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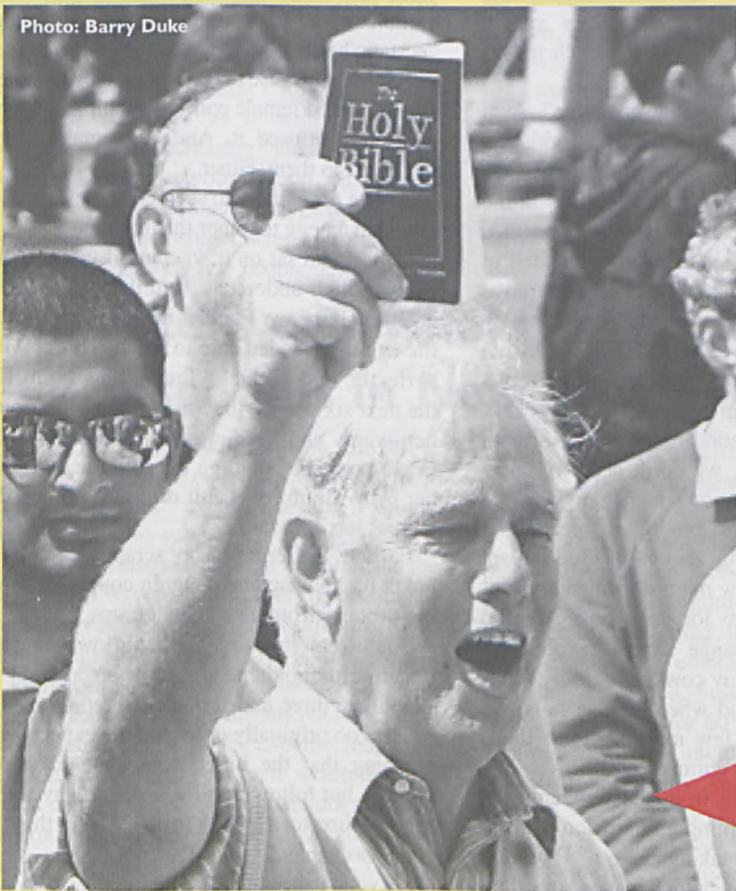
# The Freethinker

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

This is an Emperor penguin chick, cute as a can be



This, on the other hand, is a less-than-lovable, full-on, fulminating fundamentalist. To find out what links the two, see *Freethinking Allowed*, p2



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Three cheers for rationalist Sir Henry Wood – see p14

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THERE is very little that film-makers, TV producers, playwrights or authors can do to satisfy the infantile appetites of devout Christians. If the mindless, unchallenging pap they are constantly mewling for were ever allowed to smother true artistic endeavour in a theocracy over which the religious held dominion, theatres and cinemas would go belly up, and the outraged owners of TVs and radios would consign their equipment to the nearest dump.

But, once in a while, Christians *do* find something to applaud – and right now they are gurgling with glee over the *March of the Penguins*, a French wildlife documentary, which has become this year's surprise American blockbuster. The feature-length film by Luc Jacquet recounts the heroic life of the Emperor penguin, a species that battles against extraordinary conditions in Antarctica.

Blizzards, gales and a chill as low as -40 degrees Celsius are only a few of the obstacles thrown in the penguins' way. After laying their single eggs, the females trudge in single file to feeding grounds 110 kilometers (70 miles) from their breeding site.

For two months, the male sits on the egg to keep it warm and let the chick hatch, awaiting the return of the female bringing food for their offspring. Only when the mother returns does the father then make his own trek to the distant coast to ease his own hunger.

But the *March of the Penguins* has become more than a wildlife hit — it's on track to become the most politically-charged movie in America since *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Michael Moore's take on Bush's war on terror. The penguins have been seized upon by conservative Christians as a parable of family virtues, a role model for men, an argument against abortion – and convincing proof that Darwin was wrong. I should not be surprised if they start replacing the fish stickers on their bumpers with penguins.

The movie is "the motion picture that most passionately affirms traditional norms like monogamy, sacrifice and child-rearing," film critic Michael Medved told the *New York Times*. For devout Christians, he suggested, "This is the first movie they've enjoyed since *The Passion of the Christ*. This is *The Passion of the Penguins*. Oh, yuck!

One Christian organisation, the 153 House Churches Network, raves over the film as "proof of the glory of God". It is organising workshops in which families are invited to homes and cinemas to see the film.

Christians can be inspired by the exemplary "dedication, cooperation and affection" between the mating penguins, and the loyalty and perseverance of the father, says Mari Helms, reviewing the movie on [www.christiananswers.net](http://www.christiananswers.net).

Another commentator, Maggie Gallagher, a columnist with [yahoo.news](http://yahoo.news), said: "It is hard not to see the theological overtones in the

movie ... Beauty, goodness, love and devotion are all part of nature, built into the DNA of the universe," she said

Rich Lowry, editor of the right-wing publication the *National Review*, urged young conservatives to check out the documentary. "It is an amazing movie. And I have to say, penguins are the really ideal example of monogamy."

**Would Christians be so enchanted with penguins if they knew the full story? BARRY DUKE doubts it.**



"Monogamy? spluttered San Francisco writer Sheerly Avni on [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org). "These penguins get around. They switch mates each new mating season, which makes for some pretty slutty birds ...

As to the film's "Christian message", Avni said "This is the most cynical misappropriation of someone else's message since the Republicans started pumping their fists in the air to Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA*. (Or, for that matter, since Reagan decided to name his space programme Star Wars, a move George Lucas resents to this day.)

"In all, conservatives' embrace of the *March of the Penguins* is pretty ironic, coming from a nexus of religious groups that justify back-burnering environmental issues because, with the Rapture at hand, we don't need to worry about the next generation's planet anyway.

"As long as we're looking to the animal kingdom for inspiring visions of God's plan, may we suggest a few more documentary topics: dolphins who go for gang rape; bonobo monkeys who exchange sexual favours for food; dry humping gay cows; and orally fixated male guppies. And when all else fails, we could always use a few more shots of those perpetually onanistic chimpanzees ...

"What can we take from those penguins – that is, if global warming and erosion of their natural habitat aren't taking enough? From the movie, we know that nature makes sure they don't give birth to more offspring than they can feed. Mostly we know – from this supposedly family-values oriented documentary – that male and female penguins split responsibility for child-rearing right down the middle: the male becomes a stay-at-home dad, warming the egg and being ready on hand with a tiny bit of food he stores in his beak; he waits to the point of starvation for his mate to return from her arduous trek to the water's edge to bring food. When mom comes back, they switch places, with no time to spend together.

"It's the ultimate commuter marriage. Probably not the kind of family values Those Who Speak Directly to God had in mind, unless we missed the part where fighting for paid paternity leave moved up a few items on

the right-wing agenda.

"So we have sex with up to 20 partners in a lifetime and males who take 'Go ahead and work late, honey, I'll watch the kids' to a whole new level. Again, we'd bet these aren't the family values the Christian Right had in mind. But paid paternity leave? We'll take it."

I should point out too – at the risk of wiping the silly smile off the fundies' faces – that if they were to start setting up penguins as role models, then they should damn well stop bad-mouthing gays and lesbians, and condemning gay adoptions. Penguins, you see, are a pretty gay species. Witness Roy and Silo, two chinstrap penguins at the Central Park Zoo in Manhattan, who are completely devoted to each other. For nearly six years now, they have been inseparable. They exhibit what in penguin parlance is called "ecstatic behaviour": That is, they entwine their necks, they vocalise to each other, they have sex. When offered female companionship, they have adamantly refused it. And the females aren't interested in them, either.

At one time, the two seemed so desperate to incubate an egg together that they put a rock in their nest and sat on it, keeping it warm in the folds of their abdomens, said their chief keeper, Rob Gramzay. Finally, he gave them a fertile egg that needed care to hatch. Things went perfectly, and a chick, Tango, was born. For the next six weeks they raised Tango, keeping her warm and feeding her food from their beaks until she could go out into the world on her own. Gramzay is full of praise. "They did a great job," he said.

Earlier, a German zoo scrapped plans to break up homosexual penguin couples following protests from gay rights groups.

The Bremerhaven Zoo had flown in four female Humboldt penguins in an attempt to encourage three male couples to reproduce.

The zoo originally defended the experiment, claiming that the birds were an endangered species, but following protests from gay rights groups, director Heike Kueck has said that the zoo was abandoning the plan. She said: "Everyone can live here as they please."

Kueck said that it was neither her intention, nor was it possible, to separate the gay couples by force and interest them in their new female companions.

Gay groups had protested against "the organised and forced harassment of the penguins by female seductresses" in an open letter to Bremerhaven's Mayor Joerg Schulz.

Believable though they sounded, reports that German fundies wanted the birds to be "reprogrammed" by Exodus International, the American-based evangelical organisation which uses the power of Jesus to turn gays "straight", turned out to be completely false. Even if it were true, such reprogramming would not have worked: penguins have a built-in immunity to religious twaddle.

# Labour's religion policies will result in parallel communities, warns NSS

THE government is in grave danger of inflaming inter-racial tensions if it persists with two of its policies which are profoundly misguided, says the National Secular Society (NSS).

The NSS says that the Government is inadvertently encouraging a separatist mentality in those from minority faiths by increasingly encouraging people to define themselves by their religion. The proposed increase in single-faith schools will also reinforce the wall of separation that has developed between communities in Britain.

Speaking in support of Trevor Phillips of the Commission for Racial Equality, who expressed concerns in a widely-reported speech about the increasing "ghettoisation" of society, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, said: "The government is increasingly addressing citizens as religious groups, but relatively few people define them-

selves primarily in such a way. A Home Office survey shows religion only ranked ninth in importance in self identity. The danger in doing this is that the dialogue between the government and minorities is almost exclusively with unelected leaders who are almost all theocratic in outlook. But many from ethnic minorities do not consider that religion is the first priority in their lives and resent being represented by men who cannot possibly speak for the whole of their communities, especially women, the young and the many who are not practising their community's faith. It is time for a much wider representation."

Mr Porteous Wood said that the Government's plans to bring 150 Islamic schools into the state sector was also misguided. "The Education Minister will reportedly require these schools to take at least 25% of their pupils from other religions to ensure

some integration. That this condition is being mooted indicates that the Government accepts that separate schools based on religion are an invitation to educational apartheid, but the requirement is entirely unrealistic. Islamia Infant school in Brent has had an open admissions policy for some years, but not a single non-Muslim admission. Many Muslim parents are happy for their children to attend mixed-race community schools which will prepare them for life in the culture they will have to inhabit as adults. With integrated schooling, friendships can be made across the racial and religious spectrum but separated education leads to distrust and misunderstanding."

Mr Porteous Wood added: "The government must reverse its plans to expand the number of single-faith schools and consult much more broadly about the needs of complex and multi-faceted minority communities."

## Voters overwhelmingly reject faith schools in New Statesman poll

A RECENT poll conducted by the New Statesman magazine ended up with 96.4 per cent voting "Yes" to the question "Should Blair abandon his support for faith schools?"

The *New Statesman* ran an editorial on the poll: "When 96 per cent of readers responding to our online vote endorse the proposition that Tony Blair should end his support for faith schools, it is an indication, to put it no higher, of general agreement. Few of the arguments put forward by those readers could be called extreme: religion is a personal matter and not one in which the state should meddle; tax receipts should not subsidise the promotion of any religion; children deserve the broadest access possible to ideas. Further, faith schools may have a tendency to "ghettoise" communities, and they may teach as fact notions

with no foundation in science or history, without supplying the equipment to evaluate those notions critically.

"The government, which is to announce its plans in the next few weeks, has already turned its back on these arguments. Though this is regrettable and baffling, it is also the case that even if ministers embraced such principles their hands are tied. Subsidised faith schools have been around for 60 years and more, and to do away with them would require an upheaval that only overwhelming public demand would justify. Such demand does not yet exist, however much we might wish it did. It is also the case that many of the faith schools eager to join the state system are Muslim schools, and to slam the door on them now, when Christian and Jewish schools have had public money for many years, would be an act of religious discrimination.

"The pass has been sold, but all principle need not be sacrificed. We are entitled to insist that toleration and citizenship be taught well in these schools and that pupils be exposed to ideas beyond the confines of religious dogma. No pupil taught at state expense, for example, should be left in ignorance of evolution and its scientific basis. This government is besotted with Ofsted. Very well, let Ofsted be deployed with unprecedented vigour to ensure that faith schools, if they must have our money, are never academies for bigots."

## Freethinker to feature in BBC documentary

A SIGHT you thought you would never live to see – a clergyman parading the streets of London selling copies of the *Freethinker*, and declaring that there is no God – is about to be shown on BBC2 TV next month.

This surprising scene forms part of a follow-up to last year's series, *The Battle for Britain's Soul*, which begins on October 7 at 9pm.

The new four-part programme charts the religious history of Britain from the early 18th century, and brings viewers right up to the present.

In the second episode, which will be screened on October 14, the programme's presenter, ad-man-turned-vicar, Reverend Peter Owen Jones, examines the history of the *Freethinker*, and in one scene takes to the streets of London to sell copies of the magazine.

The programme is described by the BBC as "a fast-paced journey from the beginnings of non-conformism through the challenges of science and politics, to the ultimate challenge of secularism. It discovers what forces shaped the established Church of England and finds out who the winners and losers were in this battle for Britain's soul."

## Quotable quote

MEN rarely (if ever) manage to dream up a god superior to themselves. Most gods have the manners and morals of a spoiled child.

– Robert A Heinlein

## Religion under fire in new rock album

The "evils of religion" feature large in the lyrics of a Seattle, US, based band who are about to release a new album, *Sisters of the Red Death*.

In an interview with Jason Hailman, of [chartattack.com](http://chartattack.com), Zach Davidson, lead singer in the band Vendetta Red, said that many of the dark themes in the band's work sprang from his "disgust" with certain issues within religion, primarily the "epidemic of child abuse that keeps going unpunished within the church."



# Christian Voice bigots step up their vendetta against ‘offensive’ musical

A NEW play by Howard Brenton, author of the notorious work *The Romans in Britain*, prompted 200 letters of complaint even before the curtains went up on the production at the National Theatre last month.

The play, *Paul*, which charts the life of the man who, legend has it “received a divine revelation on the road to Damascus”, was described as “irreverent” and “provocative” by the theatre. Nicholas Hytner, the National’s director. He said the letters were not offensive, but their authors “are all praying for me, and telling me I would go to hell unless I take the play off. I don’t mind, because I don’t believe in hell.

“All assumed the play is about Paul’s being

homosexual and misogynist; they assume it’s going to be a prurient hatchet job.” In fact, Hytner said, the play was not concerned with Paul’s sexuality. “It’s true it won’t be satisfying to a certain kind of devout Christian, but it will be interesting and amusing for most of the people of faith whom I know. It’s a play about the nature of faith. Not a devout play, a sceptical play. It is not meant to be controversial or shocking.”

One of those who voiced opposition to the play was Stephen Green, National Director of Christian Voice, who said in an interview on BBC Radio 4 that, although he knew nothing about the play’s content, it was bound to be offensive, given Hytner’s statement that “it won’t be satisfying to a certain kind of devout Christian”.

A day or so later, Green issued a press release condemning the decision of Avalon, the company behind *Jerry Springer the Opera*, to take the show on tour next spring.

Said Green “It is clear that director Stewart Lee is being driven by some kind of perverse missionary fervour ... I wonder if the municipal theatres from Plymouth to Aberdeen share his anti-Christian zeal and are prepared to sacrifice community cohesion for it.

“This production portrays Jesus as a crophiliac with an infantile complex who admits to being homosexual and who is told ‘Fuck you’ by Satan and ‘Jesus, grow up for Christ’s sake and put some fucking clothes on’ by Jerry Springer. Almighty God is put across as an old fool who needs therapy ... With references to ‘Judeo-Christian mythology’ added in, it is hard to see how Lee could have made the show more offensive to Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. (Green’s “concern” for Muslim sensitivities is hypocritical in the extreme, as the panel on this page proves).

“Stewart Lee has said the tour is not financially viable and he has announced that he does not expect to make any money from it. It seems he has managed to persuade local theatre managements to become financially involved. We shall want to challenge local councillors about their support of such a divisive and anti-Christian production on their doorstep.

“Councillors will have some explaining to do to their constituents, especially come the May local elections.

“This tour can only bring the judgment of Almighty God on the United Kingdom. We are almost ready to issue proceedings for blasphemy on Avalon and the BBC.”

Philip Hensher, writing in the *Independent*

on September 21, said “Stephen Green is one of this column’s favourite people. I don’t know what we’d do for amusement without him. The incorrigible self-publicist from Carmarthen and his ‘group’, Christian Voice – I’d love to see his membership tallies – came to our attention when the BBC proposed to broadcast *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

“What is Mr Green’s objection to the piece? It’s quite clear: ‘It’s hard to see how it could [have been] made more offensive.’ ‘It insults us Christians.’ ‘It being on in a London theatre offends me, just as much as a murder or rape happening behind closed doors offends me.’

“Just how feeble the claim of offence is, is shown by other comments by Mr Green. On the subject of homosexual police officers, he says: ‘Homosexual police are involved in some of the most disgusting perversions imaginable: how can they bring clean hands to any investigation?’ Elsewhere, of homosexuals in general, he claims that ‘their whole life is lived in denial: how can they be expected to tell the truth in court?’ and asserts that ‘many homosexual men will have been interfered with at an early age, and be sexually attracted to boys of around that age as a result.’

“I personally find these opinions staggeringly offensive; I can hardly think of any assertion worse than those suggesting that one’s domestic relations make one corrupt, a congenital liar, and an abuser of children.

“Mr Green observes that “the causing of gratuitous offence is hardly the hallmark of a civilised society. No civilised person would deliberately insult a stranger in the street.” On the other hand, he seems quite happy to cause great offence when he and his beliefs are not the target.

“What we should be doing, and what Mr Green, the promoters of the Religious Hatred Bill and all other forces now cheerfully threatening our liberty should be doing, is not looking around for causes of offence, and deciding which of them cause us, personally, offence. We should just accept, as most of us have, that we live in a big complicated world; not everyone is like us; not everyone holds, or should hold, the same beliefs that we do; and from time to time we will prefer to avert our eyes or close our ears.”

## Quotable quote

SO far as I can remember, there is not one word in the Gospels in praise of intelligence.

– Bertrand Russell

## CV brands Koran as ‘hate speak’

BELIEVE it or not, Christian Voice strongly supports “freedom of speech”.

In a statement on its website, CV says it “opposes the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill as an illiberal attack on freedom of speech. It actually does nothing about racial hatred, that’s already on the statute book, but it brings in a subjective law against religious hatred which we say will stop legitimate criticism of religions. We want the freedom to preach the Gospel, to say Jesus Christ is The Way, The Truth and The Life, and that the gurus and prophets of other religions lead nowhere except to hell.

“Odd but true: the Bill was only brought in to buy Muslim votes at the last general election. Muslim leaders see it as a Bill which will stop anyone criticising Islam. The Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP, Home Secretary, wrote to every mosque in the country before the election promising to bring in this Bill if re-elected. We shall continue to fight the Bill, by the grace of God. However, if this Bill is passed, we shall do two things, God willing and as He gives us strength and courage:

“(1) Report Islamic Bookshops for selling the Koran and Hadith, which, if they aren’t hate speech, nothing is. In fact, Muslim leaders have already tried to have the Koran exempted from the Bill – and failed.

“(2) We shall be quick off the mark and fearless in His strength alone in pointing out what is wrong with other religions and what is right with Christianity. If anyone is going to be a ‘hate speech martyr’ it must be a Christian, and not the leader of the British National Party, who would love that distinction.”

# American Atheists say hands that help are better than lips that pray

THE American Atheists' organisation says President Bush should stop urging prayer for Hurricane Katrina victims because it violates the Constitution. Ellen Johnson, president of the group said Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and Bush "should not be violating the Constitution by telling people to pray for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. It's unconstitutional for government officials to be promoting religion; and besides, judging from the speed of some relief efforts, officials should be busy working instead of preaching."

Ms Johnson said: "Contrary to what some people think, charity and mutual aid are not the monopoly of religious organizations."

While some government officials are calling for prayer and trying to focus public attention on the work done by some religious groups,

America's diverse community of non-believers – atheists, freethinkers, humanists and others – are joining the effort to support relief operations in New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast.

Johnson also expressed alarm about religious activities behind some relief efforts. "We're getting reports of how some religion-based 'aid' groups are trying to fly evangelists into the stricken areas and how US army chaplains were carrying Bibles, not food or water to 'comfort' people at the New Orleans Superdome," she said. "People need material aid, medical care and economic support, not prayers and preaching."

Dave Silverman, communications director for American Atheists, commented. "It appears that despite all of the outbursts of public religiosity and prayer, 'God' was once

again asleep at the wheel. Only human beings can deal with the calamities of the natural world. God doesn't seem to be much help when it comes to providing food, water, or antibiotics when people are suffering."

## Peaceful Muslim sect attacked in Indonesia

INDONESIAN police last month detained 35 people for vandalising mosques and houses belonging to a minority Muslim sect in West Java province. Several mosques and houses were badly damaged and at least three cars burned in four villages.

ElShinta radio reported damage to four mosques, three religious schools and 33 houses after a group of students from a local Islamic boarding school and residents went on the rampage.

The damaged buildings belonged to the Ahmadiya, a Muslim sect which the country's highest authority on Islam has outlawed as a "deviant" group.

Ahmadiya was founded in the late 19th century in what is now Pakistan with the professed goal of reviving Islam by stressing non-violence and tolerance.

It breaks sharply with mainstream Islam by insisting that Mohammed was not necessarily the last prophet.

## Devout Christian sentenced for murder and sexual abuse

A SEVENTH Day Adventist in Fresno, California, has been sentenced to death for first-degree murder and 14 counts of rape, oral copulation and continuous sexual abuse.

Marcus Wesson, 58, an SDA clan leader who fathered children with his wife, daughters and nieces, was charged with the murder of his nine children, aged between one and 25. They were all shot in the head.

Wesson preached long Bible passages, including those that justified polygamy and incest. He abused his daughters and nieces as young as eight, "marrying" some of them to have "babies for the Lord".

He beat them for speaking to men, took away their money, and dictated what they could eat. He also coached them to be prepared to kill each other and themselves if the authorities ever threatened to break up the clan.

# Homosexuals blamed for Hurricane Katrina

CHRISTIAN zealots in the US have blamed gay men and women in New Orleans for hurricane Katrina which destroyed the city in August.

Repent America says that the city was hit by the devastating storm just days before Southern Decadence was due to host an annual gay pride celebration which attracts tens of thousands of people to the French Quarter of New Orleans.

"Southern Decadence," trumpeted Repent America, "has a history of filling the French quarter ... with drunken homosexuals engaging in sexual acts in the public streets and bars. This act of God destroyed a wicked city."

Asked about the men, women and children killed and injured or left homeless and hopeless by Katrina, the leader of the Philadelphia-based Repent America, Michael Marcavage replied:

"Too bad, screw 'em, they deserved it. Although the loss of lives is deeply saddening, this act of God destroyed a wicked city. From Girls Gone Wild to Southern Decadence, New Orleans was a city that had its doors wide open to the public celebration of sin ... Let us pray for those ravaged by this disaster. However, we must not forget that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in their city for so long."

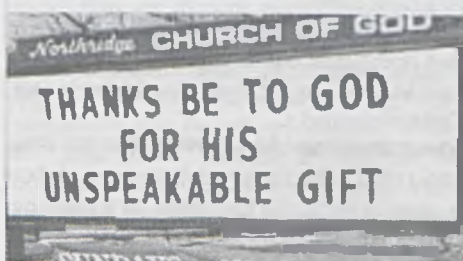
Commenting on Repent America's statement, the British gay weekly, the *Pink Paper*,

said "Extreme Christians obviously have no imagination when it comes to the powers or intelligence they credit God with having.

"Ever quick to point the finger of blame at people who don't quite conform to the hair-shirt-wearing God-botherers' ideal, a group called Repent America has blamed a gay party for prompting God to destroy the city of New Orleans using hurricane Katrina.

"Apparently the annual Southern Decadence festival is so sinful that the whole of New Orleans had to be levelled before it could allow such a disgusting spectacle to take place.

But, as one reveller who was intending to visit the city for the party, said: 'If God had waited a few days he could have wiped out thousands of homos mid-sin.'"



Err... Would that be hurricane Katrina? This church sign in California was spotted by US atheist Ron Frederickson, and first appeared in *Freethought Today*.

IT was a proposal that sent a shudder through many Western capitals: Ontario looked as if it would allow Muslims to establish their own *sharia* courts. And if it did, how long would it be before other Muslims in other countries began clamouring for the introduction of similar religious courts?

On September 8, 11 demonstrations against the proposed *sharia* courts took place in Canada, and several European capitals, including London.

Four days later the province's Premier Dalton McGuinty declared that Ontario would not become the first Western jurisdiction to allow the use of a set of centuries' old religious rules called *sharia* law to settle Muslim family disputes. Furthermore, it would ban all existing religious tribunals used for years by Christians and Jews under Ontario's Arbitration Act.

"I've come to the conclusion that the debate has gone on long enough," he said. "There will be no *sharia* law in Ontario. There will be no religious arbitration in Ontario. There will be one law for all Ontarians."

McGuinty added that religious arbitrations "threaten our common ground," and promised his Liberal government would introduce legislation "as soon as possible" to outlaw them in Ontario. "Ontarians will always have the right to seek advice from anyone in matters of family law, including religious advice," he said. "But no longer will religious arbitration be

deciding matters of family law."

Last December, a report from former New Democrat Party attorney-general Marion Boyd recommended the province allow and regulate *sharia* arbitrations much the same way it does Christian and Jewish tribunals, setting off a firestorm of protests.

Homa Arjomand, the women's rights activist who organised the series of protests across Canada and Europe last month to convince McGuinty to abandon *sharia*, was elated when she heard the news.

"I think our voice got heard loud and clear, and I thank the government for coming out against faith-based arbitrations," said Arjomand. "Oh, I am so happy. That was the best news I have ever heard for the past five years."

But a representative from Ontario's Jewish community expressed disappointment and shock over McGuinty's decision. "We're stunned," said Joel Richler, Ontario region chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

"At the very least, we would have thought the government would have consulted with us before taking away what we've had for so many years," Richler said the current system – in place since 1992 – has worked well and saw no reason for it to be changed for either his or other communities.

"If there have been any problems flowing from any rabbinical court decisions, I'm not aware of them," he said.

The man who pushed hardest for the intro-

# Jubilation law is rejected Canada

duction of *sharia* courts was Mumtaz Ali, the first Muslim to qualify in Canada as a lawyer. In an interview with Laura Trevelyan, the BBC's correspondent in Toronto, Ali said that a Muslim "had the right to live as his religion wished him to", and under *sharia* he could finally live like a true believer in his faith.

What is more, Ali pointed out, in Ontario Orthodox Jews are able to settle their civil disputes in religious courts, so why not Muslims?

Ali put the controversy over his plans down to what he called "post-9/11 Islamophobia".

"It is probably true that Canada's neighbour, the United States, would not entertain Ali's vision, said Trevelyan. But Canada is different, and it is not just the legacy of 9/11 which is muddying the waters for Ali. It is what *sharia* represents to many Muslim women who have fled to Canada escaping repressive regimes. Leading the charge against *sharia* law here is a group of mainly Iranian women who fled from the theocracy of Ayatollah Khomeini a quarter of a century ago.

"In a peaceful Toronto park, as the rain began to fall, several of these women told me why they are so viscerally opposed to the idea of Muslim religious law being used in Canada.

"'I came here to escape *sharia*,' one woman told me. 'Under it, a woman is worth half a man. He can divorce her and she has no rights.' Another woman who was tortured in Iran told me the very word *sharia* made her shiver. To her it is synonymous with a brutal form of authoritarianism, which discriminates against women.

"These Iranian exiles are creating a considerable PR problem for Ali and his supporters. But there are women who speak out in support of *sharia* too.

"In Ali's front room, he introduced me to eloquent and educated Muslim women who accept that *sharia* has a bad name because of how it has been interpreted.

"'This is a chance for us to develop a progressive and tolerant form of *sharia*, one that is consistent with 21st-century notions of gender equality,' so a female PhD student told me."

Asked by the BBC reporter "How do you

## God hates gut-buckets

YOU'VE probably heard of the Atkins Diet, the South Beach Diet and the GI Diet, but now get ready to praise the Lord and pass the fat callipers as a batch of slimming tips fall from Heaven, says Cindy MacDonald

Writing in *Good Weekend* magazine, published by the *Age*, Melbourne, MacDonald reveals "in the US, having a Bible Belt doesn't guarantee a slender middle. And with the country having become as well known for obesity as it is for baseball and Mom's apple pie (clearly too much of it), some clever Christians decided it was time to seek divine intervention and come up with diets based on the word of the Lord.

"As Tom Ciola, author of *Moses Wasn't Fat*, reminds us, 1 Corinthians 3: 16 proclaims our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit. 'Unfortunately', Ciola says, 'many religious Bible-believers today have turned their temples into a junkyard'. He claims his book links motivation techniques, prayer, exercise and nutrition for the ultimate goal of weight control.

"What else is on the menu? For starters, there's the Rev George H. Malkmus's *Hallelujah Diet* (a regimen of no meat, dairy, processed foods, alcohol or caffeine, but enough barley juice, carrot juice and raw vegetables to bring anyone to their knees), and the book *The Maker's Diet* (which claims it will have you 'living the way the Creator intended').

"Other diet manuals include *Help Lord ... The Devil Wants Me Fat!* (1977), *Slim for Him* (1978), *Faithfully Fit* (1991), *More of Jesus, Less of Me* (1998), *The Dieter's Prayer Book* (2000) and the *What Would Jesus Eat? Cook Book* (2002). (I imagine He would have gone for something similar to the Mediterranean Diet when He felt Himself chubbing out.)

"Do they work? If being spiritually sated fills the void where a doughnut might otherwise go, maybe. But at the risk of being called a heathen, I tend to put my weight-loss faith in something a bit more basic: eat less, exercise more."

# as sharia rejected in Canada

get round the fact that women do not have the same rights as men?" the PhD student replied: "Well, they could. I think women should be able to get as much as men out of a divorce."

Ali wanted the *sharia* courts to be used to negotiate pre-nuptial agreements, putting women in the driving seat.

"But inheritance law is unfair," said Trevelyan, "women always get less than men."

"That is because women's outgoings are less than men's, as the man must always support every woman in his family, so it is fair he gets more," she was told by a chorus of female voices.

"Across town from Ali and his front room supporters, I sat in on a class at the University of Toronto. The class lecturer helped set up the first Toronto mosque where women and men pray together.

"I am cautiously optimistic', the academic told me. 'This will force Canadian Muslims to define who they are. It could even be a Canadian contribution to an Islamic reformation.'

"In a dreary looking office block in downtown Toronto, I found the woman who will decide in September what fate awaits Ali and his *sharia* courts.

"Marion Boyd, a lawyer and former feminist activist, has been asked by the Ontario government to review the arbitration act which allows religious groups to settle civil disputes using their own courts.

"She hinted strongly to me that the government could not allow Jewish courts and forbid Muslim ones; that would be discrimination. But Ms Boyd stressed that decisions reached by Muslim courts would have to be consistent with Canada's charter of rights and freedoms.

"I left Marion Boyd trying to reconcile respect for the rights of minorities with Canadian law, and went to see a Toronto rabbi who heads a Beth Din court.

"Muslims and Jews may not always be natural allies, but on this they are united. All religious people have the right to settle difficulties according to their religion, the rabbi told me.

"The problem the Ontario government has is that it cannot say: Jews, we like your law, it is



Homa Arjomand, the women's rights activist, addressing an anti-sharia rally in Canada

good; and Muslims, we do not like yours, it is unfair to women. They must find a way round that."

Shortly after the Trevelyan report was broadcast by the BBC, demonstrations took place across Canada and in Europe. Speaking at one rally in Canada, Nasreen Shah said:

"We are gathered here to demonstrate against *sharia* courts in Ontario. We want to protect women's rights, secularism and human dignity.

The Ontario Arbitration Act (1991) was originally meant to ease the backlog in the courts and cut costs by resolving disputes through arbitration/mediation. At the time, I did not hear any mention of the introduction of *sharia* Law in Ontario. Religion and the court of law are two separate entities and should remain that way, *sharia* law is practised in various forms in different Muslim countries – so who decides which form is to be followed in Ontario?

"We are all aware of the abuse and discrimination suffered by women in countries where there is *sharia* Law – Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, to name a few. Why are Muslim women in Ontario being deprived of the rights that women in Canada have fought for and enjoy? Why are Muslim women being pushed backwards instead of forward?

"The common complaint of many Muslim men in Ontario has been that they no longer have control over their wives/daughters as they did "back home", and the divorce rate has increased in their community. What this translates into is that they can no longer be abusive and domineering towards their wives and daughters in Canada.

The government's contention is that Muslim women have a choice of settling disputes either through the courts or through *sharia*

arbitration. Where is the choice when a woman is told that she is not submitting to the will of God unless she follows the guidelines, counsel and principles related to Muslims through the Koran and Prophet Mohammed if she does not submit to *sharia* arbitration? "No one wants to be ostracised by their religious leaders and community, so naturally a practising Muslim woman will have to choose *sharia* over the courts.

"We are told that in Ontario *sharia* arbitration will deal with wills, inheritance, marriage, remarriage, marriage contracts, divorce, maintenance, custody and maintenance of children, guardianship. It is in these very areas of law where the Muslim woman's rights are abused and where she needs most protection under a court of law. For example, a woman in Islam inherits a fraction of the estate of her husband/father, etc, while her son inherits more than she does. She loses custody of the children at a certain age. In some countries if she wants a divorce, she is entitled to no financial support even though she has valid reasons for wanting the divorce.

"To ensure male domination over women, not only do the Muslim men want *sharia* Law in Ontario, but they want the courts to file or register their arbitrary decision so that it has legal status.

"When Westerners go to Eastern countries they are expected to follow the law of the land. Why, when we come to this country, should we demand our own laws and regulations? We came to this country to leave all that abuse behind us, and to enjoy the freedom and rights of Canada. Why now should we be excluded from this privilege?

"We as Canadians want the protection of the law of Canada and no other," she said.

When I was fifteen, I was having serious doubts about the existence of a supernatural entity benevolently looking over me, and – perhaps even more disturbingly – about the possibility of an afterlife in which I would again see my friends and relatives and exist happily ever after.

It was at that point that I started reading the writings of Bertrand Russell, one of the most controversial philosophers and political activists of the 20th century. Those writings made a lasting impression on me, especially these words:

“I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.”

It took me more than twenty years to really understand what Russell meant, and I’d like to share it with you, with the optimistic hope of perhaps providing other people with somewhat of a shortcut through their philosophical and emotional journey.

“I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.” People often refer to death as a mystery, the greatest mystery of existence. But in fact, there is very little mysterious about death. Death is the cessation of all biological functions, the moment in which the living goes back to the non-living. A human being, while alive, is much, much more precious to his fellow human beings than the pounds of mostly water (with some carbon, nitrogen, phosphorous and a few other things thrown in for good measure) that she or he physically is. After death, the water quickly evaporates, and the rest gradually meshes again with the rest of the universe. We are literally made of stardust, so perhaps it is only fitting that our atoms shall provide the building blocks for new beings, human or not.

However, we have no reason to believe that anything at all of what makes us conscious will survive our death. Of course, we don’t know that for sure, but this lack of knowledge is of little help to a rational thinker: it is quite obvious that the only reason to hope for life after death is our own wishful thinking. We don’t want to face the prospect of complete annihilation, so we make up stories to feel better, while pushing the spectre as far back as we can.

This fear is perhaps misplaced, as philosopher Epicurus wisely admonished us. He said that there is no reason to fear death, since where it is, we are not, and where we are, it is not. Perhaps, but my guts still tighten every time that I go through a moment of turbulence on an airplane, and I don’t enjoy thinking of a

# On Death: a Human

moment in time in which I will not exist. Nevertheless, I think with Russell that our ego, even one as big as mine, does not in fact survive the death of our body. The question is, what are we going to do in the meantime?

“I am not young, and I love life.” Well, I actually am a bit younger than Russell when he wrote those words. But I am sure that I love life as much as he did, and in fact as much as anyone else. Sometimes people think that a sceptic or atheist must be a very cynical and unhappy person, with no prospect of an everlasting existence, miserable and resentful at the rest of the universe. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am a very happy person (though the degree to which this shows depends highly on the weather), an incurable optimist about the future of humanity (despite all the evidence to the contrary), and a firm believer in the human spirit (by which I mean the resilience, ingenuity, and love for each other that our species can display in its best moments).

Where does this love of life come from? Biologically, from our genes: simply put, organisms that did not have a zest for life perished earlier than others, and probably left fewer progeny. Which means that only the optimists are left standing. From a human perspective, love for life comes from the knowledge of other people’s love for us, from the ability to make our way through the world, for the chance of deciding what is meaningful for us.

It is a precious gift from nature, and one that is unfortunately increasingly rare in some parts of the world. I cannot imagine the desperation that leads a young Palestinian to volunteer as a suicide bomber. The combination of not seeing a future for one’s own family, and the religion-instilled illusion of an eternal reward in the afterlife, result in a deadly cocktail that after September 11, 2001 has become an all-too-familiar feature of our own existence.

Love for life is not something that we can take for granted. We have to create the conditions for it, for ourselves as well as for other people. This means that it is not with coercion or weapons that we will defeat our enemies, here or abroad. It is by taking away the reasons for other people to despise life to the point of taking the lives of their fellow human beings, of being willing to give up their own life at the push of a button.

The war against crime is a perpetual failure, and so is the war against terror. We will overcome crime and terror only by realising that people don’t go around stealing and killing if

they have something to live for, if they can provide food, education, and a future to their children; if, in other words, we make possible for them as well as for us to love life.

“But I scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation.” Actually, here I disagree with Russell: I really do not like the prospect of annihilation (though I’m surely not spending most of my time shivering with terror while thinking about it). As another of my favorite philosophers, Woody Allen, said, “I don’t want to be immortal through my work, I want to be immortal through not dying.”

In this, the believer has an apparent advan-

**When it comes to death, it is hard to walk the tightrope between the rational and the emotional, the scientific and the philosophical, says MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI**

tage over the atheist. But I truly think that this is only illusory, an advantage bought at the price of refusing to accept reality, always a dangerous habit to cultivate, and which has brought terrible wreck upon humankind.

Indeed, I think it is this willingness to face our own permanent annihilation that makes being an atheist a particularly brave choice in life. You are faced with hard decisions that are not even a consideration for the believer. Why should I be moral? Why should I live a life of work and sacrifice? Make no mistake about it: atheists are, on the whole, at least as moral and good as believers, but they rarely get the extra credit for it. In some sense, the difference is like the one between two kinds of soldiers: the one who doesn’t fear death, and the one who fears it, but goes into battle nevertheless. While they may both be regarded as heroes because of their actions, certainly the fearless one had to overcome much more than his fearless comrade. If you don’t fear death (or you don’t believe it will happen to you), it is much easier to face the bullets. But it takes real guts to do what you have to do even though you are terrorised by the consequences.

“Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end.” This was perhaps the most difficult part of what Russell said for me to understand. I can accept that happiness has to come to an end, but why is it true happiness because of its fleeting exist-



# Humanistic Perspective

tence? Why is it that "all good things must come to an end," as the saying goes?

Well, imagine that you are watching a movie. A good movie, perhaps the best movie you've ever seen. It was so good, that when the titles roll you are a bit upset with the director: couldn't she have given you a few more scenes? It surely would have been nice to see how the life of the main characters would have turned out beyond the timeframe of the movie. I guess this is the primary motivation behind the persistence of sequels in the movie industry. And yet, you know what the critics say, a sequel is seldom as good as the original.

Imagine that you could in fact protract that movie for a bit longer, and then again a bit longer than that. Initially, you will feel satisfaction, perhaps. (Of course, that will actually depend on what is going to happen to your favorite characters: what if one of them soon dies, or her life takes a bad turn and she becomes somebody you can no longer admire?) But you will soon realise that you can't take that movie forever. No matter how good it was, it has to end some time, or situations will start repeating themselves, dialogues will become stale, and boredom will settle in.

I think the same is true for life, and Russell was right on the mark. If we really did live forever, we would simply die of boredom. Except, of course, that we couldn't die, because we would be immortal! This, I suspect, is a true image of Hell for human beings: like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, condemned to repeat every motion and every word after we have exhausted them all aeons ago. A similar situation was described by the genius that was Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: one of the characters in that book is an alien that happens to be immortal, a very unfortunate condition, which he copes with by inventing all sorts of ways to pass his endless time. At the moment he appears in the book, he is involved in the project of personally insulting every sentient organism in the universe, in its own tongue. But, of course, it is a desperate (and meaningless) attempt to retard the inevitable: eventually, he'll run out of beings to insult, and out of insults to hurl at them. No, ladies and gentlemen, happiness truly is such only because it must come to and end.

**"Nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting."** Indeed they don't, quite the contrary. The meaning of my life extends beyond my life because (hopefully) what I do will still affect people in a positive way when I am gone. This thought is

more than enough to keep me happy and active. It is, I think, a grave fallacy to believe that meaning has to be universal and everlasting in order to have value. I am often asked: "But if you don't believe in an afterlife, or a god, what gives meaning to your existence?"

Besides the fact that I never understood why the existence of a god would give any more meaning to my life (I don't consider worshipping somebody, no matter how powerful, a meaningful activity), I simply don't have the time to worry about it. I have my wife and my child to take care of. I have my parents to comfort through their declining years, I have my brothers, sister and friends to nurture and grow old together. I also have my students, to whom I can perhaps communicate my enthusiasm for knowledge and reason, which will possibly help them in their own lives.

I have the readers of my columns and books, with whom I can share whatever experience or insight I may have been able to gather in the course of my reflections. Moreover, I have billions of fellow human beings that I hope my country will help live a long and meaningful life, and you can be sure that I will vote in the next elections so that those that are supposed to represent me will get that simple message!

What I am trying to say is that the meaning of it all is in you, which is a wonderfully liberating realisation. Knowing that there is an end in sight, gives you a sense of urgency to make a difference while you can. Again, as Woody Allen said in one of his movies, "It's later than you think..." Another of my favorite movie directors, the Italian Nanni Moretti, put the point eloquently in his film, *April*. The main character has been playing around with his life for a bit, without being able to bring himself to do what he really wants to do (which happens to be a musical which has for main character a Trotskyite pastry-maker, but never mind that...). A friend asks him how long he imagines he will live. The character (played by Moretti) answers "until 80." His friend then asks how old Moretti is. He answers 46. The friend takes a measure

tape, indicates the length of 80 centimeters, then one the length of 34 (80 minus 46). "That is how long you still have to go." Moretti understands the message, smiles, and decides to finally do something with the rest of his life, before it's too late. He also recriminates himself for not having answered 100 instead of 80...

Death is a serious issue, even though it is not mysterious. In the last two years I have seen its spectre on two occasions, when both of my parents were diagnosed with cancer and both had to struggle to survive and add a few more years to my pleasure of seeing them in this world. I still am not completely over the death of two of my grandparents, with whom I grew up. I regularly see them in my dreams, talk to them, and wish very hard that they could still be with me. But I know they won't, and what I need to do is to take care of those that love me now and are still around to see that I love them.

When it comes to death, it is hard to walk the tightrope between the rational and the emotional, the scientific and the philosophical, to understand how death can be faced without the belief in a god or in an afterlife, to inquire into how human dignity and moral strength can be maintained even in a universe that doesn't care about us, and it is nevertheless our only home. Nonetheless, it is our choice and privilege to make that home as pleasant for us and for our fellow creatures as we possibly can. There is much to be done, and Moretti's meter is getting shorter every day...



Fooling around with death, Halloween-style

# Silver Ring Thing abstinence group used taxpayer's money to promote religion

THE founder of an American evangelical teen abstinence programme accused of using tax dollars to promote religion said last month the group no longer needed government money.

The Department of Health and Human Services cut off federal funding to the Silver Ring Thing over questions about whether the group adequately separates religion from its message.

Silver Ring founder and president Denny Pattyn insists the group used federal money only for the secular portion of its programme featuring stage performances, music videos and light shows urging teens to abstain from premarital sex.

The department's decision to cut off funding to the group came several months after the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit charging that the Silver Ring Thing improperly used federal money for religious activities. The group has received \$1.2 million in federal money since August 2003 as part of a Bush administration initiative to expand abstinence-only education.

Pattyn said the Silver Ring Thing could survive without federal aid, largely because of increased donations in the wake of the ACLU lawsuit. "More people have come to our aid because of this. It's actually helped us," Pattyn said. "Things have gotten better, not worse."

ACLU Pennsylvania legal director Witold "Vic" Walczak was pleased by the Health and Human Services Department's decision.

"It should not have taken a lawsuit for HHS to discover what was pretty obvious. Silver Ring Thing was using federal dollars to proselytise," Walczak said. "They were using government funds to convert students to a particular faith."

The Silver Ring Thing claims that more than 30,000 young people have vowed to abstain from premarital sex after attending one of the group's three-hour, multimedia presentations.

ACLU said that the Silver Ring programme features people testifying about Christ, quoting from Bible passages and providing members of the audience with Silver Ring Thing Bibles.

But Pattyn says 80 percent of the pro-

gramme is secular. Teens can choose to sign a covenant to themselves or to God, receive a silver ring symbolising their vow with or without a Bible verse inscription, and get follow-up e-mails that are secular or religious.

"There's nothing we've done to try to sneak in faith to kids who don't want to hear about it. It's not our *modus operandi*" he said.

But ACLU insisted that there was no equivalent secular ring. The religious silver ring sold to youngsters is inscribed with the biblical verse "God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin."

Also, during Silver Ring Thing events organisers rain Bible passages from the stage, and ask students interested in remaining sexually abstinent to make a "covenant before God".

On the programme's website, a diary entry openly encourages students to pursue faith and to find completion in Christ.

At many events, however, organisers give participants, who may be uncomfortable with messages of spirituality, the liberty to attend separate sessions in different rooms.

Pattyn said federal dollars were kept in a separate account and that he can show none of the money went for religious activities. Still, he said the programme will submit a plan to Health and Human Services so funding can be restored.

Carol Rose, executive director of the ACLU in Massachusetts, which sued HHS for funding the programme, said the federal government should not underwrite religious indoctrination of students.

"The Silver Ring Thing is nothing more than a vehicle for converting young people to Christianity. Our taxpayer dollars should play no part in such a programme," she said.

Pattyn founded the Silver Ring Thing in 1996 under the umbrella of the John Guest Evangelistic Team Inc at Christ Church at Grove Farm in Ohio Township. It is now based in Moon.

In an era of AIDS, teen pregnancy and date-rage drugs, not many disagree with a message that asks young people to delay sexual activity, but not everyone agrees on how the message should be conveyed.

Abstinence-only education programmes,



No sex, please, we're virgins for Jesus: two American teenagers pictured at a Silver Ring Thing jamboree

which reach millions a year and give no information on contraception, were expected to get \$168 million in federal funding this year. Critics say preaching abstinence is good, but does not sufficiently teach young people about basic sexual health or sexually transmitted diseases.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States argues that federal funding should not push religion, but rather more comprehensive, medically correct family planning and pregnancy prevention, including discussion of contraception.

It also argues that more federal oversight is needed for grants that support faith-based organisations to ensure they promote public health policy without proselytising.

A 2004 Columbia University study showed that while participants in such programmes delayed the start of sex by an average of 18 months, 88 percent still had sex before marriage. And they had rates of sexually transmitted diseases similar to others their age.

Silver Ring Thing, formed a decade ago, has received about \$1.3 million since 2003 as part of President Bush's effort to broaden abstinence-only education.

Denny Pattyn, a native Pittsburgher, created the outreach programme in Yuma, Ariz., and it has spread across the country and internationally.

The HHS letter to the group expressed concern that the programme "may not have included adequate safeguards to clearly separate in time or location inherently religious activities from the federally funded activities."

## Quotable quote

GOD is the immemorial refuge of the incompetent, the helpless, the miserable. They find not only sanctuary in His arms, but also a kind of superiority, soothing to their macerated egos; He will set them above their betters.

— H L Mencken

A SILLY question, surely. Religion is all those fairy stories told us by people with their collars on back-to-front. On the other hand, for some it is the "sure and certain hope" of everlasting life. For many in Britain, it is a vague background activity which comes in handy for weddings and funerals. And for many millions world wide it is a taken-for-granted system of laws, morals, festivals, observances that structure life from birth to death.

It seems worthwhile trying to be clearer what this phenomenon is. What do the experts say? The *Catholic Encyclopaedia* states that "Religion, broadly speaking, means the voluntary submission of oneself to God". It goes on for many pages, but that is apparently the essence, and no doubt Muslims would agree. Any textbook of comparative religion shows, however, that this is only a small sample of what are by common consent called 'religions'. Some have no God, many do not involve submission. Of course for the *Encyclopaedia*, all religions save one (guess which) are more or less primitive.

A more reputable source, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, gives five main meanings, the most general being "one of the prevalent systems of faith and worship". This is nearer to what we usually mean, but it neglects the innumerable systems that have come and gone in history.

It might seem that religions are essentially sets of beliefs or doctrines. These are often crucial to the faithful. Wars are fought, individuals tortured or killed, over them. It is beliefs that proselytisers offer potential converts (Jesus is alive today!). To the unconvinced, on the other hand, they are often what seems most objectionable. It is usually easy to show that they are absurd or impossible, and to the rational thinker that ought to bring down the whole edifice. But it does not. So doctrine cannot be as vital as it seems.

Moreover, it changes – sometimes quite quickly. A more sophisticated approach suggests that there are various features, possession of several of which makes the term *religion* applicable. There are many such lists.

Those suggested by William Alston (in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1967), are: 1. Belief in supernatural beings/gods; 2. A distinction between sacred and profane objects; 3. Ritual acts focused on sacred objects; 4. A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods; 5. Religious feelings, such as awe, mystery, guilt, adoration, connected in idea with the gods; 6. Prayer and other communication with the gods; 7. A world view including a sense of purpose and of the place of the individual; 8. The organisation of life based on the world view; 9. Social groups bound together by the above. However, it seems to me that this list is not long enough. Religions as we

# What is Religion?

observe them surely include many other aspects, each to a greater or less extent. I suggest the following, in no systematic order. 1. A doctrine or creed, more or less mandatory. 2. Sacrifice, real or symbolic (bread and wine, incense). 3. A formal, "authorised" priesthood.

## PROFESSOR JOHN RADFORD poses the question

4. An organisation and corporate body (sometimes with vast possessions and great power). 5. Systems of retreat, eg monasticism and hermitry, with which we might group pilgrimage. 6. A body of myth, legend and real or supposed history. 7. Expression in the arts – music, dance, drama, visual arts, architecture. 8. Individual spiritual development, however that is interpreted. 9. Mystical and ecstatic experience (for some, the essence and culmination of religion). 10. Iconography, the representation and (for some) embodiment of sacred beings and events. 11. A system of ceremonies and festivals, either recurrent such as Easter or Sunday, or *rites de passage* such as baptism, marriage or extreme unction. 12. Texts, scriptures, and oral traditions.

For every one of these components, one could probably find a religion that did not possess it. Quakerism and Zen Buddhism possess little by way of doctrine. Some religions rely heavily on music or ecstatic dance (like the original Dervishes and Shakers), others proscribe them. Elaborate buildings and icons may or may not be vital (Christian history has many bitter conflicts over altars, statues, stained glass windows etc.). Sacrifice varies from killing large numbers of animals and indeed humans, to a coin in the collection box or cabbages at Harvest Festival. There may be still more components, but some selection of these would make up, I think, every known religion.

The complexity suggests one reason for religions persisting. They fill so many functions. Of course one can argue that some functions, such as sacrifice, serve no useful purpose. Some would be better filled in other ways, as with codes of moral behaviour. And some have no essential connection with religious belief, such as architecture and music. But in practice, some such conglomeration is what many people seem to want, and is what religions actually consist of. Even in increasingly secular

countries such as ours, most people want to mark a death, for example, in some way felt to be suitable, and many then turn to organised religion even if they normally pay little attention to it. The religions are ready and willing, and have the procedures and buildings and expertise. A formal ceremony led by an authorised person, with a greater or less degree of ritual, is what many people feel to be appropriate. Bereavement often occasions a deep need to believe that the loved person is in some sense not really gone, and religions unambiguously give that assurance. A different reason for persistence is that once an organisation has reached a certain level of complexity, size, and wealth, it will tend to keep going under its own momentum. "The Church" of whatever persuasion offers a career structure for priests, a vast range of jobs from cleaners to accountants, an outlet for innumerable voluntary workers, and communal activities of all kinds.

A going concern will tend to go on and expand, perpetuating its doctrines, at least until competitors take the business away, or fashions change, or scandal, corruption or schism develop. History shows that, far from being eternal, as proponents frequently claim, religions come and go. Some are limited to a lifetime, as with the prophetess Joanna Southcott (c. 1750-1814. A derivative, the Panacea Society of Bedford, lingered on into our own day.) Hinduism on the other hand has flourished for some thousands of years. The reasons are clearly complex, involving economic, social, evolutionary, psychological and many other factors. If you think, as I do, that religion is in general a blind alley in the development of the human race, it is important to try to understand the phenomenon in all its complexity, and the reasons for its persistence. It won't do just to dismiss it all as nonsensical, however bizarre the beliefs.

*John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.*

### 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](mailto:library@ethicalsoc.org.uk)

A GUEST on Alan Colmes' American radio show, Robert Spence, author and director of [www.jihadwatch.org](http://www.jihadwatch.org), horrified his host by agreeing with Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney's suggestion that American mosques should be bugged. Romney was right, said Spence, because American Muslims in general had not taken any concrete steps to separate jihadists and those with jihadist sympathies from their ranks.

Colmes was aghast, and cited the condemnations of terror by the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR). Several times during the half-hour Spence was on the show, Colmes chided him for not taking CAIR's condemnation of terrorism at face value.

Commenting on the radio show on his website, Spence said "Colmes seemed blissfully unaware, or unwilling to consider, the possibility that CAIR's condemnation might not be all that it appeared to be.

"Indeed, much of what CAIR produces is not all it appears to be – as was graphically illustrated last month by a misadventure in photo retouching at CAIR's website. A photograph posted at the website depicted "leaders of the interfaith community gathered for an interfaith candlelight vigil...to mark the fourth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks." One of these leaders – who appeared to be Samina Faheem Sundas, editor of the *American Muslim Voice* — was standing prominently between the male speaker at the podium and two other Muslim women. Those women were standing submissively with hands clasped in front and eyes cast downward, hijabs showing prominently in the picture. But there was something suspicious about the hijab worn by the woman resembling Sundas: she wasn't actually wearing one. The one she had on in the picture was crudely drawn on her head by a retoucher. What's more, two women in the crowd also sported drawn-on hijabs. Someone at CAIR evidently thought that posting a photo of bareheaded women would cast doubts upon the organisation's Islamic correctness.

"When I posted the photos illustrating this at my website, CAIR within hours replaced the

## Quotable quote

I DO not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

– Thomas Paine

retouched photo with the unretouched original. But the damage was done: soon the story was posted all over the web.

"If this were the only example of CAIR airbrushing the truth, it would be innocuous enough. But it isn't:

"1. CAIR's material misleads non-Muslims about Islam.

"At its website the organisation explains that jihad 'is a central and broad Islamic concept that includes struggle against evil inclinations within oneself, struggle to improve the quality of life in society, struggle in the battlefield for self-defence (eg, having a standing army for national defence), or fighting against tyranny or oppression.'

"Left unmentioned is the fact that throughout history, Muslims have not stopped at self-defence or fighting against tyranny. In fact, the mainstream Islamic understanding of jihad has always included the idea of offensive war against unbelievers to spread the hegemony of Islam. A manual of Islamic law from the Shafi'i school, one of the four major schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence, calls jihad 'a communal obligation' to make war upon 'Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians ... until they become Muslim or else pay the non-Muslim poll tax'. A jurist from the Maliki school declared that 'Jihad is a precept of Divine institution' and that non-Muslims 'have the alternative of either converting to Islam or paying the poll tax (*jizya*), short of which war will be declared against them'. Ibn Taymiyya (d 1328), a Hanbali jurist who is a favorite of Osama bin Laden and other modern-day jihadists, writes in a similar vein: 'Since lawful warfare is essentially jihad and since its aim is that the religion is God's entirely and God's word is uppermost, therefore according to all Muslims, those who stand in the way of this aim must be fought.' The Hanafi school sounds the same notes, explaining that Mohammed 'instructed his commanders, directing them to call the infidels to the faith ... If the infidels, upon receiving the call, neither consent to it nor agree to pay capitation tax, it is then incumbent on the Muslims to call upon God for assistance, and to make war upon them.'

"2. CAIR criticises those who tell the truth about Islam.

"After getting radio host Michael Graham suspended, CAIR directed its ire toward Geoff Metcalf, Graham's replacement, who had told his listeners that the Koran allows Muslims to lie to unbelievers. CAIR's press release attacking Metcalf, however, carefully avoids saying that what Metcalf said was false. And it wasn't: deception of unbelievers is indeed taught by the Koran itself. 'Let not the believers take for friends or helpers unbelievers rather than believers. If any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah; except by way of precau-

## US Muslim organ photo for 'Islam'



**Top photo shows the crudely-created hijab around Samina Faheem Sundas' head which appeared on CAIR's website. It was quickly replaced with the original, unretouched photo when this stupid deception was spotted by Robert Spence, director of Jihadwatch.**

tion, that ye may guard yourselves from them' (Koran 3:28). Revered Koranic commentator Ibn Kathir explains that this verse teaches that if there are 'believers who in some areas or times fear for their safety from the disbelievers', they may 'show friendship to the disbelievers outwardly, but never inwardly'. That's deception. Also, Koran 16:106 even allows a Muslim to deny his faith under pressure.

"This wasn't the first time CAIR raised a fuss over someone telling the truth about Islam. In March it waged a successful campaign against *National Review*, compelling the magazine to remove from sale by NR Book Service a book called *The Life and Religion of Mohammed*. CAIR called the book 'virulently Islamophobic', and took issue with its description of the prophet of Islam as a warrior and a man of large appetites. CAIR's Ibrahim Hooper fumed that 'this anti-Muslim screed is the literary equivalent of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and should not be promoted by a publication that has any sense of decency'. But, in fact, *The Life and Religion of Mohammed* is not 'anti-Muslim hate literature', and asserts nothing about Mohammed that cannot be abundantly established from the Koran and the earliest Islamic sources.

## anisation doctors mic Correctness'

"3. CAIR has exaggerated data on anti-Muslim hate crimes.

"According to journalist David Skinner, 'It's almost humorous what tiny offences pass as worthy of complaint in the CAIR report. That a student at the University of Houston 'saw flyers and posters with false and degrading statements about the Koran and the prophet Mohammed' is apparently a civil rights matter. That a College Republican at Roger Williams in Rhode Island wrote in a student publication that 'a true Muslim is taught to slay infidels' is treated with similar gravity'. School officials ask a Muslim student to remove her hijab before getting photographed for her school ID card – more discrimination. Then CAIR claims solemnly that anti-Muslim hate crimes have sky-rocketed since 9/11.

"4. CAIR has never come clean about its own ties and goals.

"Would CAIR like to see the US become a sharia state? CAIR board chairman Omar Ahmad said this to a Muslim audience in 1998: 'Islam isn't in America to be equal to any other faith, but to become dominant. The Koran should be the highest authority in America, and Islam the only accepted religion on earth.' Ahmad has since then claimed that he was misquoted, but the reporter who heard him stands by her story. CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper was almost as forthright as Ahmad, telling the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*: 'I wouldn't want to create the impression that I wouldn't like the government of the United States to be Islamic sometime in the future.' Radio host Michael Medved recently told me that he pinned down Hooper to acknowledge the same thing on his show not long ago.

Hooper told the *Star Tribune* that he wanted to attain this goal not through violence, but 'education'. However, other CAIR officials have not been so peace-minded. CAIR co-founder Nihad Awad has repeatedly declared his support for the terrorist group Hamas. Former CAIR communications specialist Ismail Royer is in prison for his role in the 'Virginia jihad network'. Royer's indictment charges that he stockpiled arms and planned 'to prepare for and engage in violent jihad on behalf of Muslims in Kashmir, Chechnya, the Philippines and other countries and territories, against countries, governments, military forces and peoples that the defendants and their conspirators believed to be enemies of Islam'. Other former CAIR officials also languish in prison on terrorism-related offences.

"Why do Alan Colmes and his friends in the mainstream media and many government organisations still give CAIR a free pass as a neutral civil rights group when its commitment to the truth is so manifestly tenuous? The Photoshopped hijab bears mute but eloquent witness to the real priorities of this organisation. The sooner Colmes and his ilk wake up to this, the safer we will all be.

• Robert Spence is a writer and researcher who has written five books, seven monographs, and hundreds of articles about jihad and Islamic terrorism. He is the author of *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith* (Encounter) and *Onward Muslim Soldiers: How Jihad Still Threatens America and the West* (Regnery).

### Muslim Council of Britain

The British equivalent of Jihadwatch is MCBwatch, recently set up to monitor the activities of the Muslim Council of Britain. Last month its carried the following report:

Among its many roles, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) acts as an umbrella body for a wide range of other Muslim organisations, seeking by the weight of numbers to present a more powerful voice to the media and to government. The MCB are proud of their affiliate programme and the 2005 Secretary General's Report boasts that "over 400 organisations have affiliated to the MCB so far." Seeking to pull together the community in this way is a laudable aim but there is a problem, namely that among their affiliates are some organisations with some pretty unpleasant views.

Consider the example of *Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith*, an educational charity with over 40 branches across the UK. Given their stated purpose of educating Muslim youth, one begins to worry when their aims and objectives speak of calling Muslims back to "the authentic traditions of the past times" and that "Islam is the basis of the civilisation and the politics of the state". But where things really hot up is when you turn to their magazine, *The Straight Path*.

*The Straight Path* is a bi-monthly magazine and older issues can be viewed online; it is the May-June 2004 issue in which we are particularly interested. The editorial article on page 3 gets straight to the point and opens with a quote from Dr Mahathir Mohamed, a former president of Malaysia, who says:

"Today the Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them ..." Just in case you thought this was just Dr. Mohamed's view, the editor of *The Straight Path* goes on to say that this statement "is not far from the truth". The Jews are blamed for the war against the Taliban, which was apparently designed to weaken Afghanistan and Pakistan so that they would not be a problem

when the Jews advanced on other Muslim nations. The war in Iraq is also the fault of the Jews, and, after Saddam fell, apparently a Jewish leader said "We (the Jews) have no worries now in the Middle East". They are now targeting Saudi Arabia, says the article, which goes on to speak of the "terrorism" the Jews are engaged in.

The tendency of Islamists to blame the Jews for all the woes of Muslims, be they political, social, or religious is well documented. Its roots lie in the rejection of Mohammed by the Jewish tribes in Medina and can be traced from the Koran down through Muslim history. Indeed, *The Straight Path* magazine supports its anti-Jewish slant by helpfully quoting (on page 13) a saying of Mohammed in the hadith: "May Allah curse the Jews and the Christians ..." (a tradition reported in the collections of both Bukhari and Muslim).

What if you're not a Jew? Now at this point those readers who are not Jewish may be breathing a sigh of relief and thinking to themselves "This is very nasty, I'm glad I'm not Jewish!" Alas, *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith's* resentment does not end with the Jews. If you move from their magazine to the articles section of their website, you will find an essay by Dr Muhammad al-Jibaly entitled *Eid Celebrations – Differing from the Disbelievers* in which he sets out a number of reasons why it is important that Muslims make themselves distinct from disbelieving, non-Muslims. In particular he notes that: "The disbelievers are misguided, and their ways are based on sick or deviant views concerning their societies, the universe, and their very existence. Their actions frequently reflect their deviant opinions. Why then would anyone ever think of imitating them?"

(*Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith* withdrew this article from their website after a BBC Panorama programme also drew attention to it on August 2005. But thankfully you can still read it by visiting Google's cached version.)

Now this is pretty strong stuff. But the key question is this: given the undeniably unpleasant views of *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith*, why have the MCB allowed them to become (or remain) an affiliate?

Nowhere on the affiliation form on the MCB website is there any mention of a code of best practice to which affiliates are expected to subscribe, which means that the MCB either has a blind-spot when it comes to this issue, or simply does not care about the stance of the organisations it is in bed with.

This same issue came up recently when another affiliate organisation of the MCB openly declared support for suicide bombings

(Continued on page 14)

### Natural disasters

FROM a historical perspective, Katrina is a rather banal instance of nature plying her trade. If we are in the wrong place at the wrong time, nature will pummel us, drown us, incinerate us, suffocate us, pulverise us, disembowel us as casually as we might swat a fly or step on a cockroach.

Nature harbours no ill will. It matters not a jot to her whether we writhe or thrive. As Stephen Crane notes in his short story *The Open Boat*, nature is neither kind nor cruel, but "indifferent, flatly indifferent."

In deadliness, Katrina has been vastly outstripped by numerous disasters, most recently the Asian tsunami that claimed 200,000 lives. Thirty thousand died in 79 CE when Mt Vesuvius erupted; 800,000 in a Chinese earthquake of 526 CE; 300,000 in an 1881 Chinese typhoon; 4 million in an 1888 Chinese flood; 6,000 in a Galveston tidal wave of 1900; 100,000 in a 1923 Japanese earthquake; 2,000 in a 1928 Florida flood; 75,000 in a Peruvian earthquake of 1970; one million the same year in a Pakistani cyclone.

These death tolls pale beside the gargantuan

lethality wrought by epidemic diseases. The worldwide Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918-1920 smote 22 million; cholera, typhus and smallpox have claimed millions; recurrent outbreaks of bubonic plague, the worst in 1347-1351, have dispatched up to 100 million hapless souls.

Natural disasters are abetted by human ignorance, negligence, stinginess and stupidity. Were ours a sensible species, we would stop warring with one another and instead collectively wage war against the common enemy, the destructive vicissitudes of nature.

GARY SLOAN  
Louisiana

I BELIEVE I am right in saying that America is considered the most religious country in the world. The religious spectrum ranges from the Moonies, the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses to the somewhat outlandish Amish communities etc, but I have been wondering whether the advent of hurricane Katrina has launched some sceptical assaults against deeply entrenched religious convictions.

If memory serves me right, I seem to recall that some 10 or 12 years ago Barbara Smoker delivered one of her characteristically pungent remarks when she said: "If the Christian God exists, He must be a very incompetent Architect." (And so say all of us!) Is it remotely feasible, one wonders, whether quite a few Americans are now coming round to a similar point of view?

MARTIN O'BRIEN  
Gwent

### 'Islamist' terrorists

I DON'T want to spoil anyone's fun, but just as a matter of interest, how do we know that we are under attack from "Islamist" terrorists? I've only ever read statements from two of those allegedly involved in the bombings of New York, Washington DC, Madrid or London – and in both cases, these alleged bombers were at pains to stress that the motives for their barbarity were political, not religious.

As I am by far the most extreme fundamentalist atheist I've ever met, I'm happy to see religion blamed for everything and anything. I do

## Three cheers for rationalist Sir Henry Wood

By Bill McIlroy

THERE appeared to be an air of defiance at this year's Last Night of the Proms. Thousands of Londoners and music lovers from further afield travelled by bus and Underground to the Royal Albert Hall. They could not have been oblivious to the possibility that Islamic terrorists who hate all things Western, including music, would make another attack on the transport system. But Promenaders were undeterred by those who wish for Britain's submission to the supposed will of a myth.

Thousands packed the Royal Albert Hall or saw the concert in Swansea, Glasgow and

Belfast. They were well rewarded by Paul Daniel and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, with outstanding performances by counter-tenor Andreas Scholl and guitarist John Williams.

Prominent on the platform was a bronze bust of Sir Henry Wood (1869-1944), co-founder and first conductor in 1895 of the Promenade Concerts. As usual on the Last Night, two promenaders placed a chaplet on the bust. And when Paul Daniel invited three cheers for Sir Henry the response was roof raising.

Freethinkers have cause to be proud of Sir Henry Wood. He was one of us, an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association from 1937 till his death.

The Last Night included, as always, Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* March No 1.

Sir Edward Elgar (1857 - 1934) was born into a Catholic family. Although his compositions included religious works like *The Dream of Gerontius*, based on Cardinal Newman's poem, Elgar's Catholicism was



Sir Edward Elgar

superficial and abandoned in later life.

Father Valentine Elwes, who called during his last illness, was sent away on Elgar's orders.

When the cancer-stricken patient was dying, another priest was admitted to his bedroom. He claimed that Elgar had reaffirmed his faith. But the nurse who was with him till the end said: "He was unconscious with the drugs and did not say anything. He just died."

Elgar had directed that he should be cremated (a very unCatholic practice 70 years ago) and his ashes scattered at the confluence of the Severn and the Teme. Horrified Catholics exerted such pressure that his wishes were ignored. Elgar was buried in the odour of sanctity at St. Wulstan's, Little Malvern.

## Deception and bad bed-fellows

(continued from page 13)

against civilians in Israel. In a BBC Radio 4 interview, Inayat Bunglawala of the MCB was asked why the MCB could not simply cut off the organisation in question. Mr Bunglawala consistently ducked the question, which would suggest that the MCB knows it has a problem with its affiliates, but is either unwilling or not brave enough to draw up a code of conduct.

Drawing up such a code would surely not be difficult. One could, for example, state that any affiliate found to be promoting hatred, violence or division would have their affiliation cancelled. Can it really be that hard? Is the real issue the MCB's failure to grasp the nettle of Islamic radicalism? Or, most worryingly, do the MCB actually share the views of *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith*?

The sorry fact is that *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith* are not the only Islamist organisation affiliated to the MCB, and their views are not uncommon. Amongst the MCB's affiliates are organisations that espouse racist, radical, and terrorist views. Over the next few weeks, we will expose more of them.

If you want to take further action on this matter, please consider emailing Barclays Bank, with whom *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith* have an account. You could ask them why they allow an organisation with such unpleasant views to hold an account with them and point out they have closed the accounts of racist organisations in the past. You might also consider writing to the Charity Commission for England and Wales and asking them to consider revoking *Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith*'s charitable status. (*Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith* are charity number 272001).



worry however, that if we allow wishful thinking to cloud objective analysis, we risk assisting the propaganda work of the USA – which is, without any doubt, a fundamentalist Christian empire, and is also (as possessor of more money and weapons than any other state in history) the One True Threat from which we should never allow our attention to be distracted.

**MAT COWARD**  
Somerset

**Shocking photo**

YOUR September cover picture was shocking. Now – playing the war-game – if it is reasonable to suppose such nastiness were generated by Islam itself, just supposing, what will the *Freethinker* readership do?

Continue to patronise handy convenience shops and restaurants owned by Muslims – because these are nice Muslims who couldn't possibly be donating cash towards the building of another mosque or Muslim community centre? Continue to take holidays in Morocco because the people are so nice there? Continue to socialise with Muslims who, when the numbers reach a critical point, will still want to socialise with you as an equal and allow you the inherited civil rights?

I suspect that, unless casting yet another letter into the political establishment is considered a doing, it will do nothing.

**KEITH BELL**  
Wrexham.

**Salman Rushdie**

SALMAN Rushdie is quoted (*Freethinker*, September) as saying: "It should be 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." It is difficult to know what he means by this. It is true that the main events of Mohammed's life are fairly well established, though some, such as the night trip to Jerusalem, are fantasies. But the origins of many religions and religious movements are as well, or better, documented. For example, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Shakers, Mormons, Theosophists, Rastafarians, Scientologists, the Bahai faith and the Unification Church. In any case, Islam is not founded on the events of the Prophet's life, but on his supposed revelations from God by way of the angel Gabriel. Since there is no reason to think that either of these beings exists, probably few, except Muslims, take this seriously. It is perhaps superfluous to add that the "revela-

tions" were transmitted orally for some time, and only later reduced to one authorised version. So we cannot be certain that any particular passage in the Koran actually came from Mohammed.

The author of *The Satanic Verses* must know this only too well. I have little doubt that Mohammed did believe he received a divine message, as many have done. But to regard such experiences as evidence for historical fact is nonsense.

**JOHN RADFORD**  
London

**A little knowledge**

I CARRIED out an internet search after reading Fiona Weir's letter in the September *Freethinker*, and it appears that the poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744) coined the phrase, in his *Essay on Criticism*: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring; there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again."

**MARGARET JACKSON-ROBERTS**  
London

**Editor's note:** Sorry, Margaret, you are wrong. Pope used the word "learning", not "knowledge".

**Of men and apes**

IN a belated response to John Radford's letter in the March issue, on the question of whether or not people are a variety of ape, may I direct him to the evolutionary tree shown on p26 of *A Devil's Chaplain*, which I have just come across:



Dawkins points out that "there is no natural category that includes chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utangs but excludes humans". The diagram indicates that chimps are more closely related to people than they are to gorillas, so, logically, if we are not apes then neither are gorillas, orang-utangs or gibbons. Which would make a nonsense of the word "ape".

I cannot disagree with any of the other points he made in his letter, which are well taken.

**GRAHAM NOBLE**  
Fareham

**Meditation Mathematics**

THE *Guardian* item quoted in your September issue correcting the Yogi mathematical formula for assessing the proportion of the British public required to take up advanced transcen-

dental meditation in order to bring about major changes in society is of great significance.

Though unsure whether or not there is a god, I have long yearned to be a Yogic Flyer; but all my attempts to overcome gravity have so far been unsuccessful. Now I see where the problem lies.

I therefore intend to devote the rest of my life to exhorting the square root of one percent of the British public to take up advanced meditation, for the sake of great social enlightenment as well as the ability of my humble self to achieve levitation.

Of course, any mention of square roots must bring to mind the following celebrated limerick:

*There was a young man of Bengal  
With an odd mathematical ball:  
The square root of its weight  
Plus his penis times eight  
Just equalled four-thirds of fuck all.*

**F J THISTLEWAITE**  
London

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## Events & Contacts

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Group:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. [www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html](http://www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html). The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, November 1. 7.30pm. Greg Marshall: *A Sceptic's Guide to Scientology. "You got an ology? You're a scientist!"*

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

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01494 771851. 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](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk). Website: [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.devonhumanists.org.uk).

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

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

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

**Essex Humanists:** 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: NI Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

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

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, November 3, 8pm. Mohan Uddin: *The Relationship between Science and Religion*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, November

8, 7.30pm. John Hughes: *The Lunar Men – Science and Freethought in the Age of Revolution*.

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

**Isle of Wight Humanist Group.** Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail [davidb67@clara.co.uk](mailto:davidb67@clara.co.uk)

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Friends Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, October 27, 8pm. Graham Kemish: *The Incompatibility of Funerals and Rationalism*.

**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, November 2, 8pm. John Hughes: *The Evolution of God*. Wednesday, December 7, Annual Dinner.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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