

£1.25

The

Vol 125 No 12
December 2005

Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

The woman pictured is Sajida Rishawi, who calmly walked into a wedding party in Jordan with a bomb strapped to her body. The bomb failed to go off, but the one attached to her husband *did* explode and 38 people died in the ensuing carnage. What makes people like this tick? See *The Puzzle of the Suicide Bomber* – p6



Lord Byron was contemptuous of religion, but found it difficult to shake off its influences. Gary Sloan examines the life of this complex man – see *centre pages*



Also in this issue:

Government forced to rethink its Religious Hatred Bill – p3

Religious Right branded 'Nazis' by US rabbi – p3

Saudi Teacher jailed for 'mocking religion' – p8

Humanists and Hurricanes – p10

Row erupts over 'racist' article in gay magazine – p11

Australian Muslim website incites racial hatred – p6

Evangelists sneak bibles into foreign countries under the cover of charity – p7

THERE is a name for a man who sucks an infant boy's penis, and I bet you think you know just what that is. Wrong, it is not, in this instance, a pervert, but a *mohel*.

A *mohel* is a Jewish circumcisor, and in a circumcision ritual practised by a minority of orthodox Jews, the *mohel* carries out a rite called *metzitzah b'peh*. After mutilating the infant by removing the foreskin – a disgusting practice if ever there was one – the *mohel*, in an act that can only be described as vile and barbaric – sucks the blood from the wound to “clean” it.

After reading of this practice, I was found by my partner standing in the middle of the living-room, looking faintly green and gazing distantly into space. “You ok?” he asked. “Mmmm,” I replied distractedly.

About ten minutes before stumbling on a *New York Times* report about *metzitzah b'peh*, I had slung cholesterol concerns to the wind, and tucked into a sandwich containing two runny fried eggs and several rashers of bacon. I was now turning the contents of the report over in my mind, while my stomach was turning over the contents of the sandwich. “No,” I told him, “I have just read something on the internet that has disturbed me more than anything else I can ever remember.” And I filled him in on the details, gaining some comfort that he too had become green at the gills.

The *New York Times* had drawn attention to the practice because it had come to light earlier this year that three infant boys, in Staten Island and Brooklyn, had been infected by type-1 herpes after the same *mohel* had put his mouth to their wounded genitals. One had subsequently died.

The report appeared a year after the American magazine, *Pediatrics*, ran a report concerning the infection of eight infants with genital HSV-1 infection after *metzitzah b'peh* had been performed. Four of the infants had recurrent episodes of genital HSV infection and one developed HSV encephalitis. The four *mohels* involved in this outrage – and later tested for HSV antibodies – were found to be sero-positive.

Pediatrics concluded that ritual Jewish circumcision that includes “*metzitzah* with direct oral-genital contact carries a serious risk for transmission of HSV from *mohels* to neonates, which can be complicated by protracted or severe infection”.

Pediatrics revealed that “according to biblical law, a male infant should be circumcised at the age of eight days as a sign of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people (Genesis 17:10–14; Leviticus 12:3). According to classical rabbinical interpretation, performance of this religious ritual offers medical advantages, a view upheld by many modern medical authorities.

“The Babylonian Talmud (Sabbath 133b), the main rabbinical literature completed in the fifth century of the common era, states that for the sake of the infant, the *mohel* is obliged to perform the *metzitzah* ‘so as not to bring on risk’. The nature of the risk was not specified. It specifically states that ‘this procedure is performed for the sake of the infant’s safety, and if a *mohel* does not perform the suction [of the

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE comes close to losing his lunch after learning the details of *metzitzah b'peh*



wound] this is deemed dangerous and he is to be dismissed’.”

Another example, if one were needed, of religion getting things horribly wrong.

Pediatrics added: “To prevent medical complications, the Talmud permits only an experienced and responsible *mohel* to perform the ritual circumcision.

“In the 19th century, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818–1865) established the principles of hygiene and disease transmission, after neonatal tuberculosis was documented following circumcision by an infected *mohel*. Since then, most rabbinical authorities modified their approach in response to these findings. Because the Talmudic injunction to perform *metzitzah* did not explicitly stipulate oral suction, 160 years ago Rabbi Moses Schreiber (Pressburg, 1762–1839), a leading rabbinical authority, ruled that *metzitzah* could be conducted by instrumental suction, a ruling quickly adopted by most rabbinical authorities. Consequently, the great majority of ritual circumcisions are performed today with a sterile device and not by oral suction by the *mohel*. However, some orthodox rabbis have felt threatened by criticism of the old religious customs and strongly resist any change in the traditional custom of oral *metzitzah*.

“On the basis of our observations, the medico-legal impact of neonatal infection by the *mohel* has to be redefined. Our findings provide evidence that ritual Jewish circumcision with oral *metzitzah* may cause oral-genital transmission of HSV infection, resulting in clinical disease including involvement of the skin, mucous membranes, and HSV encephalitis.

“Furthermore, oral suction may not only endanger the child but also may expose the *mohel* to human immunodeficiency virus or hepatitis B from infected infants. The same consideration that led the Talmudic sages once to establish the custom of the *metzitzah* for the sake of the infant could now be applied to per-

suaude the *mohel* to use instrumental suction.

“Indeed, after our first cases, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel pronounced in 2002 the legitimacy of using instrumental suction in cases in which there is a risk of contagious disease. We support ritual circumcision but without oral *metzitzah*, which might endanger the newborns, and is not part of the religious procedure.”

But the *Pediatrics* report cuts no ice with Rabbi David Niederman of the United Jewish Organization in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, who declared: “The Orthodox Jewish community will continue a practice that has been practised for over 5,000 years. We do not change. And we will not change.”

While *Pediatrics* deserves praise for its campaign to stamp out *metzitzah*, it’s assertion that “We support ritual circumcision” beggars belief. I have said in the past, and repeat it again: ritual mutilation of humans too young to consent to such procedures is nothing short of grievous bodily harm, and the sooner something is done to eradicate it, the better.

Wondering whether anyone else had a view concerning *metzitzah*, I trawled the internet until I hit paydirt in the form of an article entitled “Cut it off – another disgusting religious practice” by Christopher Hitchens.

He identified Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer as the the 57-year-old *mohel* responsible for infecting the three latest boys. “He is currently under a court order that forbids him from doing it again – pending an investigation by the health department. What ‘investigation’? If another man of that age were found to be slicing the foreskins of little boys and then sucking their penises and their blood, he would be in jail – one hopes – so fast that his feet wouldn’t touch the ground. If he then told the court that God ordered him to do it, he would be offering precisely the defence that thousands of psychos have already made so familiar.”

Hitchens concluded: “Jewish babies exposed to herpes in New York, thousands of American children injured for life after the rape and torture they suffered at the hands of a compliant Catholic priesthood, prelates and mullahs outbidding each other in denial of AIDS ... it’s not just your mental health that is challenged by faith. Anyone who says that this evil deserves legal protection is exactly as guilty as the filthy old men who delight in inflicting it.

“What a pity that there is no hell!”

AND now a plea for help. Next year, as part of our 125th anniversary celebrations, we aim to make the *Freethinker* available in digital format. This will entail converting past issues into pdf format on CD Rom disks. Currently we have neither the resources nor the expertise to carry out this very important project. If you can help in any way, please contact me either by post or via my email: fteditor@aol.com

Government promises rethink on Religious Hatred Bill

PEERS returned to debate the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill last month. This followed the major changes peers imposed on 25 October to protect freedom of expression (by 260 votes to 111). The government had not anticipated the defeat, and over a fortnight later is still in disarray. It has apparently also failed to persuade the Parliamentary business managers to put off the debate to give ministers more time to come up with alternative proposals.

Home Office Minister Baroness Scotland of Asthal was reduced to making no comments of substance about the government's reaction to its earlier shock defeat, except to make a vague comment that it was accepting the "framework" of peers' demands for freedom of speech to be protected. She added rather diffidently that the government was anxious to reach a consensus on the Bill that would avoid the necessity for further conflict between the two Houses. She said "nothing was set in stone" although she was not yet able to give precise details of how the Bill might be altered to meet peers' demands.

Liberal Democrat Lord Avebury tabled amendments to the Bill supported by Lord Lester of Herne Hill, QC, one of which aimed to abolish the laws of blasphemy and blasphemous libel. Lord Avebury, a long time campaigner for abolition, said: "If God exists he doesn't need the protection of this or any other law."

It was argued that by abolishing the existing blasphemy laws, it would be made clear that the new Bill was not a replacement that extended the concept of blasphemy to other religions. On the other hand, Lady Scotland said: "The government's clear desire is that the [Religious Hatred] Bill should not be seen as a substitute for the blasphemy laws." Baroness Scotland said that the government would keep the blasphemy law under review and that it would not be abolished unless the bench of bishops gave the green light for it. The Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, indicated that the Church would probably not oppose the abolition. The government said that there would

have to be widespread consultation with "faith groups" before abolition was considered, but Lord Avebury retorted that there had already been a select committee which sat for a year looking at this issue and it had consulted every conceivable religion (and the National Secular Society). He wondered why this whole process had to begin again.

There was astonishingly widespread support for abolition of blasphemy, even from the Bishop of Oxford, but there was also a feeling that this was not the appropriate Bill for it and that more work needed to be done.

The government almost pleaded with him not to put the matter to a vote but, clearly unconvinced by the Government's undertakings, he insisted on a division. This was lost by 113 votes to 153. As he commented afterwards: "I believe that the Minister will agree that it was worth putting the amendment to a Division because it demonstrated a radical change in the opinion in your Lordships' House since we last debated blasphemy. It is moving in the direction that I would like to see that of total abolition and we probably would have got there had there been a free vote on the government's side of the House as there was on this side. I will leave the Minister to reflect on that and on whether it is appropriate to embark on yet another round of consultation to substitute for the work that has already been done at such great length by the Select Committee, as she acknowledges."

They also sought to repeal Section 2 of the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860, under which Peter Tatchell had been prosecuted for interrupting the Archbishop of Canterbury in Canterbury Cathedral. Given the earlier defeat, this amendment was withdrawn.



Quotable quote

SHAKE off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.

— Thomas Jefferson

US Rabbi likens the Religious Right to Nazis

THE leader of the largest branch of American Judaism blasted conservative religious activists in a speech last month, calling them "zealots" who claim a "monopoly on God" while promoting anti-gay policies akin to Adolf Hitler's.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the liberal Union for Reform Judaism, said "religious right" leaders believe "unless you attend my church, accept my God and study my sacred text you cannot be a moral person."

"What could be more bigoted than to claim that you have a monopoly on God?" he said during the movement's national assembly in Houston. The audience of 5,000 responded to the speech with enthusiastic applause.

Yoffie did not mention evangelical Christians directly, using the term "religious right" instead. In a separate interview, he said the phrase encompassed conservative activists of all faiths, including within the Jewish community.

He used particularly strong language to condemn conservative attitudes toward homosexuals. He said he understood that traditionalists have concluded gay marriage violates Scripture, but he said that did not justify denying legal protections to same-sex partners and their children.

"We cannot forget that when Hitler came to power in 1933, one of the first things that he did was ban gay organisations," Yoffie said. "Yes, we can disagree about gay marriage. But there is no excuse for hateful rhetoric that fuels the hellfires of anti-gay bigotry."

The Union for Reform Judaism represents about 900 synagogues in North America with an estimated membership of 1.5 million. Of the three major streams of US Judaism – Orthodox and Conservative are the others – it is the only one that sanctions gay ordination and supports civil marriage for same-sex couples.

Yoffie said liberals and conservatives share some concerns, such as the potential damage to children from violent or highly sexual TV shows and other popular media. But, he said, overall, conservatives too narrowly define family values, making a "frozen embryo in a fertility clinic" more important than a child, and ignoring poverty and other social ills.

Quotable quote

ALMOST everyone who has read history in a more than casual manner knows that when the great figure of God appears in a controversy, the shooting cannot be far off.

— Stewart H Holbrook



Saudi teacher convicted of 'mocking religion'

A SAUDI high school teacher has been sentenced to three years in prison and 750 lashes after he was convicted of "mocking religion". Muhammed Al-Harbi was accused by his pupils of mocking Islam, favouring Jews and Christians, practising witchcraft and preventing them from carrying out ritual ablutions.

He will receive 50 lashes a week for 15 weeks, to be inflicted in public.

Al-Harbi said that the students who filed the complaint against him had failed a monthly chemistry test. "They asked me to give them the exam again and when I refused, they went to the principal to complain but he upheld my decision," he told *Arab News*.

According to Al-Harbi, the students' actions were triggered by other teachers who were angry that he had been promoted ahead of them. The judge in the case, which was conducted in a religious court, did not question anyone from the school except for the students and the teachers who filed the lawsuit.

"I asked the court to talk to the principal and anyone from the school, but the judge refused," said Al-Harbi.

One of the charges made against Al-Harbi was that he praised disbelievers and mocked bearded men since many religious people are bearded. "That is just ridiculous," said Al-Harbi's lawyer as Al-Harbi has a beard himself.

Al-Harbi was given ten days to lodge an appeal. "Despite recent education reforms, the Saudi government is imprisoning schoolteachers for having open discussions with their students," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "As long as schoolteachers face persecution for doing their job, Saudi children will lose out."

Al-Harbi's case is not an isolated instance of imprisoning teachers for expressing their views. In March 2004, a General Court in Riyadh banned Muhammad al-Sahimi, a former teacher in middle and high school, from teaching, and sentenced him to three years in prison and 300 lashes.

The court found him guilty of endorsing "un-Islamic" sexual, social and religious practices. The Saudi deputy minister of defence and aviation, Prince Abd al-Rahman bin Abd al-Aziz, personally involved himself in the matter, initially ordering al-Sahimi's arrest before any formal charges had been pressed. The government based its case against al-Sahimi, a teacher of Arabic, on his discussion of the varying concepts of love in poetry. Religion teachers at his school believed his words constituted apostasy. Al-Sahimi was charged with listening to music, smoking, adultery, homosexuality and masturbation. He denied the charges.

Panorama programme rejects MCB's complaints of 'dishonest' reporting

The BBC's *Panorama* programme *A Question of Leadership* televised earlier this year, and attacked even before its screening by the Muslim Council of Britain, highlighted the words of Sheikh Al Sudais, who was an honoured guest at the East London Mosque where the MCB's Deputy General Secretary is Chairman.

Speaking in Mecca, the sheik said that Jews were "monkeys and pigs", "rats of the world" and the "offspring of apes and pigs"; that Christians were "cross worshippers ... those influenced by the rottenness of their ideas and the poison of their culture ... the followers of secularism", and that Hindus were "idol worshippers."

In one of a long list of complaints made about the *Panorama* programme, the MCB expressed scepticism that the sheik had used such words, and publicly accused the *Panorama* team of being engaged in a "witch-hunt against British Muslims."

"I simply cannot accept that highlighting sectarian and racist language amounts to persecution," *Panorama* editor, Mike Robinson responded, adding "I can assure you that the sheik did use those words. His sermons are available from a Saudi website covering mosques in the holy cities of Medina and Mecca, and the translation we used was verified by BBC Monitoring, a fluent Arab speaker on our production team, and a translator outside the BBC.

The MCB, an umbrella organisation for around 400 mosques and other Islamic groups, claimed that the programme was "dishonestly presented, mischievously edited and clearly aimed at maligning the Muslim Council of Britain and its major affiliates... without regard for the facts".

Robinson described the allegations as "about as grave a complaint as it is possible to make", and went to great lengths to prove that they were all completely unfounded.

Turkey is a 'bomb' under the EU, says bishop

THE Roman Catholic Bishop of the Dutch city of Roermond last month spoke out against Turkey joining the European Union.

Bishop Frans Wiertz also expressed his fear that Muslims in the Netherlands don't often accept democratic principles.

He made his comments in the Limburg magazine *Chapeau!* "Politicians under-estimate the problem of Islam in Europe," Wiertz said. "We are surrendering our own norms and values of mutual esteem and respect. On the other hand, there is barely any or no freedom of religion in Turkey."

"With the coming of a hundred million Turks you are planting a bomb under democratic Europe," the bishop said.

Wiertz went on to say: "In our own country we have dropped the principle of the majority deciding. Because we want to put everything and everyone on an equal footing, a small minority has actually got an enormous grip on society.

"But for very many Muslims – even in this country – the democratic principle is alien. They have never learned to accept it".

The bishop said newcomers had to be taught to accept democratic principles. He expressed doubt whether Islamic schools were doing enough to promote this. "We must not be so naive. There is a real threat that our society could collapse".

Wiertz said he was worried about the rise of Islamic orthodoxy in Turkey. He said it was very difficult for Roman Catholics to be open about their faith in Turkey, while there was absolutely no religious freedom in most Arabic countries.

Meanwhile, Holland's Equality Commission has ruled in favour of Samira Haddad, 32, who brought a case against the Islamic College of Amsterdam, which insists that all Muslim women wear the hijab. The secondary school rejected her for a job after she said in an interview that she had no intention of donning the headscarf.

The Equality Commission found that the college had illegally discriminated against her on the ground of her religion and that it could not legally compel Muslim women to wear headscarves.

Definition of 'Pray'

TO ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy

– Ambrose Bierce,
The Devil's Dictionary

Desmond Tutu calls for Anglicans to support gay US Bishop Gene Robinson

THE worldwide Anglican Communion should support its first openly gay bishop, the Rt Rev Gene Robinson, Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu said last month during a visit to the University of North Florida.

Archbishop Tutu urged students to oppose all discrimination, whether based on race, gender or sexual orientation. Meanwhile a major conference was taking place in Britain on Gays and the Future of Anglicanism.

After a university forum meeting, the universally-recognised retired South African church leader said that he simply does not understand religious anger over New Hampshire's gay bishop, and expressed his frustration with opponents.

The Archbishop was at the university to receive an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters degree. He was the first black Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, and was the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches.

The committee selecting the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize praised Tutu as a "unifying leader" in bringing an end to apartheid in a peaceful way. In a recent All Saints' Sunday sermon acclaiming that God's people "are meant to be family", Archbishop Tutu called Anglicans everywhere to remember the "comprehensiveness" of their tradition.

"Jesus did not say, 'I if I be lifted up I will draw some'," Tutu said, preaching in two morning festival services in Pasadena, California. "Jesus said, 'If I be lifted up I will draw all' - black, white, yellow, rich, poor, clever, not so clever, beautiful, not so beautiful." He continued: "Isn't it sad, that in a time when we face so many devastating problems - poverty, HIV/AIDS, war and conflict - that in our communion we should be investing so much time and energy on disagreement about sexual orientation?"

Tutu said the communion, which "used to be known for embodying the attribute of comprehensiveness, of inclusiveness, where we were meant to accommodate all and diverse views, saying we may differ in our theology but we belong together as sisters and brothers" now seems "hell-bent on excommunicating one another. God must look on and God must weep."

Emphasising the connectedness of the human family, Tutu further asked: "How could we then - we who are family - go on spending obscene amounts on budgets of death and destruction, knowing full well that a minute fraction of these would insure that children everywhere would have clean water to drink,

would have enough food to eat, would have adequate, affordable health care, would have decent homes.

"How can we be willing to drop bombs on those who are our sisters and brothers, children of God, members of our family? God's family. How could we?"

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, held a meeting on November 3 with Bishop Gene Robinson. The private event, described as "friendly but candid", involved the two discussing the range of problems that have arisen following Bishop Robinson's consecration.

US families slammed for 'voting God out of their town'

US religious broadcaster Pat Robertson last month warned residents of a rural Pennsylvania town that disaster may strike there because they "voted God out of your city" by ousting school board members who favored teaching intelligent design.

All eight Dover, Pennsylvania, school board members up for re-election were defeated after trying to introduce "intelligent design" - the belief that the universe is so complex that it must have been created by a higher power - as an alternative to the theory of evolution.

"I'd like to say to the good citizens of Dover: If there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God. You just rejected him from your city," Robertson said on the Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club."

Eight families had sued the district, claiming the policy violates the constitutional separation of church and state. The federal trial concluded

ed days before Tuesday's election, but no ruling has been issued.

Later, Robertson issued a statement saying he was simply trying to point out that "our spiritual actions have consequences."

"God is tolerant and loving, but we can't keep sticking our finger in his eye forever," Robertson said. "If they have future problems in Dover, I recommend they call on Charles Darwin. Maybe he can help them."

Robertson hit the headlines this summer when, on his daily show, he called for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

And, in October 2003, he suggested that the State Department be blown up with a nuclear device. He has also said that feminism encourages women to "kill their children, practise witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."

Atheist cartoonist break new ground with his Jesus and Mo strip



A Freethinker subscriber with a wicked sense of humour has created an hilarious new cartoon strip called *Jesus and Mo*, in which a variety of contemporary religious issues are explored and ridiculed. The cartoonist, who prefers to remain anonymous, has set up a *Jesus and Mo* website - www.jesusandmo.net - where other examples of his work can be found. Watch out for more in future issues.

The Puzzle Of the Suicide Bomber

FOR a woman who recently escaped death, Sajida Rishawi seemed oddly calm during her appearance last month on Jordanian television. Wearing a white headscarf, speaking in a monotone and explaining that "my husband is the one who organized everything, I don't know anything else," she described how she and her husband, an Iraqi linked to the insurgent Abu Musab Zarqawi, had crossed the border of Iraq into Jordan, made their way to Amman, and prepared carefully: "He had two explosive belts. He made me wear one and he wore the other and taught me how to use it, how to pull and control it."

From there, the couple took a taxi to a hotel where "there was a wedding and there were women and children." Her husband stood in one corner, Rishawi stood in another. Her husband pulled his cord. "I tried to detonate and it failed. People fled running and I left running with them." Thirty-eight people died in that blast, mostly Jordanians and Palestinians.

Thanks to the modern miracle of online video links, it is possible to watch Rishawi make that confession, over and over again. You can observe her turning around slowly, showing off her suicide belt. You can listen for a hint of vocal inflection or look for a note of emotion in her face. What you cannot do is learn why she did it.

But perhaps that's not surprising. In the four years since the most famous suicide bombing in history, our explanations of what motivates suicide bombers haven't grown any simpler. Certainly the old stereotype of a suicide bomber as someone ill-educated or illiterate was shattered by the life story of Mohamed Atta, leader of the September 11 plot, who defended a master's thesis in urban planning at his Hamburg university and who spoke German so well that he liked to correct the grammatical mistakes of native speakers. The notion that all suicide bombers are victims of poverty has been overturned too: one of the London bus bombers drove a Mercedes.

Even the cartoon image of the religious fanatic, the crazed young man convinced that he will be welcomed in heaven by a bevy of beautiful virgins, has fallen by the wayside. Rishawi is not the first woman to attempt to blow herself up: Ayat Akhras, an 18-year-old Palestinian girl, detonated an explosive belt at the entrance to a Jerusalem supermarket in 2002. Akhras was not only young and female, she was also relatively secular, on good terms with her family and engaged to be married.

Nor does "trauma" provide a satisfying explanation. According to her relatives, Rishawi was

motivated by the deaths of her brothers in Iraq. But thousands of other Iraqi women also have brothers and husbands who have died in the fighting, and they would nevertheless be horrified by the thought of murdering a group of strangers. Ordinary psychological explanations are useful, but they aren't sufficient.

Washington Post columnist ANNE APPLEBAUM urges Muslims to pour scorn on suicide bombers to change 'the culture that celebrates self-immolation'

Most broader studies of suicide bombers have come to the same baffling conclusions. Many are wealthy and well-educated. Few are obviously depressed or mentally ill. While most are indeed devoted to a cause, that cause is more likely to be national than religious, and even more likely to involve an injured sense of family or personal honor. Watching Rishawi turning around to reveal the weapons strapped to her body, it occurred to me that this is her 15 minutes of fame, her chance to make her mark on the

world. She wanted to do it with smoke, blood and death – but presumably being featured on CNN and al-Jazeera is a good second best.

By definition, suicide bombers are harder to deter than ordinary criminals. Normal punishments don't work: the execution of Rishawi might serve her ends, creating a new martyr. Normal prevention doesn't work either: after all, she looked just like the other wedding guests. The impossibility of distinguishing between bombers and ordinary people is part of the horror of suicide bombing and adds to the damage of such attacks too. In Iraq, the suicide bombing campaign has made every American look at every Iraqi – male and female, old and young – with suspicion.

There is a solution, of course, but it isn't one that can be applied by the American military or even the Jordanian police. To stop the Rishawis of the future, her community – her family, her compatriots, the Jordanians marching in the streets last week – must change the culture that celebrates self-immolation and that sick form of honour and pride. If the desire for murderous glory is what makes suicide bombers act as they do, then scorn from all across the Muslim world on whose behalf she thought she was acting is the only lasting deterrent.

Australian Muslim website incites racial hatred

An Australian website aimed at young Australian Muslims promotes hatred of Jews and Christians, claiming the Jews in the US Government "are like a cockroach infestation – add some to your hit-list".

The website, Mission Islam, is run by the Muslim Information Service, and purports to provide information for the Muslim community, including advice on what to do if raided by ASIO or federal police.

One section, called "New World Order", opens with a video presentation titled, "Know who is controlling you, know who is spying on you". It has pictures of US President George Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, UN General-Secretary Kofi Annan and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, claiming they "worship the Antichrist, the Beast".

According to Andreia Lopow of the Anti-Defamation Commission, a Jewish human rights organisation, "the New World Order section screams racism and anti-Semitism and is very worrisome".

Ms Lopow said her commission complained about the website to organisations linked to it, including Islamic Sydney, Sydney Muslim Youth, the Monash University Islamic Society (Gippsland campus) and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils. AFIC removed the link immediately but the others did nothing, she said.

A spokeswoman for the Muslim Information Service, who declined to give her name, told the Melbourne Age that the web articles were "for information purposes only".

One article e-mailed out by Mission Islam says Muslims must despise Jews and Christians – "even if it is illegal" – because Allah does.

It claims "it is not allowed for a (Muslim) believer to have any sympathy, love, affection, compassion or respect for his enemy", defined as unbelievers.

"In the 21st-century crusade against Islam and Muslims, the enemies of Allah are now attempting to force the believers into loving them and their evil ideology by making new legislations (*sic*) that will prevent Muslims from fulfilling their obligations and 'inciting religious hatred'."

Carlisle primary school sends Operation Christmas Child packing

A CARLISLE primary school is to stop filling shoeboxes for a festive appeal after parents raised concerns about their collectors' motives.

Stanwix School has decided to make this year its last for collecting donations to Operation Christmas Child, which transports gifts to needy youngsters worldwide.

The decision follows a letter from a parent criticising the evangelical nature of Samaritan's Purse, the international charity that organises the appeal.

It highlighted worries that the shoebox collections were being used to spread the group's own evangelical version of Christianity – a claim they deny.

But Stanwix headteacher Bill Johnston told the local *News & Star* that the decision to stop supporting the cause was not solely down to the concerns raised and the school was already looking into helping different causes.

He added: "We were looking for other charities that we could support because we like to do some charitable work at Christmas.

"Some parents made us aware of the evangelical take of some of the groundwork that goes on, which is not explained in the literature made available to the children."

Mr Johnston hopes future festive projects could be of a similar practical nature.

Stanwix, one of Carlisle's biggest primaries, has taken part in Operation Christmas Child – with youngsters filling shoeboxes with small, essential gifts – for the past five years. Last year, pupils collected 241 boxes. Last month they welcomed the appeal's red double-decker bus into the school yard to collect their latest donation.

During the collection at Stanwix, Operation Christmas Child's founder Dave Cook dismissed the criticism.

He said: "I set this up as a Christian organisation, but the boxes go to children in need, no matter what their colour or creed.

"It is up to our partners overseas whether they want to give a booklet about the meaning of Christmas.

"We are sensitive to other religions."

Last year, Carlisle and parts of West Cumbria collected 9,000 shoeboxes with another 10,000 collected in Keswick alone.

Internationally, Operation Christmas Child distributes seven million boxes.

Sneaking Christian propaganda under the cover of "charity" into other countries – espe-

cially those that are not Christian by tradition – is by no means confined to Operation Christmas Child. An outfit called the Campus Crusade for Christ, based in Orlando, Florida, is currently trying to smuggle Christian material into Iraq.

"Reaching Iraq's little ones for Christ could affect the direction of their nation for decades to come. That's why, as Christmas approaches, our Iraqi staff desire to offer special gifts to touch the hearts of thousands of children – showing them Christ's love in a concrete way and sharing His message," says Steve Douglas in an appeal for funds posted on the internet.

"Each gift," he declared, "will include a toy, some much-needed clothing, The Story of Jesus for Children video that clearly presents the Gospel, and a Bible. Staff believe these gifts could have a dramatic impact on 20,000 children ... and they also believe that, unfortunately, this may be their last chance to pursue such an outreach. Here is a report from a staff member in the region: 'Spiritual hunger in Iraq is on the increase, especially as the situation gets worse with so many explosions targeting civilians and an increasing death rate. [I recently] met with many people who are working with children. We talked a lot about this project and they assured me that this is the right time as doors may close and they may not be able to distribute in the near future, especially if the content includes the Word of God.'"

"As you can see, now is the time! And the cost is minimal as well. Each gift will cost just \$10, including all the materials and distribution.

"As the economy in Iraq is still struggling,

these packages may be one of the few gifts these little ones receive. Imagine their excitement as they open the toy, warm clothes, Bible, and new video to watch ... all about Jesus. This is the kind of gift that they may well remember for decades to come – the one that first told them about Christ.

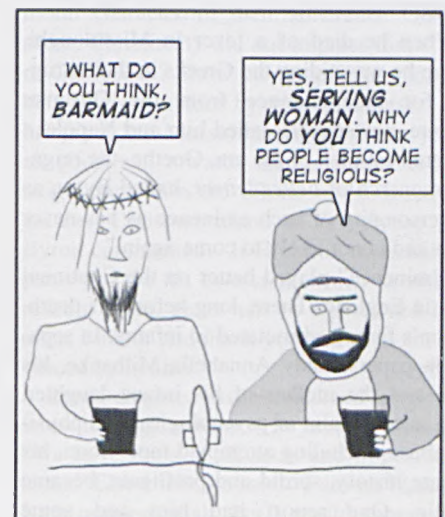
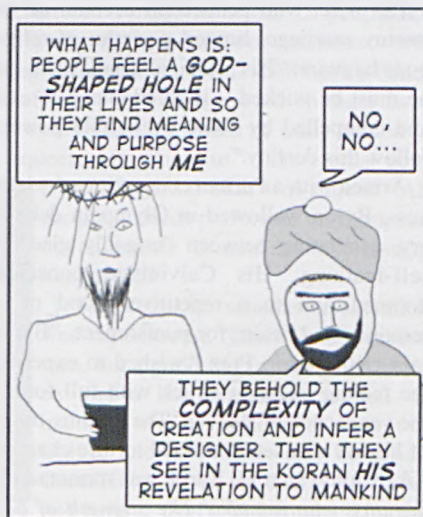
"This is truly a tremendous opportunity to touch the next generation of Iraqis with the Gospel. So, could you consider a gift of \$50 to provide gifts for five children – likely reaching their siblings, parents, and grandparents with the message of Christ as well? \$100 would provide Christmas gifts for 10 children; \$500 would help reach 50! Whatever God puts on your heart would be a tremendous blessing in the life of a child – showing them that, despite all the struggles they face with unrest, bombings, etc., they have not been forgotten. Jesus loves them, and someone cared enough to get them a special gift to tell them about Him."

Mormons pay out for sex abuse

THE Mormon Church in the US has been ordered to pay \$4.2 million to two sisters who said that a bishop had mishandled complaints of sexual abuse by their stepfather, a Mormon priest at the time.

A jury in Seattle last month found the church liable for misconduct and negligence in the case of Jessica Cavalieri, 24, and her younger sister, Ashley, 19. The girls had been abused by their stepfather, Peter N Taylor, at their home during the 1990s.

When Jessica told Bishop Bruce Hatch of the abuse, she was advised to "work the matter out through worship".



George Noel Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), was once the most celebrated poet in Europe. Handsome and charismatic, he was the darling of polite society, the cynosure of salons, a pacesetter in fashion and mannerism, the observed of all observers. Smitten debutantes, madams, and maidservants vied for the attention of the dashing peer of the realm. Men envied him. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, published when the poet was twenty-four, captivated the romantic imagination of a continent. "I awoke one day," said Byron, "and found myself famous."

Despite his demurrals, readers fused him with *Childe Harold* – a brooding, enigmatic pariah haunted by a dark past and nameless guilt. Though he cloned *Childe Harold* several times, Byron was no one-trick pony (or poet). *Don Juan*, his epic masterpiece, is, as he said, "a little quietly facetious on everything." It bristles with trenchant quips on the eternal human comedy:

"Life's a poor player" – then play out the play, Ye villains! And above all keep a sharp eye

Much less on what you do than what you say:

Be hypocritical, be cautious, be Not what you seem, but always what you see.

All present life is but an interjection, An "Oh!" or "Ah!" of joy or misery, Or a "Ha! Ha!" Or "Bah!" – a yawn or "Pooh!"

Of which perhaps the latter is most true.

Byron was a master of the ingenious rhyme: *Christians have burnt each other, quite persuaded / That all the Apostles would have done as they did.*

And:

But – Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual / Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all?

Even his wife, no fan, conceded his verbal brilliance: "He is the absolute monarch of words."

When he died of a fever in Missolonghi, where he was aiding the Greeks in their struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, newspapers called him and Napoleon the greatest men of the era. Goethe, the reigning monarch of *belles lettres*, hailed Byron as "a personality of such eminence as has never been and is not likely to come again."

"Eminence" played better on the Continent than in England. There, long before his death, Byron's fame had mutated to infamy. In separation papers, Lady Annabella Milbanke, his wife and the mother of his infant daughter, Ada, accused him of psychological and physical abuse, including attempted rape. Soon, his private history, sordid and profligate, became public. One report had him and some Cambridge cronies, dressed as monks and

using skulls for bowls, keeping wassail at his abbey. Gossip sheets sizzled with lurid tales of homoeroticism, pederasty, whoremongering, adultery, and an incestuous liaison with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. Throughout England, the clergy thundered "on his head pious libels by no means few".

Ostracized in London, where he was then living, Byron fled England in April 1816. He never returned. He spent his final eight years in Italy, Switzerland, and Greece. Reviled at home, he was feted abroad.

Caroline Lamb, a blue blood who hounded Byron into an affair, said he was "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" (her kind of guy, apparently). George Ticknor, a literary acquaintance, described him as "gentle, mannerly, natural, affectionate, and modest". Both were right. Byron was an amalgam of disparate traits: cruelty and kindness; misanthropy and philanthropy; cynicism and idealism; affectation and sincerity; arrogance and self-mockery; pettiness and magnanimity; intemperance and asceticism; self-pity and courage.

On balance, the virtues trumped the vices: "For all his flashes of vulgarity, his unworthy intrigues, his intellectual caprices", biographer Ethel Mayne concluded, "Byron was a man of daring, tenderness, and candor, and one of the most generous spirits of his age."

His vices were aggravated by indoctrination to Calvinism, which he could never quite shake off despite "an early dislike to the persuasion". Of his first grammar school, in Aberdeen, Scotland, he reminisced: "I learned little there – except to repeat by rote the first lesson of monosyllables – 'God made man – let us love him' – by hearing it often repeated." Harangued by a pious, domineering mother and catechized by a string of Presbyterian tutors and Scripture-quoting nurses, young Byron perversely deduced he was irremediably damned. A clubfoot (his mark of Cain), the mockery of playmates, and the early loss of his father confirmed his reprobate status.

His wife, who penned an account of their stormy marriage, limned a victim of religion gone haywire: "His principal insane ideas are – he must be wicked – is foredoomed to evil – and compelled by some irresistible power to follow this destiny."

Armed with a Puritan conception of wickedness, Byron wallowed in Olympian debauchery, oscillating between "ungodly glee" and self-loathing. His Calvinistic conscience doomed him to a repetitive round of sin, remorse, and desire for punishment. "Byron," said critic Mario Praz, "wished to experience the feeling of being struck with full force by the vengeance of Heaven. The gloomy tragedy of his life was set in a moral torture chamber." Like *Childe Harold*, Byron was tormented "by demons, who impair / The strength of better thoughts, and seek their prey / In melancholy

Lord Byron Demons of

bosoms, such as were / Of moody texture from their earliest day, / And loved to dwell in darkness and dismay."

His unmerited reprobation led him to identify with Lucifer and Cain: "Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in / His everlasting face, and tell Him that / His evil is not good."

In *Cain*, a closet drama on the Fall, the scofflaws collaborate on an indictment of the Almighty. Why, Cain grouses, should he be punished for his parents' disobedience? He didn't pluck the forbidden fruit: "What had I done in this? I was unborn." Besides, wasn't Jehovah guilty of entrapment: "The tree was

GARY SLOAN looks back on the life of Lord Byron

planted, and why not for him [Adam]? / If not, why place him near it, where it grew, / The fairest in the center?" In any event, why proscribe knowledge and life: "How can both be evil?"

When he queries his parents, he gets nothing but sophistry: "They have but one answer to all questions, / 'Twas his will, And he is good.' How know I that? / Because He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow?"

No, Lucifer answers: "Evil and good are things in their own essence, / And not made good or evil by the giver." Knowledge and life are inherently good. Lucifer, a proponent of both, is called wicked because conquerors define morality: "Were I the victor, his works would be deemed the only evil ones."

Most ethereal beings, says Lucifer, are servile hypocrites who worship the Almighty out of fear, not love. Those (like him) who refuse to kowtow are treated to draconian punishment: "Higher things than ye are slaves: and higher / Than them or ye would be so, did they not / Prefer an independency of torture / To the smooth agonies of adulation / In hymns and harpings, and self-seeking prayers."

Ever since they ate the apple, Cain notes, his parents and siblings have been like mindless serfs: "My father is / Tamed down; my mother has forgot the mind / Which made her thirst for knowledge at the risk / Of an eternal curse; my

Byron: The of Calvinism

brother is / A watching shepherd boy, who offers up / The firstlings of the flock to Him who bids / The earth yield nothing to us without sweat; / My sister Zillah sings hymns."

Jehovah, Lucifer assures Cain, wanted humans to live as beasts in "A Paradise of Ignorance, from which / Knowledge is barred as poison." He inflicted the race with such "poor attributes as suit / Reptiles engendered out of the subsiding / Slime of a mighty universe, crushed into / A scarcely-yet shaped planet, peopled with / Things whose enjoyment was to be in blindness."

'If people are to live, why die? And are our carcasses worth raising? I hope, if mine is, I shall have a better pair of legs than I have moved on these two-and-twenty years, or I shall be sadly behind in the squeeze into Paradise'

He thought he was imprisoned in "foul and fulsome" flesh racked by hunger, thirst, deprivation, sickness, debility, disease, pain. Sexual pleasure, the Puritan archangel advises, was a machination to perpetuate misery: "A sweet degradation / A most enervating and filthy cheat / To lure thee on to the renewal of / Fresh souls and bodies, all foredoomed to be / frail and unhappy." Lucifer sums up the human lot: "Eat, drink, toil, tremble, laugh, weep, sleep, and die."

The tree of knowledge, Cain carps, "was a lying tree, for we know nothing." Or, rather, he knows only that life isn't worth the living: "I



A detail from *Lord Byron on his death-bed* by Joseph-Denis Odevaere, circa 1826

live. / But live to die; and, living, see no thing / To make death hateful, save an innate clinging. / A loathsome, and yet all invincible / Instinct of life, which I abhor, as I / Despise myself, yet cannot overcome / and so I live."

Lucifer, no false comforter, tells Cain his posterity will have it worse than he. His suffering and sorrow "are both Eden / In all its innocence compared to what / Thou shortly mayst be; and that state again, / In its redoubled wretchedness, a Paradise / To what thy sons' sons' sons, accumulating / In generations like to dust (which they / In fact but add to), shall endure and do."

Before disappearing, Lucifer – perhaps recalling he is (etymologically speaking) a bearer of light – rouses Cain with a pep talk on the power of reason to surmount celestial despotism:

"One good gift has the fatal apple given – / Your reason: let it not be over-swayed / By tyrannous threats to force you into faith / 'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling: / Think and endure – and form an inner world / In your own bosom – where the outward fails."

Whenever Byron eluded the undertow of Calvinism, he wrote like an Enlightenment rationalist. "In morality," he remarked, "I prefer Confucius to the Ten Commandments and Socrates to St Paul." He disdained revelation and mystery: "God would have made his will known without books," he told his lifelong friend Francis Hodgson, a cleric, "considering how very few could read when Jesus of Nazareth lived, had it been His pleasure to ratify any peculiar mode of worship."

"I wouldn't subscribe to some of the articles of faith," he told a correspondent, "if I were as sure as St Peter after the cock crew. I refuse to take the Sacrament because I do not think eating bread or drinking wine from the hand of an earthly vicar will make me an inheritor of Heaven." On miracles, he sided with the skeptics: "I agree with Hume that it is more probable men should lie or be deceived than that things out of the course of nature should so happen."

Resurrection made no sense: "If people are to live, why die? And are our carcasses worth raising? I hope, if mine is, I shall have a better pair of legs than I have moved on these two-and-twenty years, or I shall be sadly behind in the squeeze into Paradise." Like eternal punishment, eternal bliss was unjust: "All the pious deeds performed on Earth can never entitle a man to everlasting happiness."

The Christian scheme of salvation was superfluous: "Christ came to save men, but a good Pagan will go to heaven and a bad Nazarene to hell. If mankind who never heard or dreamt of Galilee and its Prophet may be saved, Christianity is of no avail. And who will believe God will damn men for not knowing what they were never taught?"

Even were Christianity valid, the Christian is no more spiritually secure than the ancient Roman: "According to the Christian dispensation, no one can know whether he is sure of salvation – even the most righteous – since a single slip of faith may throw him on his back, like a skater, while gliding smoothly to his paradise. Therefore, whatever the certainty of faith in the facts may be, the certainty of the individual as to his happiness or misery is no greater than it was under Jupiter."

Byron anticipated Sigmund Freud's "moral fallacy" of Christianity: "The basis of your religion," he wrote Hodgson, "is injustice. The Son of God, the pure, the immaculate, the innocent, is sacrificed for the guilty. This proves His heroism; but no more does away with man's guilt than a schoolboy's volunteering to be flogged for another would exculpate the dunce from negligence or preserve him from the rod. You degrade the Creator by converting Him into a tyrant over an immaculate and injured Being, sent to suffer death for the benefit of some millions of scoundrels, who, after all, seem as likely to be damned as ever."

'I am no Platonist, I am nothing at all; but I would sooner be a Paulician, Manichean, Spinozist, Gentile, Pyrrhonian, Zoroastrian, than one of the seventy-two villainous sects tearing each other to pieces for the love of the Lord and hatred of each other'

Byron judged religions pragmatically by the moral character of their adherents. On that score, Christianity did not impress him: "Talk of Galileism? Show me the effects – are you better, wiser, kinder by your precepts? I will bring you ten Mussulmans shall shame you in all good will towards men and duty to their neighbours." On the efforts of Hodgson and another Christian friend to proselytise him, Byron commented: "If Hodgson takes half the pains to save his own soul, which he risks to redeem mine, great will be his reward hereafter; I honor and thank you both, but am convinced by neither."

Byron despised institutionalized religion: "I know nothing, at least in its favour," he wrote. "We have fools in all sects and impostors in most." Elsewhere, he said: "I am no Platonist, I am nothing at all; but I would sooner be a Paulician, Manichean, Spinozist, Gentile,

Pyrrhonian, Zoroastrian, than one of the seventy-two villainous sects tearing each other to pieces for the love of the Lord and hatred of each other."

In *The Vision of Judgment*, a satirical *tour de force* on Christian eschatology, Byron ridiculed the Church of England: "I know this is unpopular; I know / 'Tis blasphemous; I know one may be damned / For hoping no one else may e'er be so; / I know my catechism; I know we're crammed / With the best doctrines till we quite o'erflow; / I know that all save England's church have shammed, / And that the other twice two hundred churches / And synagogues have made a damned bad purchase."

Don Juan simmers with saucy irreverence. Imperiled by a sinking ship, a passenger asks a clergyman (Pedrillo) to pray for him: "And there was one / That begged Pedrillo for an absolution / Who told him to be damned in his confusion."

For spiritual solace, religion had a worthy competitor: "There's naught, no doubt, so much

the spirit calms / As rum and true religion." Then, there was the Reverend Rodomont Precisian: "Who did not so much hate the sin as the sinner." *Don Juan's* mother is stumped by an English idiom: "'Tis strange—the Hebrew noun which means 'I am,' / The English always use to govern 'damn'."

The son, too, was baffled: Juan "did not understand a word Of English, / Save their shibboleth, 'God damn!' / And even that he had so rarely heard, / He sometimes thought 'twas only their 'Salaam,' / Or 'God be with you!'—and 'tis not absurd / To think so: for half English as I am / (To my misfortune), never can I say / I heard them wish 'God with you,' save that way."

For the narrator of *Don Juan*, bouts of illness authenticate orthodox doctrines: "The first attack at once proved the Divinity / (But that I never doubted, nor the Devil); / The next, the Virgin's mystical virginity; / The third, the usual Origin of Evil; / The fourth at once established the whole Trinity / On so uncontro-

vertible a level, / That I devoutly wished the three were four / On purpose to believe so much the more."

Despite the impieties, Byron was never secure in his apostasy. "He had read enough of Hume and the Voltairian skeptics before he left Cambridge to unsettle his faith in the dogmas of the established religion, both Catholic and Protestant, and to make him an agnostic," noted biographer Leslie Marchand, "but he never completely made up his mind." Percy Bysshe Shelley, his neighbor and fellow exile in Switzerland, bemoaned his own inability to "eradicate from Byron's great mind the delusions of Christianity, which, in spite of his reason, seem perpetually to recur."

"Let us ponder boldly," Byron wrote, "'tis a base / Abandonment of reason to resign / Our right of thought—our last and only place / Of refuge; this, at least, shall be mine."

But the demons of his childhood dwelt there, too.

AMERICAN atheists are vilified at the best of times by their country's "moral majority". Now, even at the worst of times, they are apparently fair game for the kind of British journalist who won't let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

Guardian columnist Roy Hattersley who, as the Rt Hon the Lord Hattersley, is on the British Humanist Association's list of distinguished supporters, claimed in his September 12 column that, amongst the relief providers after Hurricane Katrina, the non-religious were non-existent. "Notable by their absence are teams from rationalist societies, free-thinkers' clubs and atheists' associations – the sort of people who not only scoff at religion's intellectual absurdity but also regard it as a positive force for evil," wrote Hattersley, who concluded that the religious were "morally superior" to atheists like him.

The websites of freethinkers' clubs and atheists' associations tell a different story. Immediately after the hurricane, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia conducted a clothing drive. The Atheist Alliance International, the Center For Inquiry, American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation organised fundraisers. As renowned humanist Paul Kurtz, who is Chairman of the Center for Inquiry writes: "The Center for Inquiry and its affiliated organisations have launched an initiative to raise charitable funds for the area. We encourage all humanists, skeptics and rationalists to step forward and make a contribution through SHARE, the Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Effort. All donations to SHARE from this

Humanists & Hurricanes

campaign will go to AmeriCares for the benefit of victims of Hurricane Katrina.

AmeriCares is a non-profit aid and relief organisation that co-ordinates distribution of medical supplies in response to natural disasters and for long-term humanitarian assistance programs."

Roy Hattersley says that the religious are morally superior to the humanist community when it comes to aid work. MARIA MacLACHLAN begs to differ.

Throughout the disaster and its aftermath internet discussion boards were filled with poignant messages by individual atheists caught up in the disaster. One that appeared on a private non-theist board I frequent came from Mississippi police officer and father of three, Steve Schlicht:

I still don't have much time now but I did want to let you know that the humanist ideal is getting me through this horror and devastation I am witnessing in my home town.

Please pass on to everyone out there that I was able to rescue my family when my house came apart and eventually did get them out of state with the help of a good neighbor and my in-laws from Illinois. I still have friends unaccounted for. It is utter chaos here and we are

all doing our best to maintain order and get much-needed food and supplies to those worse off. I am living with a police officer friend at his country home in northern Gulfport and we have dial-up service, electricity and good water.

I need everyone to rally around humanistic aid to try to stem the human need. I'm already hearing the false adage that "There are no atheists in foxholes and hurricanes" in the midst of my own despair as I, a non-believer in gods or goddesses, try to maintain order in the town of my childhood. What little time off I have, I am spending delivering what I can to those who have no way of getting to distribution centers.

Katrina was a force of nature rarely seen on earth, but humankind is an even more powerful force of nature when led by unconditional love and care in the midst of devastation and horror ... and we will endure for the greater good. Where there is breath, there is always hope.

Thank you for anything you and the group of regulars can do for us down here. Those that bicker are wasting time and effort.

Steve has written to Roy Hattersley asking that he reconsider his views regarding atheist charity and "the notable and unconditional caring provided by those with no belief in supernatural deities, yet who possess an extremely high level of ethical and moral responsibility to the human family."

Anyone holding their breath?

•Maria MacLachlan is acting editor of *Humanism Scotland*, and her article first appeared in the autumn issue of the magazine. We thank her for granting permission to republish it.

'Political Correctness' leads to resignations at the *Gay & Lesbian Humanist*

A concerted attack by "politically-correct" elements within, and aligned to, the gay movement in the UK has led to the resignation of Andy Armitage from the post of editor of the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist*, and the magazine's assistant editor, Dean Braithwaite.

Their resignation last month came in the wake of the publication in the autumn issue of the magazine of a challenging and highly-controversial article attacking Islam – as well as the immigration policies of successive governments – under the headline *Towards a New Humanism*, by Londoner Diesel Balaam.

This article, together with several other pieces in the autumn edition, prompted representatives from a number of organisations to sign a letter of protest which was posted on the gay website **Gay.com** – and this generated a heated discussion among those who supported the signatories, and others who did not.

The letter read as follows: "We are deeply concerned that the autumn issue of the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist* magazine includes a number of statements which can be interpreted as racist, including support for the now deceased gay Dutch racist, Pim Fortuyn. One article demonised immigrants stating: 'our major towns and cities being for ever changed by huge numbers of foreign settlers', referred to as 'the often poor, ill-educated and culturally estranged Third Worlders, many of whom 'are criminals of the worst kind' (p11). Another article denounces all Muslims, stating: 'What does a moderate Muslim do, other than excuse the real nutters by adhering to this barmy doctrine?' (p6).

"The magazine endorses views of the deceased far-right Dutch leader Pim Fortuyn, saying: 'The warnings of popular gay politician Pim Fortuyn were tragically snuffed out by a left-wing assassin before he could sufficiently alert people to the damage the influx of Muslims is doing to his own native land' (p12).

"This attitude to Fortuyn is consistent. As long ago as 2002, the editor wrote of him approvingly: 'His "crime" in the eyes of many was that he said his country could take no more immigrants.'

"We believe that the lesbian and gay community has nothing to gain from racism. On the contrary, we pledge to work with the Black and Asian communities to tackle racism and the far right which threaten all of our human rights and indeed our very lives.

"We differ with the leaders of most religions

in their all-too-often bigoted attitudes to lesbian and gay rights, but rather than demonise any one religion or race or immigrants, we will work with lesbian and gay Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, people of all religions and none, to promote respect for our

On the face of it, a row over an article in a gay humanist magazine would seem to be of little interest to anyone not directly concerned. But the controversy exposes some very important issues, not least being the issue of free speech

human rights."

The letter was signed by, among others, Denis Fernando, Lesbian and Gay Coalition Against Racism; and Peter Herbert, Chair, London Race Hate Crime Forum and Spokesperson for the Society of Black Lawyers

Appended to the letter were several excerpts from the issue in question: **Editorial p2** (Andy Armitage – Editor): "Our front page headline [The Sick Face of Islam]...could be saying...this is the face of Islam and its face is sickening. Interpret it as you will. But I suspect that many...may well be thinking the latter, as more and more of what Islam seems to stand for is laid before us, as article after article in the newspapers and magazines chronicles the atrocious nature of aspects of this growing belief system."

[What Armitage, in fact, wrote was: "Our front page headline this quarter is deliberately ambiguous: it could be saying that this is only the *sickening* face of this religion called Islam (implying that there is possibly another face); or it could be saying this is *the* face of Islam, and its face is sickening. Interpret it as you will. But I suspect that many who thought the former some years ago may well be thinking the latter, as more and more of what Islam seems to stand for is laid before us, as article after article in the newspapers and magazines chronicles the atrocious nature of aspects of this growing belief system."]

World Watch p4, George Broadhead (GALHA Secretary): "There are two terms that, increasingly, annoy us: Islamophobia and moderate

Muslims...what is wrong with being fearful of Islam (there is a lot to fear): ...what does a moderate Muslim do, other than excuse the real nutters by adhering to this barmy doctrine?"

Towards a new Humanism, p10 (Diesel Balaam): "...The reckless mismanaged immigration policies of successive governments have led to the demographics of our major towns and cities being for ever changed by huge number of foreign settlers. For years, the liberal elite dismissed fears about immigration, because more people quit the UK than moved in – the pretence being that all the doctors, engineers and inventors we lost were somehow equivalent to the often poor, ill-educated and culturally estranged Third Worlders who largely replaced them."

"The politicians also failed to anticipate the alarming Balkanisation of Britain, whereby places like Bradford and Leicester are gradually becoming de-Anglicised to the point where Englishmen will be in the minority in ten years, as they will be in Birmingham soon afterwards. Even now, walking down the street in some parts of London – not just the obvious areas, but places like Queensway, Willesden and the Edgware road you could be forgiven for thinking you were in Kandahar. Redundant churches are sprouting onion domes and minarets. We are becoming strangers in our own lands."

"Maybe it's a fear of being labelled 'racists', or just politically correct inertia that leads humanists to bang on endlessly about the Church of England...when it is patently obvious that the wolf at the door is militant Islam. For homosexuals, it is doubtful that there is any such thing as a 'moderate' practising Muslim, or that the Koran can be regarded as anything more than just a squalid murder manual.

"A sensible debate about the extent, character and policing of future immigration is urgently needed. Perhaps the most immediately important campaign is to prevent the liberal elite – who have long presided over the reverse-colonisation of so many of our towns and cities – from extending legal protection to religious expression, which may well compromise efforts to prosecute or even counter hate speech from Islamics and other fundamentalists.

"...We do need to shift our approach from one of indulgent libertarianism to an enlightened authoritarianism – to put ourselves on a war footing, if you will."

In a considered response to his critics, Balaam penned the following:

"At 7am on July 7 I was putting the finishing touches to my controversial article *Towards a new Humanism*. I read it back to myself and wondered if the argument was perhaps a little too strong, too over-stated. I decided to wait until that evening before deciding whether or not to submit it to the *Gay & Lesbian Humanist magazine* (G&LH). The events of the next few hours, which I spent desperately trying to contact both my partner and father (separately caught up on the periphery of those awful events, but unharmed), caused me to return home that evening, like most Londoners, in a grim Churchillian mood. I hit the 'send' button without further ado.

"The views expressed and questions raised in *Towards a new Humanism* are nobody's but my own, as is made clear by the disclaimer on page 2 of *G&LH* magazine. Of course, there is much in the piece that can be justifiably criticised. It tries to cover too much ground, it neglects to reference source materials, and in places, the language used is unnecessarily waspish in tone. It is an exploratory piece (the title *Towards a new Humanism* is a big clue); it raises difficult questions, and it does not even represent my own final opinion – which is still a work in progress. This is the nature of free-thinking – it is a process, not a ding-dong battle of entrenched opinions based on received wisdom. Freethinking humanists have a moral duty to question everything and keep an open mind. Admittedly, I was painting my argument in very broad brush strokes and some of the generalisations, could, if lifted out of context and looked at in isolation, be misinterpreted by some as being motivated by a kind of generalised racism. This was certainly not my intention. My true intention was to provide a rallying cry to other freethinkers to adapt to the changing circumstances we now find ourselves in, to make humanism, increasingly marginalised, relevant once again. By 2050, humanism might very well be viewed as we now view 19th-century Chartism. More than anybody, freethinking humanists should have a lot to say about the rise of militant Islam, but we are too cowed by far-left 'unthinkers' to say very much at all.

"Sometimes freethinkers are summoned by a moment in history to turn conventional pieties on their head. Perhaps one such moment is now. Nonetheless, challenging debate should still have due regard for the sensitivities of others. The same arguments in my article could have been advanced using kinder, more moderate language. It must be pointed out that the piece contains no fewer than four unambiguous denunciations of racism and calls on humanists to continue opposing racial discrimination in all its forms. Humanism, almost by definition, is the antithesis of racism. There are also two calls

for private religious expression to be tolerated and protected.

"Let us now examine the most controversial statements:

"Quote: 'Legal or illegal, many of these Third World and Eastern European newcomers are criminals of the worst kind, and many more are hopelessly ill-equipped to live in a complex Western democracy, unable even to speak English in some cases. A parasitic few are bent on the destruction of western civilisation.'

"This statement refers to, but does not directly cite or quote from, numerous high-profile news stories and crime reports widely available in the public domain, which were committed by persons who could reasonably be described as 'Third World or Eastern European newcomers'. The overwhelming number of newcomers have, for some years, come to Britain from these global regions [ref Migrationwatch figures], either to better their economic chances or sometimes flee persecution. As widely reported in the press and on television, numerous individuals from within these demographic migrations have either been convicted, arrested, placed under surveillance, investigated, or continue to be sought, in connection with crimes such as: gangsterism behind sophisticated and widespread credit card and ATM fraud, people smuggling, exploiting and mistreating migrant workers, enforced prostitution, drug trafficking and supply, gun crime, membership of violent gangs (eg Yardies, Triads, Mafia), honour killings (currently there is one a month – *Times* Nov 5), plotting to assassinate public figures (including Tony Blair at the Queen's golden jubilee celebrations in 2002), directing terrorism in their native lands from bases in London (sometimes financed by other crimes like fraud and blackmail), the manufacture of ricin and explosive substances for planned terrorist attacks, planning at least half-a-dozen terrorist attacks in Britain prior to July 7 (foiled by the police and intelligence services), inciting racially motivated attacks on specific groups here in the UK and overseas, as well as recruiting *jihadis* in mosques, and at universities, to fight in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan (often against UK Service personnel). This list is not necessarily exhaustive.

"These are crimes which exploit and harm other people, either from within their own, or other ethnic groups. In fact, a disproportionate number of their victims are those from ethnic minority backgrounds, often the most vulnerable people at the margins of society. Given the crimes they commit, those committing such crimes might reasonably be described as 'criminals of the worst kind'. They certainly pose a threat to the peaceful, integrated and multiracial society we have to build, and they

should be dealt with firmly. I accept that the word *some* would have improved on the word *many*. I have not claimed that 'all' or even 'most' Third World and Eastern European newcomers commit such crimes, or that people outside these groups do not commit similar offences. Further, it should be noted that one such group exploited by these criminals were the tragic Chinese cocklers who perished in the bay at Morecambe in February 2004, unable to summon help on their mobile phones because 'they were unable to speak English'. Obviously, shared language is central to integration, participation and social cohesion. Migrationwatch has found that up to 300 different languages are now spoken in London's schools. The Government has now introduced citizenship tests for those wishing to become naturalised Britons, to ensure applicants do at least have a basic understanding of our way of life. Finally, the 'parasitic few bent on the destruction of western civilisation' clearly refers to those who help themselves to welfare benefits and Legal Aid provided by the very society they seek to undermine and destroy (also widely reported).

"Peter Tatchell (of OutRage!) is right to say, partly in response to my article, that we should 'challenge racism' and 'express respect for, and solidarity with, people of all nationalities and races'. I totally agree with him. But simply repeating this noble platitude like a mantra does not actually help us manage the day-to-day realities of net in-flows of migration. It ignores difficult questions like 'How many can we reasonably be expected to accommodate within the UK?' 'Where can we put them?' 'How can they support themselves and be supported?' 'Can our infrastructure cope?' and 'What does this all cost?' Finally, and most importantly, 'What do we do, when newcomers, including naturalised citizens, subsequently turn against society and commit terrorist acts or other highly damaging crimes that hurt people?'

"However over-stated, my article does at least raise these concerns. Peter and his dwindling band of OutRage! supporters, in their rush to censure, conveniently ignore these questions because they don't do 'nitty-gritty', just robotic self-righteousness. The truth is, there are numerous positions on immigration, falling between the Tatchellite 'open door' policy at one extreme, and the Powellite 'keep 'em all out' policy at the other. Most people, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds, occupy the middle ground. So do I.

"Quote: 'For homosexuals, it is doubtful that there is any such thing as a "moderate" practising Muslim, or that the Koran can be regarded as anything more than a squalid murder manual. So, while we must be tolerant

towards Muslims who quietly and privately profess their faith, we must be ever vigilant.'

"In other words, 'It is questionable that practising Muslims would fully support the rights of homosexuals to live freely, openly and equally within society.' This is what I meant and probably what I should have said. Koranic texts, together with the Sunnah (sayings of the Prophet), and the Hadith (stories about the Prophet's life), have nothing to say to homosexuals, certainly practising homosexuals, beyond that they should be killed by one of several grisly means – hanging, stoning, beheading, or dropping from a high cliff or building. The above statement couches these points in hyperbole, but the basic premise holds true, as demonstrated by the distressing hangings of the gay teenagers in Iran, under shariah law, which the *G&LH* editorial in the same issue rightly highlights. It should be noted that Muslims are not a race of people, any more than Catholics or humanists are, so strongly worded criticism of practising Muslims cannot be considered racist (small numbers of white Britons are converting to Islam too, while some individuals, like the Somali-born Dutch MP, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, have declared themselves to be 'ex-Muslims').

"After further consideration and reflection on the freethinkers' 'naughty step', I now accept that I failed to differentiate properly between information and opinion. It is true to say that comment is free but facts are sacred, but a fact still has no meaning until it has been interpreted (which is why we have political debate in the first place). I also neglected to provide named, accredited sources, which have since been lodged with the editor. The tone was hectoring, and, in places, immoderately expressed. Unintentionally, some careless statements may have appeared to some, in isolation, to endorse a non-specific and generalised racism, which I deplore.

"Finally, it is worth looking at the conclusion of *Towards a new Humanism* as this sums up the thrust of my whole argument.

"If people want to come here, either fleeing persecution or seeking a better life, they play by our rules and our way of life. If they don't, they are going to have to go because they are threatening our people and way of life. Coming to Britain is not a right. And even when people come here, staying here carries with it a duty."

"Actually, I did not say that. What I said was: 'It is time to erect new structures that will protect our hard-won freedoms and reinforce the social obligations we have to one another. This includes removing all forms of racial discrimination for the law-abiding, while at the same time making it clear to foreign settlers that if they seriously abuse and damage our

society, their criminal convictions will carry the ultimate forfeit of fast-track deportation.'

"So who is the author of the first statement? Prime Minister Tony Blair, at a press conference given at Downing Street, shortly after the July 7th bombings (reported *Sunday Times* August 7). You could not put a cigarette paper between his statement and mine, and mine improves on his by prefacing the argument with a call to end all forms of racial discrimination. Unintentionally, it seems that I have become a Blairite. Albeit an open-minded and freethinking one."

Explaining his decision to resign as editor, Armitage, in the preface to a detailed 91-page briefing paper concerning the controversy, and published on the internet at www.mfebooks.com/G&LH/Intro, said that criticism of the Balaam article emanated "from mostly left-wing activists, and from none other than the committee of Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association itself."

"The criticism from the GALHA committee – which included a decree that, in future, all magazine contents should be approved by both it and the Pink Triangle Trust [a charity closely associated with GALHA] came as the most surprising and hurtful. It decided that aspects of the magazine had been 'racially prejudiced and inflammatory'. It did not provide any proof of racial prejudice (whether something is inflammatory, of course, is entirely subjective) and it did not consult the editorial team before issuing a press release dissociating itself from the magazine's contents (including, one must assume, the 'World Watch' column of the committee's own secretary, George Broadhead).

The GALHA press release stated: "We are disturbed by certain comments published in the editorial and opinion sections of the current issue of *Gay and Lesbian Humanist*. "As humanists, we believe in defending secularism and confronting religious ideology where it impinges on the rights of individuals. But equally we oppose the encouragement of hatred or discrimination against individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their religious affiliation. Humanists criticise ideas, not people.

"The views expressed in the magazine in connection with immigration are the personal opinions of the authors. In our view they are inconsistent with GALHA's ethos. We therefore wish to make it clear that GALHA does not endorse those opinions and we unreservedly dissociate ourselves from them. We are taking urgent steps to avoid this situation recurring."

It was this that has led – not without a great deal of rancour – to the resignation of Andy

Armitage as editor and Dean Braithwaite as assistant editor.

Commenting on the events that led to his resignation, Armitage told the *Freethinker*:

"I've always striven to publish challenging and contrary articles, including some by people from both the Christian and Muslim faiths.

"No one's shown that the Balaam article is racist. It's in keeping with the style I'd established, and I'm appalled that I've worked hard to make a lively and challenging publication over the past five years only to have my efforts trashed and to be humiliated by summary 'justice'.

"I resigned because I couldn't work under the new regime to be imposed by the committee, under which all copy would be vetted by them. That's not what the magazine's about. It's not a bland trotting-out of some committee-approved line.

"I'm furious that the GALHA committee immediately disowned their own magazine by putting out a press release with no consultation with the editorial team. Instead of entering the fray and defending their magazine's valour, they ran with their tails between their legs as soon as the political-correctness brigade started whining.

"I've never seen such spinelessness from people who call themselves campaigners and freethinkers. GALHA is the worse for this fiasco. I hope its members bear that in mind come the next committee elections, before a much-needed organisation becomes a eunuch."

Broadhead said: "*G&LH* magazine is issued to all GALHA members free, and complimentary copies are sent to many gay and Humanist groups and publications worldwide.

Although it is GALHA's charitable wing, The Pink Triangle Trust, which publishes the magazine, it is widely considered as the voice of GALHA, so the GALHA committee gets the blame for any of its content which is deemed controversial and, in this particular case, perceived as racist or likely to stir up racial hatred.

It is highly significant that the signatories to the letter that made these accusations, and which include a representative from the gay Muslim group Imaan, were among those who strongly objected to the protest of GALHA, OutRage! School's Out! and other groups, at the warm welcome accorded by the Mayor of London to the homophobic Islamic cleric Dr Yusuf Qaradawi.

These people are opposed to any criticism made of Islam and brand it racist. But GALHA has every right to condemn a religion which is not only intrinsically homophobic but oppresses women and calls for the murder of unbelievers, and it will continue to do so."

Violent pornography

I WAS shocked to read Dr Sean Gabb's letter (November *Freethinker*) claiming no link between violent pornography and sexual violence.

Everything I have read *supports* the link. Also an interest in one "extreme" eg bestiality – will frequently mean an interest in another – eg paedophilia.

I would suggest that culturally a tolerance of pornography also will be reflected in the attitude to women eg hip-hop.

A tolerance of women or children being portrayed as objects can only support a view that they are... whichever comes first. It follows that women or children being portrayed as objects to be abused will allow the user of this pornography to feel justified and supported in this view.

Also, you seem to presume that all "pornography" is made with consensual adults. This is naivety in the extreme, akin to presuming all prostitutes are consenting adults.

I would welcome a ban and resent the idea that I am an "anti-sex fanatic"! It is a ridiculous suggestion that if I don't agree with you, Dr Gabb, I must hate sex or the expression of sexuality. This is not a proper argument! For freedom of sexual expression in society, surely we must all feel we are respected and valued for our sexuality. Violent pornography makes many of us feel vulnerable.

To think that homophobic material is on a similar footing to islamophobic material is strange. I see no problem with loathing a belief, but to publish hate material about someone's fixed sexuality is bizarre and surely indefensible? The drip-drip of hate material can alter opinion – as the tabloid papers know well.

I do agree that as a society we must be careful what we ban – but some restrictions must apply to preserve others' freedoms.

DOROTHY LEWIS
Surrey

A Thought for the Day

I OFFER this as Thought for Today (and every day). Wandering through the streets, in June 1972, to make sense of the sudden death of my son Tim, 17, it came to me: Life is an accident. There's no reason, no plan, no-one to blame or thank. There are compensations and we must be grateful for them. All we can do is to make the most of every day and enjoy the company of those around us the best we can for as long as we can. There is no life but this one.

To which I would add: Mankind must grow up, face reality, and give up the selfdeception and fairytales of religion. Everywhere religion

Help boost the *Freethinker's* subscription levels

NEXT May, the *Freethinker* celebrates 125 years of uninterrupted publication. Today, our task is to ensure the continued success of the magazine – and to do so we would like to increase substantially its readership over the next few years.

You can help achieve this goal by helping to distribute a full-colour leaflet which we have just had printed. The front of the postcard-sized flyer is reproduced here. The wording on the back is as follows.

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

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

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

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

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

Freethinker Subscription Drive
PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

**Religion is
screwing
the world!**



**Isn't
it time
you did
something
to combat
the
dangers
in our
midst?**

**Join the battle against the forces of
religious fanaticism by subscribing to
the *Freethinker*, the world's oldest
atheist magazine.**

See details on the reverse of this flyer



is employed by rulers and their minions to deceive and to assert power over people. It also provides a living, in some cases very rich living, for some people. Religion, deception, money and power are inseparable.

STEWART VALDAR
London

Taking issue with Pigliucci

THERE are a couple of points in Massimo Pigliucci's article, *On Death: a Humanistic Perspective*, (*Freethinker*, October) which I would like to take issue with.

Pigliucci states that "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." I'd much prefer it if people who express their lack of sureness about life after death used "I" rather than "We".

I don't share his doubts. I know exactly and precisely what it will be like for me when I'm dead. It will be exactly and precisely what it was like for me before I was born – non-existence. In other words, when my brain is eaten by the worms or burnt to ash, which I won't be caring a toss about, when I am declared clinically dead, that is it! Game shot! What is it that Pigliucci can't be sure about? A senseless, bodiless, invisible entity existing beyond the naturalistic universe? These are the "can't be sure's" that the supernatural mystics feed on.

My second point is that when he was discussing the fear of death he says that "In this the believer has an apparent advantage over the atheist".

There are only two basic alternatives in the main stream religions to which the majority of believers belong, eternal bliss or eternal torment – and they are indoctrinated into believing that it is always going to be a very close call. If this can be construed as some sort of "apparent advantage" they are welcome to it. What ever I feel about people who dedicate their lives to evading reality it is not envy.

JIM CASS
Co Durham

'Losing my Religion'

I WAS looking forward to the radio programme 'Losing my Religion' to be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on September 19.

However, when I read the notice in *Radio Times*, I could only find the names of contributors who had manifestly NOT lost their religion and I could not see how they could possibly have anything to say on this matter. Barbara Smoker was not

named. So, I did not listen to this programme.

If the decision to include religious spokespeople was made "very near the end of production", it is hard to see how *Radio Times*, which presumably has to be printed well in advance of the programmes it lists, could have had time to include them, and does not explain why Barbara Smoker's name was omitted or why there was not time to inform her of the change of plan.

The arguments given for including religious spokespeople seem rather thin, as Sara Conkey herself seems to admit. The BBC does not have a remit to try to explain or excuse the horrors of any religion.

There are enough high-profile Muslims who go in fear of their lives for leaving their faith for us to see what is the norm. Death threats were made against Salman Rushdie by highly placed representatives of the Muslim faith who presumably knew their theology, not by jobs. Thank you for publishing the parts of the programme which I DID want to hear and thanks to Barbara Smoker and others for telling their stories.

MAUREEN LOFMARK
Wales

Jonathan Miller's 'Unbelief'

I AM very much enjoying Jonathan Miller's current series on Unbelief. It is summarising all those books I once bought but never got round to reading.

However, I do wonder if it is getting to the vast audience that could benefit from and find what they are looking for? I am sure it is way over many people's heads, whereas what is required is the TV equivalent of the books I found available in the early 1950s – such as the Thinkers' Library. This set me off to the RPA and NSS, books by Joseph McCabe, and all the many pamphlets that were available.

I then realised that I was not alone in my views and have never looked back since.

JOHN DOWDING
Colchester

Tears of blood

"ROMAN Catholic authorities in Italy ruled yesterday that 'tears of blood' on a statue of Saint Padre Pio were female, so could not be 'miraculous'."

Hang on a mo' I thought as I read that report recently in the *Times*. The Catholic Church is founded on bunkum, and expects its adherents to believe all sorts of absurdities, yet refuses to countenance the possibility that Padre Pio, who died in 1968 and was canonised three years ago, might actually have been a woman in monk's drag. Or that, having shuffled off to paradise, where apparently all things are possible, he decided to change sex in order to bunk up with all those popes who were so sadly denied nookie on earth. Scrub that bit. Being

Catholic, they would not be *remotely* interested in sex with anyone over the age of ten.

JONATHAN SIMONS
Purfleet

Hilarious Headline

I THOUGHT readers might like the the front page headline from the October 30 edition of *Hertfordshire on Sunday*, a freesheet distributed in my area. The headline certainly grabs attention ... I bet the Vatican will be a bit ratty.

POPE ON INDECENT ASSAULT CHARGES

A CAR dealer has been charged. The offence allegedly took place over a week in the UK.

IVOR WILLIAMS
Herts

Editor's note: The Pope in question is car dealer Graham Pope

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.
Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

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

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

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

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to the Freethinker, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

Events & Contacts

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group: Information on 01273 227549/461404. www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, December 6, 7.30pm. Anne Mitchell: *Romantic and Secular Poets*.

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

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 Hight Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, December 13, 2pm. Film: *The God Who Wasn't There*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295. Sunday, Dec 11, 12 noon. Winter Solstice Social at 295 Springfield Road, Chelmsford. Tel 01245 353743.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, December 13, 8 pm. Bob Makin: *Marriage Today: Great Expectations or Hard Times?*

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

Isle of Wight Humanist Group. Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail davidb67@clara.co.uk

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Friends Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, December 15, 8pm. Winter Solstice Party.

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, December 7, Annual Dinner. Wednesday, January 4, 8pm. Frank Abel: *That was 2005, That Was*.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8037/4. E-mail: library@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.

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

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

E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

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

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

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

E-mail: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.ulsterhumanist.freeservers.com

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Bill McIlroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road,
Hove, Sussex BN3 1RU.

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