of Islam need to be supported. These are the movements that not only can allow Western anti-Muslim bigotry to see a different, more progressive face of Islam, but also, even more importantly, can allow Muslim cultures themselves to embrace democratic, equal-rights agendas as compatible with Islam, rather than as humiliating Western cultural impositions. Interestingly enough, the current anti-terrorist campaign, with all its gross errors, has done one thing right. It has realized that if it is to build a Western-Muslim alliance, it cannot simply demonize Islam. It needs to publicize the positive, progressive voices of Islam. Thus most Americans have probably read and heard more about the diversi-

Continued on page 10

THE play is set in the Supreme Court of Human Rights in the Hague. The characters are: The defendants, God the Father, Jesus, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.

The Judge.

The Prosecuting lawyer.

The Defence Lawyer.

Judge: Will defendants one, two and three please stand up. You are standing before the Supreme Court of Human Rights.

To the charge of "Imposing cruel and unusual punishments on Adam and Eve" what do you plead?

The defendants: Not guilty.

Judge: To the charge of "Imposing cruel and unusual punishments on the whole of humanity, without a trial" what do you plead?

The defendants: Not guilty.

Judge: To the charge of "Creating and profiting from the international human slave trade" what do you plead?

The defendants: Not guilty.

Judge: To the charge of "Genocide" what do you plead?

The defendants: Not guilty.

Judge: Please all sit down.

Short pause:

Judge: Will the leader of the Trinity stand up?

God remains seated, looking around to see if anyone else stands up.

Judge: Will defendant number one stand up? Will the others remain seated?

God stands up in the dock as Jesus.

PL: Please state your name and occupation.

Jesus: My name is Jesus Christ. I am a member of the Trinity.

PL: For the benefit of the court, what is the Trinity? Is this the name of a gang?

Jesus: The Trinity will forever be a mystery to you. I am the Son of God – the word made flesh.

PL: Please look at the document I am holding in my hand. Do you recognise this?

Jesus: Yes, it is the Bible.

PL: Your honour, I would like to circulate copies of this document.

Waves The Holy Bible at the audience, and circulate copies to the cast.

PL: Has this document accurately recorded your works and teachings?

Jesus: Yes. It is true in every detail.

PL: Are there any phrases or sentences which you have written in this document where you claim that you are God?

Jesus: No, but...

PL: Thank you. Your honour, I am finished with this defendant.

Judge: Please sit down. Will defendant number two stand up?

PL: Please state your name and occupation.

God the Holy Ghost: My name is Holy Ghost. I too am a member of the Trinity.

PL: What is the Trinity.

God the Holy Ghost: Only through redemption will you have the spiritual enlightenment of the Trinity. Until then, you must accept that the Trinity will remain a mystery.

PL: I am finished with this defendant your honour.

Judge: Please sit down. Will defendant number three stand up?

God sits down and stands up again – grandly as God the Father.

PL: Please state your name and occupation.

God the Father: I am God the Father.

PL: You are really the senior member of the Trinity, aren't you?

GF: Yes. I have been a member for ... an eternity.

PL: How many members are there in the Trinity organisation?

DL: Your honour, I object. The Trinity is a sacred mystery which must not be questioned.

Judge: Are you objecting to the Trinity being questioned in this court, or to our questioning our understanding of the thing we call the Trinity?

DL: I object to this line of questioning. We should treasure the mysteriousness of the Trinity as a test of our faith through which we can be redeemed.

Judge: In this court, the defendants have the right to remain silent. Therefore I cannot see any reason for preventing any lines of questioning. Please continue.

PL: Thank you, your honour, I am very interested in the rather large number of "mysteries" which appear to surround the accused. How many members are there in the Trinity organisation?

God the Father: One and Three.

PL: One? Three? Four? Thirteen? Which is it?

God the Father: One and Three. Believe this and enter the kingdom of heaven – your soul will be filled with spiritual understanding of the Trinity. Otherwise go to hell.

Judge: Defendant number three, I must ask you to show this court some respect.

God the Father: Respect is due to him who created all of you, and all this land, the seas, the skies and the stars. Bow down before your God and pray for your redemption.

Judge: Defendant number three, you will be held in contempt of court if you do not answer the questions being put to you.

PL: Do you recognise the document I am holding in my hand?

God the Father: Yes, it is the Bible.

PL: Has this document accurately recorded your works and teachings?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: In Chronicles and Kings, do you state that God would never dwell on earth?

God the Father: Yes I did write that, but...

PL: In Genesis, do you state that God would

God o

never become flesh?

God the Father: Yes, but...

PL: So, you stated clearly on at least three occasions that God would never become man. That is, you have repeatedly ruled out the possibility that Jesus Christ is a member of the Trinity.

God the Father: To talk about the Trinity ...

PL: Yes or no? Did you, on at least three occasions, state that God would never become man? Yes or No?

God the Father: Yes, but...

PL: Thank you for making this clarification

A short play by M

to the court that Jesus Christ is not a member of the Trinity after all.

Judge: I wish to remind the court that Jesus Christ is on trial for very serious crimes against humanity, irrespective of his status within the Trinity. When all the evidence has been presented and considered, judgement will be passed on the basis of the totality of that evidence. However, I am minded to pass separate judgements on the three defendants, now that the status of the Trinity has been called into question.

PL: Your honour, I wonder if the Trinity would like to consider finding a new name for their organisation to reflect their reduced membership? The Duplicity, perhaps!

Judge: Order in the court. I will not tolerate such flippancy. This is a very serious case, and you will show this court some respect.

Short pause.

PL: Did you authorise the expulsion from Eden, causing a flood of refugees all over the earth?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: What was the crime which led to this expulsion?

God the Father: Stealing apples.

PL: Who was charged with this alleged crime?

God the Father: Adam and Steve – no, sorry, Adam and Eve. I only know their Christian names.

PL: Did Adam and Eve receive sentences for their alleged crimes?

God the Father: Yes, they both received double sentences – exile from Eden, followed by death.

PL: Do you think that expulsion from their homeland followed by the death sentence is a just punishment for stealing apples?

on Trial

God the Father: My laws must be obeyed, and transgressors must be punished.

PL: Were any other people put on trial for this offence?

God the Father: No.

PL: Did any other people nevertheless receive the same punishment?

God the Father: Yes – their children.

PL: And *their* children?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: The whole of humanity?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: Why did you also punish all the generations of humanity who were yet to be born at

Malcolm Barnes

the time of the apple-stealing incident?

God the Father: Your minds are too limited to be able to understand, but with my grace, you will see it all very clearly in my kingdom.

PL: Remember you are now in The Hague, on trial under international law. However, the court will be very interested to hear the details of some of your actions carried out according to the laws of your kingdom.

Short pause.

PL: The section Genesis says we were created man in your own image. Since this cannot possibly mean that you are less than all-powerful, you must have intentionally included a design limitation into human beings.

God the Father: I did not want human beings to understand everything. I wanted humanity to be mystified by the truth, so that they can either have faith in me and all that is true, or go to hell.

PL: In Mark you say: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils;... They shall take up serpents and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them." Is this your teaching?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: In James, do you say "And the prayer of faith shall save the sick"?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: Have any people believed these teachings, and having taken poison or handled snakes, suffered from severe ill health and even death when your promise was not fulfilled?

God the Father: My promise will always be fulfilled when prayer and faith are fervent and strong enough.

PL: Has anyone died?

God the Father: Yes. Many have died. Their faith was not strong.

Short pause.

PL: Did you create heaven and earth, and all things in these places?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: Including all men and all women?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: Were they all created to be equal?

Short pause.

God the Father: I love all my children equally.

PL: Was each person created with a free will?

God the Father: Yes.

PL: Are there many followers of your teachings?

God the Father: There are multitudes that have exercised their free will to believe my word, and they will enter the kingdom of heaven.

PL: I would like to read some passages from your document: "...none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up everything he has" is taken from Luke. Does this mean that, according to your laws, nobody is permitted to own any property of any description?

God the Father: That is true, ownership of property is against my teachings. Only poor people will enter my kingdom.

PL: Wouldn't everyone then become poor? How would everyone survive?

God the Father: They should become poor and become beggars. Prayerful beggars would be at my mercy, and they shall enter my kingdom.

PL: A person can only beg if there are people to beg from. Can you guarantee a supply of sinful rich people who have not yet given away their wealth?

God the Father: Hmm.

PL: I beg your pardon? I did not quite hear your answer.

God the Father: My laws are rather difficult to obey, so I suppose there will always be quite a few sinners around.

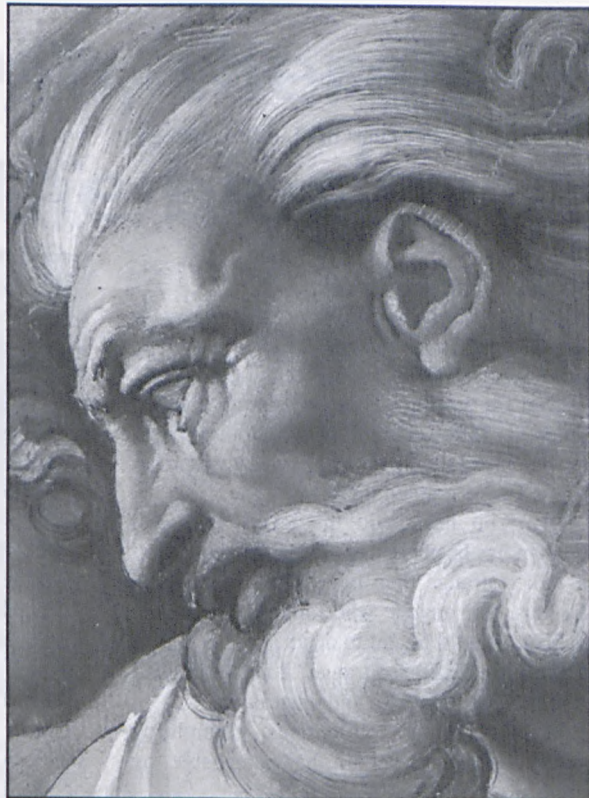
PL: Please tell the court – do a large percentage of your followers actually obey this law and give away all their wealth?

God the Father: No, this is rather a difficult law for most of them.

Short pause. PL waves the Bible around gently while thinking about his next move.

PL: Just listen to this passage: "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.... Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?" This appears in Matthew and Luke. What is this supposed to teach us?

God the Father: That your future is entire-



ly in my hands. Your plans and schemes amount to nothing against my will. I will decide whose children will eat and whose will starve. If I decide that your children should starve, you must still bow down before me and worship me.

PL (sounding unconvinced): Indeed! And hate everyone else?

Judge: Please clarify your question to the defendant, and the court.

PL bows to the judge:

PL: Please explain the meaning of this, taken from Luke:

"If any man come to me, and not hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

God the Father (looking agitated and cornered): This is the word of God. It is not your place to understand my teachings. You should follow my teachings to gain moral and spiritual strength. Then you can meditate on the mysteries and get closer to heaven.

PL: Here are some other rules from Deuteronomy and Exodus:

- Money cannot be lent at interest to your brother, only to foreigners.

- A man must marry and have relations with his dead brother's wife.

- A seducer must marry an unengaged virgin whom he seduces.

- A raped, unengaged virgin must marry her rapist and they can never divorce. (Deuteronomy, Chapter 22 Verses 28-29).

Pauses to let this sink in.

- A garment composed of wool and linen

(Continued on p10)

can't be worn.

• One's nation can lend to other nations but not borrow from them.

• Bastards can't enter the Lord's congregation.

• First-born children should sometimes be sacrificed to the Lord. (Exodus, Chapter 22 v 29).

Pauses to let this sink in.

PL: In your opinion, do these laws preserve the human rights of illegitimate children, first-born children, rape victims and women in general?

God the Father: These laws were made to guide my followers into the kingdom of heaven. Humans should be grateful for whatever rights I have granted them.

PL: You have said that every man and woman has been created with a free will. Isn't it rather strange then to require, as stated in Exodus, that anyone who fails to observe the Sabbath should be put to death?

God the Father: Strange? I am God and I decide what is strange and what is not.

PL: According to Leviticus, committing homosexual acts should be punishable by death.

God the Father: Yes.

PL: Have any homosexuals been sentenced to death?

God the Father muses in a state of puzzlement:

Yes, there are many virtuous societies where death is the standard punishment. But for some reason, it never seems to solve the problem. There are always more homosexuals coming into this world, and they always seem to fornicate in the holiest of places.

Short pause.

PL: Do you recall the section of Leviticus, Chapter 25 Verses 44-46?

God the Father: Of course I do, this is my word.

PL: I would like to read this for the benefit of the court your honour.

Judge sleepily assents by waving his hand.

PL: Thank you, your honour. "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can will them to your children as inherited property and you can make them slaves for life." Are these your words as written in Leviticus?

God the Father: Yes, this is my word.

PL: Now, I will read this passage from Leviticus: "If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a result, he must be punished, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property." Are these your

words?

God the Father: Yes, this is my word.

PL: A passage is from Joel goes: "I will sell your sons and daughters to the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, a nation far away." Are these passages from your Bible true?

God the Father: The Bible is holy and true.

PL: So there we have it. The court can see quite clearly that you single-handedly created a regulated market for slave trafficking, and then actively took part in this slave trade yourself. I will now read...

Judge: Everyone in the court has had ample opportunity to read this document. Are you going to ask the court to listen to the whole Bible?

PL: This is the last extract, your honour.

Judge: Carry on.

PL: Please read out this section, which, I would like the court to note, is taken from 1 Samuel, Chapter 6 Verse 19.

God the Father (*talking slowly and with shame*): "The Lord smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the Ark of the Lord, even he smote of the people 50,070: and the people lamented, because the Lord had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter."

Short pause.

PL: Your honour, that is my case.

Judge: Let us hear the case for the defence.

DL: My clients have informed me that they do not recognise this court, and will not participate in the remainder of this trial.

Judge: The court will interpret this as a request to remain silent. This is the defendants' right according to international law. Will the

defendants stand up to hear judgement?

God stands up.

Judge: Looking at the evidence, if we see this document called "The Bible" as being a true and accurate account of human history, I am sure that everyone would agree that the actions of the author are a catalogue of unspeakable, vile, disgraceful and degrading actions against humanity. The death, destruction, suffering and poverty caused by the perpetrator exceed the combined excesses of Caligula, Vlad, Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot.

However, it has become apparent during this trial that:

• Jesus Christ is not a member of the Trinity.

• The Holy Ghost had only a very marginal role in these actions. The Holy Ghost was, for the most part, a silent participant fluttering in the wings.

• God the Father is the main force behind the very devious and convoluted Trinity syndicate, and it is he who must take responsibility for the massive damage inflicted upon humanity over thousands of years.

Will the defendants prepare to hear judgement?

Jesus Christ, the court finds you innocent. You are free to leave the court. The court would be happy for you to get a proper job.

Holy Ghost, the court finds you innocent. You are free to fly from this court, but you must fly away from the Trinity cage.

God, Father, you now know our pain and see our tears, listen to our judgment. Stand with your guilt hoisted upon your shoulders. Depart from this kingdom and stay confined forever in the next!

Religion's War on Women

(continued from p7)

ty of the Muslim world in the last few years than any time in the past.

The very existence of Muslim feminist movements and their strategies for a progressive, egalitarian reading of Islam have been well-kept secrets from most Western Christians. There has now been some discussion of such movements as Women Living Under Muslim Laws and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, but there needs to be much more. Progressive Muslim women's movements need to be given space to speak and develop. In the process it is important that the distortion that has happened in Western feminism, partly due to feminists themselves but mostly through hostile interpretation by Western media, needs to be corrected.

It needs to be made clear again and again that equal rights for women is the best way for the whole society to emerge from poverty and authoritarianism. Feminism is not about women against men and children. Feminism is about men and women becoming real partners in a way that can develop their fuller humanity for both of them and will allow children the best chance to flourish. It is male domination that impoverishes us all.

[Rosemary Radford Ruether is the Georgia Harkness professor of applied theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, and the Carpenter Professor of Feminist Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. She is on the board of directors of Catholics for a Free Choice and is editorial advisor to *Conscience*. Her article first appeared in the Winter 2001/2002 issue of *Conscience*.]

Move over, Jehovah, there's a new God on the block

A NEW element has been introduced into the debate about creationism and evolution in Kansas: the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Since the Kansas School Board gave serious consideration to granting creationism the same status as evolution in biology lessons, it has been bombarded with letters from believers in the Flying Spaghetti Monster, who are insisting that their deity – and its explanation for the origins of the world – be given equal recognition in schools.

The Flying Spaghetti Monster revealed itself to Bobby Henderson, “a concerned citizen” in the US, who, like a latter-day Mohammed, did its bidding and promptly established a new religion – one that has spread like wildfire.

Henderson's first task was to write to the Kansas School Board, and to persuade other members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster to do the same – a task the Pastafarians, as they like to be known, embarked upon with fervour.

Said Henderson: “I am writing you with much concern after having read of your hearing to decide whether the alternative theory of Intelligent Design should be taught along with the theory of Evolution. I think we can all agree that it is important for students to hear multiple viewpoints so they can choose for themselves the theory that makes the most sense to them. I am concerned, however, that students will only hear one theory of Intelligent Design.

“Let us remember that there are multiple theories of Intelligent Design. I and many others around the world are of the strong belief that the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was He who created all that we see and all that we feel. We feel strongly that the overwhelming scientific evidence pointing towards evolutionary processes is nothing but a coincidence, put in place by Him.

“It is for this reason that I'm writing you today, to formally request that this alternative theory be taught in your schools, along with the other two theories. In fact, I will go so far as to say, if you do not agree to do this, we will be forced to proceed with legal action. I'm sure you see where we are coming from. If the Intelligent



Design theory is not based on faith, but is instead another scientific theory, as is claimed, then you must also allow our theory to be taught, as it is also based on science, not on faith.

“Some find that hard to believe, so it may be helpful to tell you a little more about our beliefs. We have evidence that a Flying Spaghetti Monster created the universe. None of us, of course, was around to see it, but we have written accounts of it. We have several lengthy volumes explaining all details of His power. Also, you may be surprised to hear that there are over 10 million of us, and growing. We tend to be very secretive, as many people claim our beliefs are not substantiated by observable evidence. What these people don't understand is that He built the world to make us think the earth is older than it really is. For example, a scientist may perform a carbon-dating process on an artefact. He finds that approximately 75 percent Carbon-14 has decayed by electron emission to Nitrogen-14, and infers that this artefact is approximately 10,000 years old, as the half-life of Carbon-14 appears to be 5,730 years. But what our scientist does not realize is that every time he makes a measurement, the Flying Spaghetti Monster is there changing the results with His Noodly Appendage. We have numerous texts that describe in detail how this can be possible and the reasons why He does this. He is of course invisible and can pass through normal matter with ease. I'm sure you now realize how important it is that your students are taught this alternative theory. It is absolutely imperative that they realize that observable evidence is at the discretion of a Flying Spaghetti Monster. Furthermore, it is disrespectful to teach our beliefs without wearing His chosen outfit, which of course is full pirate regalia. I cannot stress the importance of this enough, and unfortunately cannot describe in detail why this must be done as I fear this letter is already

becoming too long. The concise explanation is that He becomes angry if we don't.

“You may be interested to know that global warming, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters are a direct effect of the shrinking numbers of pirates since the 1800s. For your interest, I have included a graph of the approximate number of pirates versus the average global temperature over the last 200 years. As you can see, there is a statistically significant inverse relationship between pirates and global temperature.

“In conclusion, thank you for taking the time to hear our views and beliefs. I hope I was able to convey the importance of teaching this theory to your students. We will of course be able to train the teachers in this alternative theory. I am eagerly awaiting your response, and hope dearly that no legal action will need to be taken. I think we can all look forward to the time when these three theories are given equal time in our science classrooms across the country, and eventually the world; One third time for Intelligent Design, one third time for Flying Spaghetti Monsterism, and one third time for logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence.”

Terry Sanderson, Vice President of the National Secular Society, was highly impressed. “At last, a sky god that comes with evidence! The NSS is thinking of opening a City Academy devoted to the creationism of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Unfortunately, it's necessary to prove to the government our religious credentials by first opening a used-car dealership”.

Secularists needed for debate on the existence of God!

THIS event takes place on Tuesday October 18, at 7 pm in the main hall at Conway Hall.

Motion: This House Believes the Christian God to be a Myth. Proposers: Joan Smith (NSS Honorary Associate) and Norman Bacrac (NSS Council). Against: Rev Sandy Miller, Alpha Course and Holy Trinity, Brompton, and Rev Paul Cowley, Alpha for Prisons and Holy Trinity, Brompton.

Admission free but please phone Ethical Society admin. to book place: 0207242 8034. Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL.

Enquiries: 0207242 8034/7 or Email: library@ethicalsoc.org.uk

Barbara Smoker on Radio 4

BARBARA Smoker, recently honoured in Paris for services to humanism, can be heard on BBC's Radio 4 on September 19, 2005 at 11am in a programme on giving up religion.

EARLIER this year, the cardinal leading the Vatican's charge against Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* branded the bestseller as "a sackful of lies" and urged Catholics to shun it like they would "rotten food".

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Archbishop of Northern Genoa, and the most senior Catholic churchman to denounce the novel, expressed his horror that the central tenet of the book is that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, and had children.

So, just how "rotten" is this book? We asked William Harwood, a regular *Freethinker* contributor who lives in Canada, to review it for us.

Few would dispute that Dan Brown is an accomplished writer, or that *The Da Vinci Code*, viewed as unmitigated fiction, might well be described as a masterpiece, writes Harwood.

And unlike 90 percent of all books, fiction and non-fiction, written since 1945, it is narrated in correct English.

Where I have a major problem is with Brown's claim that the scenario in which his novel is set is non-fiction. The first question raised by such a claim is: Does he really believe that?

One of the definitions of science fiction is speculation based on a "what if?" proposition that contradicts the history of the real world. Kingsley Amis wrote a novel based on "what if?" Hitler had won World War Two. Robert Silverberg wrote a novel based on "what if?" the Roman Empire had never fallen. Dan Brown has written a science fiction novel based on "what if?" a hunchbacked dwarf psychopath who died childless 2,000 years ago had left a biological heir whose descendants are alive to this day.

So the question arises: Is Brown buying an audience by deliberately misinforming the public to make them think his fiction has a real-world parallel, emulating TV scriptwriters who do the same thing on a daily basis out of depraved indifference to anything but the bottom line? Or is he simply presenting an imaginative interpretation of evidence because he lacks the scholarly expertise to distinguish between disciplined hypotheses and indefensible speculation?

Brown's basic premise, that evidence survives showing the Christian figurehead Jesus to have sired an heir, was taken uncritically from *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, an exposition of what would be a legitimate hypothesis if it did not stand or fall on the *non sequitur* that a document of much later origin already existed prior to the First Crusade. Brown mentions *Holy Blood* in his novel without acknowledging it as the primary source for his speculations.

Brown's dating of the negative connotations of "Friday the thirteenth," actually a double feminine that was doubly hateful to male-god

religion, to a specific event of 1307 CE, is probably the strongest indication that his whole thesis is a series of imaginative guesswork. And his statement that the six-pointed hexagram, which did not become a symbol of Judaism until medieval times, "was later adopted by the Israelite kings – David and Solomon", is further proof that Brown's concept of historical research is blind repetition of popular myths with no investigation of whether they had any validity.

As for his reading into the works of Leonardo da Vinci "clues" that are simply not there, that raises the ultimate question of whether he is so determined to give his speculations credibility that he has deluded himself that such clues are really present.

What neither Brown nor the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* bothered to learn was that Jesus *could not* have left a biological heir, since following the execution in c 107 CE of his last surviving relative, his cousin Shimeown bar Klopa, leadership of his Nazirite cult passed to persons who were not blood relatives. It was that termination of King Jesus' royal bloodline (his followers – and nobody else – saw him as Israel's true king) that enabled the Anointers (*khristianoi*) to relegate the Nazirites and Ebionites, true followers of Jesus Judaism, to "heretic" status, and claim that *they* were the true heirs of Jesus' teachings.

Brown is abysmally ignorant of the Jesus of history. His fictitious biblical historian, Sir Leigh Teabing, speaking for the author, states "Jesus Christ was a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen ... As a descendant of the lines of King Solomon and King David, Jesus possessed a rightful claim to the throne of the King of the Jews." And if Brown believes that, I have a bridge for sale in Brooklyn that I think will interest him.

FACT: Jesus was a nobody who achieved nothing. He was posthumously transformed into a somebody when Paul of Tarsus capriciously chose him out of the dozen recently executed messiahs to be the figurehead of his newly invented gentile religion. He was not descended from King David, as the gospels even show him acknowledging, but a descendant of gentiles forcefully converted to Judaism by the Maccabees more than a century earlier.

Brown's delusion that the Christian canon was chosen by Constantine has been adequately demolished by Bart Ehrman in *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*, which anyone who is tempted to take Brown's revisionist history seriously is urged to read. As for Brown's assertion that the gospels arbitrarily named Mark, Matthew and Luke depicted Jesus as a god (or

Condemned by the Vatican been described by a cardi

son of a god), the kindest interpretation of such falsification is that he has not actually read them. But since roughly half of Brown's chapter on Constantine's role in the formation of Christianity is accurate, and many of Ehrman's "corrections" are inaccurate, the most convenient way to get the facts is to read the last two chapters of *Mythology's Last Gods*.

Other than correctly delineating Christianity's borrowing of its rituals and myths from paganism, the entire section of Brown's book spelling out his version of first-century history, chapters 55 to 61, is such incompetent drivel, naming even Mickey Mouse as a co-conspirator, that it undermines everything else he wrote about the alleged history behind his mystery novel. And that is unfortunate, because he got a lot right, including the role in ancient Judaism before it was purged by King Yoshihahw in 621 BCE of sacramental marriage, which even secular historians with no axe to grind have been brainwashed into calling sacred prostitution.

In many ways, *The Da Vinci Code* qualifies as a historical novel. In a historical novel, any speculation is acceptable so long as it does not contradict known reality. My own historical novels contain scenes that originated in my imagination and therefore almost certainly did not happen – but it is not known for certain that they did not happen, and that is what separates legitimate historical fiction from illegitimate. Does Brown cross that line? I am not prepared to say that he does. Since the book was published in 2003, even his postulation that John Paul II's successor would be a liberal who planned to repudiate Opus Dei, while improbable, is legitimate as a necessary basis for the story's plot. Brown is a bumbling amateur in the field of biblical criticism, with no awareness of his incompetence, and it is entirely possible that none of his false statements about the real world in which his novel is set are conscious, intentional lies.

On the good side, by conning millions of readers that Jesus may have a living descendant, he has drawn attention to the basic fraudulence of the Catholic Church, whose crimes against truth and justice may not include the specific actions of which Brown's book accuses it, but are certainly no less oppressive, reprehensible, and totalitarian. Since Brown's fiction encourages readers to believe that a descendant of Jesus rather than the current pope may be the true Head Christian, the Catholic Church's vitriolic denunciation of the book is understandable.

While the Church's obedience-enforcing

Vatican, this novel has cardinal as 'a sackful of lies'

arm, known to history as the Inquisition, (the current pope was his predecessor's Grand Inquisitor), no longer has the power of life and death, it is as determined to stamp out all opposition as Hitler, Stalin or Torquemada ever were. Brown has made waves, and the Church was unwilling to gamble that, if it ignored him, he would go away.

While Brown stops short of identifying Opus Dei as, in so many words, the Vatican Gestapo or the Catholic al-Qaeda, he does expose it as an anti-human conspiracy to turn planet Earth into a totalitarian Catholic theocracy run by theofascists willing to commit any crime, including multiple murders, to achieve the absolute power that is their ultimate aim. Even the Jesuit order has denounced Opus Dei as a throwback to the Dark Ages. Yet under the most recent and current popes its excesses have been glorified to the point of putting the psychopathic criminal who created it on the fast track for canonization. If the Catholic Church canonizes Saint Josemaria Escrivá, can Saint Hitler be far behind?

The Da Vinci Code is certainly misleading. It encourages readers to believe that Mary the Magdalene was Jesus' intimate companion (as she almost certainly was), that she was his legal wife under Jewish law (as she almost certainly was not), and that she was the mother of Jesus' child (as she assuredly was not, although the existence of a secret society that believed otherwise is hard to dispute).

Brown's postulation of the works of Leonardo da Vinci as supporting evidence for his speculations is best described as a mushroom fantasy. The book does, however, portray the Catholic Church as a devious, conniving organization that will stop at nothing to maintain its status as absolute puppetmaster of its more than one half-billion brainwashed mind-slaves, comparable with Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. On balance, that public service outweighs the book's disinformation, regardless of whether Brown's alleged facts are intentional lies or unbridled speculation.

But let us not forget that *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction. As a mystery novel, it ranks alongside the works of Wilkie Collins who invented the genre. And parts of it evoke memories of Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* – although Brown's albino assassin is only an approximation of a trained orangutan. This is a book that, with the specified reservations, I can recommend to Catholics in particular (those who are not unteachable), as well as believers of every variety, and even to non-theists who do not need a fiction writer to tell them that the

world's largest god cult is as firmly founded on lies and plagiarism as the Mormons and the Seventh Day Adventists, as motivated by conscienceless greed as the Scientologists and the Moonies, and as viciously anti-human as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Christian Scientists.

I fully endorse Brown's contention that the most vitriolic criticisms of his novel have come from persons who have not read it. When I first learned that a best-selling novel was centered around a propagandistic falsification of my field of history, I was as outraged as the Vatican – for very different reasons. After reading the book, I am satisfied that its only

reprehensible element is the author's failure to stay within the bounds of plausible history – and that may well be unintentional. Go ahead and read it. But skip chapters 55 to 61, since the extended masturbation fantasy in those chapters is superfluous to an otherwise well-wrought mystery. *The Da Vinci Code* is well told and entertaining – as fiction with no factual basis whatsoever, beyond the fact that Christians have indeed been conned for 2,000 years, even if not in the ways Brown claims.

***The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, Doubleday, 1745 Broadway, NY 10019, 2003, ISBN 0-385-50420-9, 454 pp, hardback, \$24.95.**

Lawyer suing the Pope over child abuse plans to challenge the Vatican's status

THE lawyer who is suing Pope Benedict XVI in Texas for allegedly covering up the sexual abuse of children by a seminarian said last month he would challenge the US diplomatic recognition of the Vatican if the Pope is given immunity in the case.

According to an Associated Press report, the Pope's lawyers have already asked President Bush to certify Benedict's immunity from liability in the civil lawsuit since he is a head of state – the Vatican city-state.

Attorney Daniel Shea, who is representing one of three boys suing the Pope, told a news conference that Bush could abstain from confirming Benedict's immunity. In that case, the judge handling the case, Judge Lee Rosenthal of the US District Court for the Southern District of Texas in Houston, would decide how to proceed, he said.

But if Bush grants the immunity, Shea said he would challenge the constitutionality of the US diplomatic recognition of the Holy See as a sovereign state on First Amendment grounds.

"The Holy See is a church," Shea said.

Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict's former name – is cited as a defendant in the civil lawsuit, accused of conspiring with the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston to cover up the abuse of three boys during the mid-1990s. The suit is seeking unspecified monetary damages.

The three boys, identified in court documents as John Does I, II and III, allege that a Colombian-born seminarian on assignment at St Francis de Sales church in Houston, Juan Carlos Patino-Arango, molested them during counselling sessions in the church in the mid-1990s.

Patino-Arango has been indicted in a criminal case by a Harris County, Texas, grand jury and is a fugitive from justice, the lawsuit says.

Shea has argued in civil court documents that a May 18, 2001, letter Ratzinger wrote to bishops around the world was evidence that he was

involved in a conspiracy to hide Patino-Arango's crimes and to help him escape prosecution.

The letter, written when Ratzinger was still prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explains that "grave" crimes such as the sexual abuse of minors would be handled by his congregation and that the proceedings of special church tribunals handling the cases were subject to "pontifical secret" status.

While international experts say the Pope can certainly claim immunity in the case and that ultimately Shea's suit won't succeed, lawyers for church sex-abuse victims say the case is significant because it has gone further than other recent attempts to implicate the Vatican and high-ranking church officials in the sex scandal.

Shea acknowledged that a previous court challenge to the US diplomatic recognition of the Holy See failed, but said it was because the plaintiffs – a lobbying group seeking further separation of church and state – didn't have standing, meaning they weren't affected by the issue.

"John Doe I, II and III have got standing and then some," he said.

He said Bush may also choose to abstain from the case because of the political implications it may have.

"The Evangelical community has been horrified at what they've seen in these cases, and I don't think his political base can stand him in effect providing cover for Ratzinger. But that's a political question," he said.

The State Department has said the Pope is already considered a head of state and automatically has diplomatic immunity. Spokeswoman Gerry Keener said that Benedict doesn't have to ask for immunity and Bush doesn't have to grant it.

The Vatican spokesman and Ratzinger's lawyers have declined to comment on the case.

Surely Enough Is Enough

THE recent murderous activities of some British Muslim zealots in London is a tragic indictment of the political correctness and slavish subservience to religious extremism that characterise liberal Western democracies.

Any secular organisation which promoted warfare against civil society and brainwashed young people in its educational institutions to believe that they would be richly rewarded for perpetrating mass murder would long ago have been banned and its principals prosecuted for conspiracy and incitement to commit a felony.

But call the organisation a radical mosque, the warfare jihad, the educational institutions religious madrassahs, the rich reward an eternity in a houri-rich heaven and the principals

mullahs, and authorities not only take no action but celebrate and subsidise "this splendid example of cultural diversity".

No doubt the majority of Muslims do not support the criminal activities of their co-religionists, but they too are smiling indulgently at the "eccentricities" of these malignant mosques.

If the British Racial and Religious Hatred Bill becomes law, one can rest assured it will be used not only against AngloSaxon neo-Nazis (for whom I have no sympathy at all) but against anyone daring to express the views in this letter.

It must however be conceded that more innocent civilians than political thugs are being killed in Iraq by the Coalition of the Willing.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

Racism

I AM appalled at the torrent of racism directed at Muslims in this country, often citing their failure to integrate into British society and to adopt our customs. Nothing could be further from the truth, as a glance at the lifestyle of extremist Islamic cleric Omar Bakri Mohammed will attest.

He lived in a £200,000 council house, hadn't worked since he arrived in the UK, has seven children, received £300 in state benefit and drove a Motability car. Our indigenous white welfare dependants have more in common with the cleric than they perhaps realise.

JOHN EOIN DOUGLAS
Edinburgh

Help boost the *Freethinker's* subscription levels

NEXT May, the *Freethinker* celebrates 125 years of uninterrupted publication. Not even the prison sentence for blasphemy imposed on its founder, G W Foote, nor the bombing of its offices in London during World War II, interrupted its production.

Today, our task is to ensure the continued success of the magazine – and to do so we would like to substantially increase its readership over the next few years.

You can help achieve this goal.

We will shortly be printing a promotional card. The front of the post-card-sized flyer, in full colour, is reproduced here. The wording on the back is as follows.

Religious fundamentalism is threatening to tear apart the fabric of our society. The time has come to tame, not appease it by giving it more influence, which is precisely what successive Governments have been doing for far too long. Religion has to be returned to its rightful place – inside the heads of gullible believers, and in their homes and in their places of worship. It has NO place in our schools or in our legislative processes!

Since 1881, when it was first launched, the *Freethinker* has campaigned for a society free from religious interference, and has provided a valuable resource for non-believers. If you value a secular society, free of the hatred, intolerance and violence generated by religious zealots of every hue – you should be reading the *Freethinker* every month. It is the only publication in the UK that pulls no punches in its total opposition to religion in all its virulent guises. It will keep you abreast of the threat we are under, and will help you network with like-minded people.

If you would like a sample issue of the *Freethinker*, please send a first or second class A4 self-addressed envelope to: The *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD.

We would like existing subscribers to help distribute the flyers in libraries, schools, universities etc. They will be available in packs of 50, and, in order to recover the cost of production, would ask those requesting a pack to enclose £3.50, plus, if possible, a donation to the *Freethinker's* Anniversary Issue appeal, which I will be launching next month.

If you would like to assist in our drive for more readers, please send a cheque or postal order to:
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Freewill

BOETHIUS, a religious philosopher (480-524), apparently argued that the mere fact that God knows instantaneously, by Divine Inspiration as it were, everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen, does not of itself impair humanity's freewill, since God also possesses the power to include the operations of freewill in His Divine Knowledge.

However, this doctrine would seem to imply that while humanity is allowed to enjoy the benefit of Freewill, the actions of God himself at least are completely circumscribed, and he is quite unable to engage in any actions other than those that he foresees on pain of infringing that sacred human freewill which alone absolves him from the responsibility for the evils to which his creatures have been, are, and will be subject: creating as it were a sort of Deity's Dilemma! To adapt the words of King Richard II, "Subjected so, deprived of the power of responding to Pleadings and Prayer, how can you say that I am God?"

Mind you, bearing in mind that old joke that tells how God and the Devil were playing at dice, for a human soul, God always has another trick up his sleeve! The Devil, we are told, throws a double six and exclaims triumphantly "I've won, I've won!", whereupon God throws a six and a seven! "But that's cheating," the Devil complains. "Not at all" says God, "It's only another miracle!"

What it is to be a God!

ALBERT ADLER
London

Can people do without religion?

TODAY, as we face the extreme outcomes of one particular religion, this question becomes topical because all religions, not just one, have in the course of centuries of human history and development produced similar or, at times, even worse outcomes.

Some say that the problem is not with religion, but with the way people interpret religion. This is not a valid argument, for the simple fact that anything belonging to the human world must be the result of human elaboration, including the assumed revelations from a superhuman world.

Religion has been, and still is for some, the main constituent of their identity, and people could not live without some identity.

Apart from identity, religion also provides what people crave for: ie the ability to judge correctly. Religion tells us what is undoubtedly right and what is undoubtedly wrong, and consequently how we should or should not behave.

Democracy is very slowly offering us the confidence to rely on the rules most of us would wish to live by, but it will take quite a while for self-confidence and democracy to be accepted as a guide to our behaviour. Because people are brain-washed by religion at a very early age and unless secularism is taught from a very early age, replacing the influence of religion will be a very, very long process.

But we are influenced and educated also by the media, the radio, the television, the rituals and the ceremonies attended by the leading role models of society.

So we will be able to do without religion when a sufficient number of people support the efforts of the secularists and the humanists in the media, in education and in government.

DAVID IBRY
London

Humanist action in Nottingham

FOR your information, humanists are alive and well in Nottingham!

My union (NUT) is fighting Notts City Council over the setting up of three more academy schools, and a second attempt to set up a Muslim faith school. Below is a letter I have sent to the Nottingham *Evening Post*.

Stephanie Bungay (*Post*, August 11th) reports that an independent Muslim school is to apply to the Council for a second time to become state-funded.

This should again be rejected. Councillor Chapman is right. Such a school would add to the problem of surplus places. At the moment Muslim children are educated perfectly well in state schools in the Hyson Green area. Establishing a faith school would drain pupils and resources from other schools.

I fundamentally disagree with the Government's and the Council's policy that setting up faith schools adds to diversity and choice.

Faith schools (be they Catholic, Muslim, C of E., Jewish etc) create divisions in society. All state (secular) schools teach religious education, but not religious indoctrination, as faith schools do.

In France and the United States education is secular. Religion is a family affair. The French Government sees integrating children of all faiths in schools as a way of integrating all into French society. President Bush wants to destroy the secular system in his own country by forcing all schools to teach creationism as a "balance" to evolution.

What nonsense! Why not then go on to teach alchemy alongside chemistry? Why not teach flat-earthism alongside astronomy?

Our schools should be secular, comprehensive and inclusive of all faiths.

Faith schools promote ignorance and divisiveness and could be a breeding ground for religious fundamentalism – and we all know

what that can lead to.

MARTIN KIRBY

Notts City NUT press/publicity person and NUT representative on Notts City SACRE.

Editor's Note: Martin's letter was published by the *Post* on August 16.

A little learning ...

AFTER reading Carolyn Baker's disturbing piece on Dominionism (*Freethinker*, June), I went to the Book of Proverbs to check her quotation "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" (she uses it four times, so I am worried that my A-level memory is forsaking me).

Was my inability to find it caused by my unwillingness to more than skim-read such stuff, or is Alexander Pope's aphorism "a little learning is a dangerous thing" indeed a misquote from Proverbs?

Carolyn Baker confirms my long-held feeling that I would much rather live here than in the USA.

FIONA WEIR
London

**The
Freethinker**

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote & Co Ltd
P O Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD
Tel: 01273 680531

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com
Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5.00 sterling or USA \$8.00 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.00

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Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

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 227549/461404. <http://www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uhumanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, October 4, 7.30pm. Mike Howgate: *Myths, Fakes and Frauds Exposed*.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Dearmaley 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: Summer programme available, 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.

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

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N1 Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of Scotland – Dundee Group: Contact secretary Ron McLaren, Spiershill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. 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. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, October 11,

7.30pm. Glanville Williams: *The BBC – Past its Sell-by Date?*

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.

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, September 7, 8pm. Barry Johnson: *The Pharmaceutical Industry*. Wednesday, October 5, 8pm. Colin Hampton: *Poverty*.

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: 0207242 8037/4. E-mail: library@ethicalsoc.org UK. Monthly programmes on request.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London. Tuesday, October 18, 7pm. Debate: *This House Believes the Christian God is a Myth*. See display announcement, page 11.

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: brianmcclinton@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