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The frightening face of fanaticism



This is the face of Yousef al-Khattab, once a devout orthodox Jew called Joseph Cohen, now a Muslim fundamentalist living in Gaza. Al-Khattab, who wants Western women “fixed” by their men so they don’t appear as “whores on the street”, reveres Osama bin Laden, and supports the militant Palestinian group Hamas, was one of a number of religious zealots interviewed by Professor Richard Dawkins in his two-part Channel 4 TV programme, The Root of All Evil? – see full report on page 12

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THERE are many things I can cheerfully live without. If, for example, Morris dancing, soy milk and Brylcreem were suddenly to vanish overnight, I will certainly not lament their passing. But if I were to wake up to world without pickled cucumber, or the internet search engine Google, I think I might fall apart at the seams.

The less said about my pickle addiction the better, but Google – ah, that’s something else. With its ability to deliver internet search results in the blink of an eye, I laud it as undoubtedly the most valuable tool anyone embarked on research could possibly use. Here’s an example: last week I typed the words “ignorant bigots” into Google, and in 0.05 seconds Google offered me, as No 1 in a staggering list of 263,000 results – the Christian Voice website.

This spooked me. How did CV reach such an elevated position? On delving further, I discovered that Stephen Green’s baby had been the object of something called “Google bombing”. Another witless born-again Christian who has been “Google bombed” was George W Bush. I typed “miserable failure” into Google, and in 0.09 seconds found the US President’s official biography at the head of a list of 6,040,000 miserable failures. And it has held that position for more than two years.

According to a BBC report, the trick is possible because Google searches more than just the contents of web pages – it also counts how often a site is linked to, and with what words.

Thus, members of an online community can affect the results of Google searches by linking their sites to a chosen one.

My interest in ignorant bigots was sparked by Sir Iqbal Sacranie, head of the Muslim Council of Britain, who had worked himself into a lather over civil partnerships, or “gay marriages”. Sacranie believes that homosexual relationships are harmful to society, and said as much in an interview on BBC Radio 4.

I was furious that Eddie Mair, who interviewed Sacranie, failed to point out to him that what is *really* harmful to society is the bombing of trains and buses and restaurants and clubs, and that these atrocities are sparked by Islam, and not by homosexuality.

Curious to find out how many other religious nutters had entered the civil partnership fray, I Googled “ignorant bigots” and was instantly offered Stephen Green’s take on the issue.

The Führer of Britain’s Christian right described the first civil ceremonies in England and Wales as “a sham and an affront to Almighty God and to common decency. Ordinary people would be revolted by the sight of two men or two women kissing in a parody of a marital embrace ...

“Despite all the legislation man can pass, two men or two women will never be ‘one flesh’ as the Bible speaks of marriage. In sexual intercourse, a couple consummate their marriage, which in God’s ideal is the time each

relinquish their virginity. Homosexuals cannot do sexual intercourse together, and have to resort to mutual masturbation or pressing a part of the human body into a use its gracious Creator never intended.

“Civil Partnerships will do great evil. They will cement sad, deluded people into a lifestyle characterised by deceit, disease, degradation and death.” Hmmm. An apt description of Christianity, I would venture.

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE goes in search of ‘ignorant bigots’



On the subject of homosexuality, you cannot get a fag paper between Green’s ignorance and Sacranie’s. Damn it, the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of religious fanaticism even *look* the same, as their mugshots below indicate.

But Green would hate being called Sacranie’s bedfellow, as he is no great lover of Islam either, and has suggested that if Incitement to Religious Hatred legislation were passed, he would want the Koran banned as “hate literature.”

In fulminating against civil partnerships Green declared that “these disgusting spectacles have given Islamic fundamentalists fresh ammunition in their war of words against this nation. They can, with even greater justification, hold the UK up as an example of moral sickness, depravity and decadence which, they will say, must be destroyed.”

A great furore broke out after the Sacranie interview, culminating in the Metropolitan Police confirming they were investigating a complaint that the MCB head had used “hate speak”. This infuriated me even more than Sacranie’s actual words, and I immediately sent this e-mail to the BBC:

“Sir Iqbal Sacranie is a Muslim fundamentalist and therefore cannot be expected to think rationally about homosexuality. Indeed, being a member of a religion as backward and barbaric as Islam, he cannot be expected to think rationally at all. That said, he is no different from, say, Stephen Green, national director of Christian Voice, who has expressed equally insulting and ignorant views about homosexuality. I find it utterly absurd that, in a free and democratic society, Sacranie and people like



Green and Sacranie

Green should be prevented from publicly expressing their stupidity and bigotry. As editor of the *Freethinker*, the world’s oldest atheist magazine, which has aggressively exposed ALL religion to ridicule and sarcasm for 125 years, I staunchly believe in freedom of expression, and I am deeply troubled that political correctness will kill off all but the most flaccid of debates.”

THE end of 2005 and the beginning of this year brought me a touching number of goodwill messages from friends and *Freethinker* subscribers, but none amused me as much as the one I received from my brother-in-law, Paul Duveen, who lives in South Africa. This is the entirely PC message he e-mailed me.

“I wanted to send out some sort of holiday greeting, but it is so difficult in today’s world to know exactly what to say without offending someone. So I met with my attorney yesterday, and, on his advice, I want to say to you:

“Please accept with no obligation, implied or implicit, my most fraternal best wishes for an environmentally-conscious, socially-responsible, low-stress, non-addictive, gender-neutral celebration of the Winter Solstice holiday, practised within the most enjoyable traditions of the religious persuasion of your choice, or secular practices of your choice, with respect for the religious/secular persuasions and/or traditions of others, and/or their choice not to practise religious or secular traditions at all.

“I also wish you a fiscally successful, personally fulfilling, and medically uncomplicated recognition of the onset of the generally accepted calendar year 2006, but not without due respect for the calendars of choice of other cultures whose contributions to society have helped make South Africa great (not to imply that South Africa is necessarily greater than any other country, or that South Africa is the only great country in the Western Hemisphere), and without regard to the race, creed, colour, age, physical ability, religious faith, or none, or sexual preference of the wished.

“By accepting this Greeting, you are accepting these Terms:

- 1 This Greeting is subject to clarification or withdrawal;
- 2 It is freely transferable with no alteration to the original greeting;
- 3 It implies no promise by the Wisher to actually implement any of the wishes for her/himself or others, and is void where prohibited by law, and is revocable at the sole discretion of the Wisher;
- 4 This wish is warranted to perform as expected within the usual application of Good Tidings for a period of one year, or until the issuance of a subsequent holiday greeting, whichever comes first, and warranty is limited to replacement of this wish or issuance of a new wish at the sole discretion of the Wisher.”

NSS protests over police distributing a Christian comic

A CHRISTIAN comic book, *Cops and Robbers*, which contains first-hand stories from criminals who have embraced the faith, will not be distributed by Scotland Yard without wider consultation with faith groups.

The National Secular Society had protested to the Metropolitan Police about the Christian Police Association's attempts to use police officers to distribute proselytising material.

"It is essential that we respond effectively to the needs of all faith groups and that the potential impact of any initiative is carefully considered," a Metropolitan Police statement said.

Commander Alf Hitchcock, of the Metropolitan Police, said he welcomed the involvement of the Christian Police Association – "the *Cops and Robbers* publication is an innovative and positive concept. However, it is important that effective consultation takes place, in relation to the material, and that the needs of other faith groups are also considered as part of the ongoing work being undertaken by the Custody Directorate."

The NSS protested that the police have no business evangelising on behalf of any particular religion. NSS Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, said: "London is a hugely multi-cultural city, its residents probably cover the whole religious spectrum. Consequently, its police force is there to serve everyone, and not to be used as a proselytising tool by one particular religion.

"The police force must remain a secular body that doesn't show favour to any section of the community. It must not involve itself at an official level in these sectarian religious activities. Nor should the police forget that the majority of young people do not consider themselves as belonging to any religion."

"Once the police start down the road of religious favouritism, conflict will surely follow," said Mr Wood. "What happens when the Moonies or the Scientologists ask to have their material distributed by the police? How can they say no to one when they've said yes to another? The answer is to declare that the police authority is a secular body that does not involve itself in religious activities at an institutional level."

A member of the CPA indicated that the group hopes to reverse the Met's decision. Pc David Turtle, deputy chairman of the CPA, said: "We are expressing our disappointment to the commissioner and the Metropolitan Police Authority, and will be seeking ways in which this can be reversed."

The CPA is believed to have around 1,000 members within London's police force. The

comic was designed to be given out to youths being held in custody cells.

Des Brown, a convicted killer who now works in a Christian youth group, says he wants criminals to become Christians.

"The purpose of this comic is to put forward a story that people's lives can be changed by the power of Jesus Christ. That's the point of the comic."

Meanwhile, the *Times* reported last month that gay police officers are facing increasing homophobic bullying and harassment from other officers.

The paper said that the Gay Police Association (GPA) had reported a 75 percent increase in calls on its 24-hour action line and gave warning of a rise in "faith-based homophobia" from Christian and Muslim officers.

Vic Codling, the national co-ordinator of the GPA, writes in the latest edition of *Police Review* that there were 14 cases last year involving homophobia based on religion. They included officers who had refused to work with gay officers or were withdrawn from groups discussing equality within forces. Mr Codling said that police managers were unsure of what action to take. He pointed to the Christian Police Association which, he said, as a condition of membership, ruled out habitual homosexual activity without repentance. A spokesman for the Christian Police Association told the magazine: "It is certainly not a condition of membership and we do not ask anyone their sexual orientation when they apply."

TfTD will remain a megaphone for faith

APPEARING before the Broadcasting Select Committee in Parliament last month, Mark Thompson, the Director General of the BBC, confirmed that he has no intention of opening up *Thought for the Day* to non-believers.

When questioned about comments he made a week before in an interview with the *Tablet*, indicating that he might be amenable to ending the religious monopoly on TfTD, Mr Thompson made clear that the issue had been settled in 2004, when the board of governors had rejected a complaint from the NSS.

Terry Sanderson, vice president of the National Secular Society, said: "It was clear to us from the start that Mr Thompson had absolutely no intention of reviewing this matter. This unjustifiable religious propaganda slot will remain unchallenged."

Moaning Muslims back in the news

AN employment tribunal threw out a case of religious discrimination last month brought by a Muslim salesman who was "offended" when wine was offered as a job incentive.

Imran Khan, 25, from Bristol, claimed that the bottles of wine on offer from his employer, Direct Line Insurance, put him at a disadvantage because, as a Muslim, he could not drink alcohol and could not claim the prizes.

British-born Mr Khan sought damages for "hurt feelings" but the panel chairman, Clive Toomer, rejected his claim, reasoning that a teetotal non-Muslim would have been in the same position. Louise Cummings, the team leader, said she introduced the incentives to "improve staff morale and performance". She added: "If I had realised that I had hurt anyone's feelings, then I would have taken steps to rectify that." A Muslim colleague exchanged his wine for gift vouchers, the tribunal heard.

'Offensive ice cream cone'

Business development manager Rashad Akhtar, 27, of High Wycombe, had more success with a complaint when he discovered that the lid of an ice-cream cone sold by the Burger King chain bore an "offensive" design. Akhtar claimed the design resembled the Arabic inscription for Allah, branded it sacrilegious, and threatened a *jihad* against Burger King, which reacted by promptly withdrawing the cones.

The chain was being forced to spend thousands of pounds redesigning the lid with the backing of the Muslim Council of Britain. It apologised and said: "The design simply represents a spinning ice-cream cone."

The "offensive" lid was spotted in a branch in Park Royal last week by Akhtar, who is not satisfied by the decision to withdraw the cones and has called on Muslims to boycott Burger King. He said: "This is my *jihad*. How can you say it is a spinning swirl? If you spin it one way to the right you are offending Muslims."

A Muslim Council spokesman said: "We commend the sensitive and prompt action that Burger King has taken."



The ice-cream cone lid, left, and, right, the Arabic symbol for Allah



Christians are rude and tight-fisted

“CHRISTIANITY sees Jesus as the God of Love, but it appears that Christians see one another with rather less charity,” according to Ruth Gledhill, writing in the *Times* (Dec 30, 2005).

She revealed that the *Church Times* asked readers to send in examples of bad manners in church. “The results”, said Gledhill, “make painful reading.”

One of the worst examples was in a Royal Peculiar, a chapel under the personal jurisdiction of the Queen, in which congregations are expected to stand for the National Anthem. A worshipper reported the fate of a disabled woman in the pew in front.

“One of the sidesmen rushed up to her, jabbed her in the arm with his finger and ordered her to get up in an extremely aggressive and unkind way. The woman began to cry. She tried to explain that she was unable to get up.”

Another wheelchair user was told at the church door to go home because there was nowhere to put her.

The *Church Times* found that choirs, clergy, church-wardens and even worshippers were all equally “unchristian” in their behaviour towards any who stepped over their arbitrarily-drawn lines.

A curate, doing his best to talk to a woman worshipper at the back of church on her way out after a service, received the retort: “Don’t you start talking about Jesus to me in here!”

When a number of new families turned up at a church, a churchwarden reported to the vicar, without a trace of irony: “A lot of people were coming to the altar rail today. Thought they weren’t really our type. I got the feeling you were positively encouraging them.”

Clergymen can be crass as well. *Church Times* editor Paul Handley, who compiled the examples of bad manners, revealed that one priest told mourners at a funeral that he wasn’t the rector – he’d just drawn the short straw! And a deacon admitted that he did not like people.

In an introduction to the collection, Handley wrote: “I thought nothing could surprise me in the readers’ responses. You don’t edit the *Church Times* for long without seeing the bits of church life that fell long ago through the central-heating grilles, and have been mouldering ever since.

“Besides, who attends church besides sinners in search of redemption?”

“But, as the emails and letters came in, they constantly took my breath away.

“Who were these people? Had they practised being rude, or did it come naturally?”

He is sympathetic about such lapses in behaviour. Clergy and congregations are often

under pressure, and not at their best on Sunday mornings. But, he says, you would expect churchgoing to reform people’s character. “We know people mean well, but, frankly, it’s not good enough.”

Not only are Christians rude, they are also tightfisted, according to an item published at the end of last year in the American magazine *The Church Report*. Steve Sjogren, in an article on tipping, said that “most people who work as waiters and waitresses are barely making it financially. Many are students or single parents. I worked as a waiter for several years at a number of restaurants while I was newly married and in college. I earned a lot of money as a waiter, but very little from Christians that I served.

“It’s sad to say, but I learned that the best tippers are those who drink alcohol. I also learned that by far the worst tippers – and the most frequent complainers, those with the

worst attitudes, those who sent their food back to the kitchen – were often Christians. How did I know? Sometimes they brought their bibles with them. Often, they would pray before they ate. And the longer they pray, the less they pay. That was sad, but almost universally true.”

A Christian himself, Sjogren said “as Christ-followers, we need to be known for our generosity. We need to be the kinds of customers who are so popular that when we walk into a restaurant we frequent, the staff will squabble to wait on us. They will know from experience that we won’t be rude, demanding, sour – all the things Christians have traditionally been in the past.

“You can’t disrespect people over and over again in public situations and then expect them to treat you with credibility. We’ve blown our credibility.”

‘There is no basis for homophobia in Islam’ says Muslim Professor

“THERE is no foundation in the [Islamic] faith for the non-acceptance of gay people,” according to Haleh Afshar, Professor of Middle Eastern politics at the University of York.

She made this startling statement on Andrew

Marr’s *Start the Week* programme on Radio 4 (February 9) during a discussion about Muslim attitudes towards the West.

When Marr pointed out that Amsterdam has a large gay community as well as a large North African Muslim community, and that the Muslims have been “extremely aggressive towards homosexuals” – something the Dutch see as an intolerable attack on their liberal attitudes – Afshar replied:

“Part of the problem of ghettoising and ‘otherising’ Muslims, or any community, is that they then revert to old, ossified ideas – non-real ideas – of what they are and who they are. They then claim that gays are not acceptable, which actually has no foundation in the faith.”

She said that if Muslims were much more included it was far more likely that they would interact better with other communities.

Meanwhile, a report from Algeria says that, while many countries in the West were on the brink of allowing same-sex unions, a couple made history last year by marrying in an Algerian hotel.

The two un-named men persuaded a hotel owner in Waharan to host a “birthday party”, but this was merely a cover-up for their wedding ceremony.

It all ended in tears. Algeria forbids homosexuality, and the reception was stormed by security forces, who arrested the men and took them away.

No further news about the newly-weds has emerged from Algeria.

Nigerians protest against plague of Catholic monks

IRATE villagers in Udi in south-east Nigeria invaded a Catholic monastery to protest against monks encroaching on their land.

According to a report last month in the *Guardian* (Nigeria), the placard-waving villagers, including women, teenagers and elderly people, marched on the monastery to demonstrate against what they called “the unlawful and immoral activities of the monks”.

It took the intervention of the police and state government officials to bring the situation under control.

Southern Nigeria is predominantly Christian, and it is common for church authorities to occupy land which they use to build monasteries, seminaries, prayer cities, revival camps and holy sites, leaving the local communities – most of whom live in absolute poverty – to try to survive on poor, over-farmed land.

AN advertisement for a statue of the Virgin Mary veiled in a condom has embarrassed the publishers of the US Catholic magazine *America*, and prompted some heated comment on Catholic websites.

America, a weekly magazine run by the Jesuit order of priests, said in a statement it was embarrassed and offended by the ad, which it said had been published unknowingly last December.

The spoof ad was placed by a London-based artist, who offered what he called the "Extra Virgin" statue for sale, "a stunning... statue of the Virgin Mary standing atop a serpent wearing a delicate veil of latex."

A colour photograph showed a statue of magenta-robed Mary covered with a translucent but visible condom.

America's editors offered a statement of apology: "We were embarrassed to have readers call our attention to the offensive advertisement that escaped our unknowing eye... The offence was compounded when we learnt in the advertiser's reply to a concerned reader that he had intended his art as an assault on Catholic faith and devotion.

"We have taken several steps to tighten our advance review of advertising and express our outrage to the artist."

The problem came about because *America's* editors only saw the ad in black and white before it was published, and the condom was not as evident, according to the magazine's associate editor, Rev James Martin.

"When our ad person saw it in black and



'Extra Virgin' Madonna ad embarrasses Catholic magazine

white, she didn't see anything," Martin said in a telephone interview. "When I got the magazine in colour, I noticed the ad. I thought it was a little odd, but we regularly get ads for all sorts of strange religious art."

Another issue may be Catholic priests' unfamiliarity with what condoms look like.

"We're Jesuits," Martin said. "I don't think you could have found anyone in the editors' room who has seen a condom." The mention of a "veil of latex" failed to register, he said.

The artist, Steve Rosenthal, said in a media

email, "The primary aim of the work is to highlight the Vatican's continuance of non-advocation regarding the use of condoms."

The ruckus prompted a critical column on the website of the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*, which also ran the picture with the caption: "Mary's veil? A condom."

"All of this has happened in a Church like the one in America, which has been reduced to bankruptcy and universal loathing by a body of clergy which, it seems, too often likes to fondle the genitals of seminary students," the column said.

America magazine was in hot water last May, when its previous editor, Rev Thomas Reese, quit under Vatican pressure after printing articles examining issues such as gay priests, Vatican secrecy, and the use of condoms to prevent Aids.

The Catholic Church opposes all forms of artificial contraception, which means it does not approve condoms even if used to help prevent the spread of Aids. At the same time, the Church runs many hospitals and clinics to help Aids victims.

Campaign against safe-sex key-chains badly backfires

FOR the last year, Planned Parenthood of Connecticut has been selling a range of amusing key chains on its website promoting condom use and safe sex. Business was steady but not what one would call booming – until late last month when the PPC experienced an explosion of orders for the \$3 items.

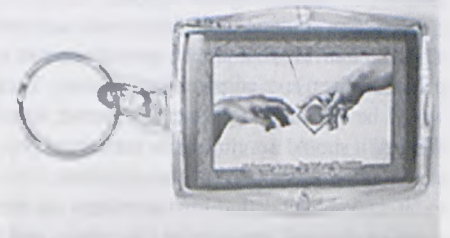
So great was the demand that their website collapsed under the avalanche of orders. Stunned staff were puzzled – then all became clear: a report about the key chains, posted by internet columnist Matt Drudge, included a statement by a conservative Christian group condemning them as "blasphemous."

One of the key chains shows Michelangelo's God (from the Sistine Chapel details) handing Adam a condom.

This enraged Kristian Mineau, president of the conservative Massachusetts Family Institute, who called the Sistine Chapel key-chain image "a very crude and crass manoeuvre."

"This does nothing to deal with the horrific promiscuity rate we have among teenagers," he said. "We believe the real approach, particularly to the young people that this is targeted at, is abstinence before marriage."

C J Doyle of the Catholic Action League of Massachusetts weighed in with this comment: "It's an example of depraved morals and contempt for the sensibility of Catholics everywhere."



One of the "blasphemous" key-chains

Judy Tabar, Planned Parenthood of Connecticut's president and chief executive, said the controversy over the key chains prompted 100,000 visitors to swamp the site on one day alone, causing it to shut down temporarily.

"The media attention led to an avalanche of orders. We have had to expand our website capacity and it is up and running again," she said.

The key chains come in 28 designs, including an image of a US flag with the stars replaced with the words "Wear with Pride" and a Statue of Liberty holding a condom instead of a torch.

Another reads "Condoms are cheaper than diapers" over a cartoon of a screaming baby.

Tabar said the variety of designs was aimed at appealing to a wide range of personalities. "Condoms are the best protection against unintended pregnancy and infection, so it's really important to get the message out there," she said.

BARRY Duke, in the December 2005 *Freethinker*, describes the unpleasant practice of the Jewish *mohel*, who after cutting off the male infant's foreskin, traditionally sucks the blood from the penis.

A correspondence I had with the Department of Health may be of interest. I first wrote, addressed to the then Secretary of State, Dr John Reid, on December 16, 2004, as follows.

"It is reported in *East End Life*, the community paper published by Tower Hamlets Council (December 13-19, 2004), that a "hospital-based religious and cultural male circumcision service for people registered with a GP in Tower Hamlets is to be set up at Mile End Hospital". The service is to be non-profit-making but will charge a fee.

"I read this report with near incredulity. Male circumcision, I need hardly point out, involves excising the foreskin of the penis, making a permanent alteration and normally leaving scar tissue. Mutilation of the genitals, or indeed any part of the body, cannot be considered as other than a serious assault on the person, unless there is clear medical justification. That is very rare, and is clearly not the case here. It is entirely unjustifiable even when the individual is able to give fully informed and free consent. Children are not able to give such consent. Indeed, they are usually not given the opportunity to do so. It is absolutely unacceptable that this practice should take place under the auspices of the National Health Service.

"The Government is rightly exercised over whether, and to what extent, parents should be permitted the use of corporal punishment. There would be universal agreement, however, that if allowed it should never result in permanent physical damage. Circumcision does just that.

"It may be said that circumcisions on religious or cultural grounds do take place, and it is better that it should be done in a hygienic environment. This argument could be used to justify any practice, and can be dismissed. Further, any surgical procedure carries some risk, and should never be undertaken unless really necessary. There is also the argument of respect for cultural and religious traditions. However, we do not allow this to override what is acceptable in our society. Fundamental to this is the rule of law, and that law must be based on such principles as respect for the person, equality before the law, and protection of the weak. These principles are violated by the practice of non-medical circumcision of children.

"I should like you to give me your assurance that your Department, and the National Health Service, do not support the practice of circumcision on non-medical grounds, and will do nothing to facilitate or condone it."

I received no reply, and in writing on February 11, 2005 to request one, added: "I

The Unkindest Cut?

would add that since I wrote, legislation has come into force which, as I understand it, makes it an offence to use corporal punishment on a child in such a way as to leave a mark. Circumcision leaves a permanent mutilation. It also appears that non-medical amputation might be illegal under Human Rights Legislation. If not, however, the same would be true of cigarette smoking. This is legal, but in view of the known harm it often does, your Department does what it can to discourage it, especially among children. Circumcision is a precise and certain harm."

JOHN RADFORD tackles the Department of Health over cultural and religious mutilation of children, and gets a response devoid of reason and ethics

This elicited the following (with apologies for delay), from a William Frost of the Customer Service Centre.

"It is generally agreed that circumcision brings no proven benefits to a person's physical health, but at the same time, it is of deep significance for the Jewish and Islamic communities. However, this Department has no plans to issue guidance to cover ritual circumcision. We regard with respect the religious and cultural traditions that have existed for centuries and which are ultimately a matter of individual choice. Strategic Health authorities and NHS Trusts are free to choose whether to provide this surgery or not. However, their decision should be based on local circumstances and, if they do choose to provide ritual circumcision, costs should be met from funds available locally.

"The legal position is unclear as it is untested. The protection of children from 'traditional practices prejudicial to the health of the children' (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) has to be balanced against the rights of individuals to practise their religion, as enshrined in the 1998 Human Rights Act.

"The most important issue is the safety of the child. Whilst no surgery is entirely without risk, an operation carried out in an appropriately equipped hospital is preferable to one

carried out by a 'lay circumciser' in the community. We support the General Medical Council's Guidance on circumcision issued in September 1997. This states that doctors who carry out this procedure must be properly skilled, must keep up to date on surgical methods, and must discuss the surgery with the parents beforehand.

"I hope this information is helpful."

Well, it is, in showing that neither reason nor ethics has much to do with it. Everything that is said applies equally to female "circumcision" which is rightly illegal. As I could not see how to make any progress, I acknowledged the reply, merely commenting that it seemed odd for the Department of Health to "regard with respect" the mutilation of children.

Male circumcision is only one of many traditional body markings or alterations with various functions, the most obvious perhaps being to indicate group identity or membership. The group may be a tribe or clan, etc, or one sex, or adult versus child. For Jews, this is exemplified by the myth of Abraham's covenant with God, in Genesis 17, 10-14 (I guess, invented to account for an existing practice). For Muslims, and other groups, it is simply traditional. It is not mentioned in the Koran, and apparently is considered compulsory by only one of the six schools of Islamic law, though the others recommend it. It is common in the United States, possibly for supposed medical reasons rather than religious ones, but it seems to be declining significantly there.

Child abuse of all kinds is tragically all too common. Male circumcision is far from the worst example. But abuse it is, and I do not see that it can be justified on grounds of long tradition or religious belief. A belief, however strongly held, cannot entitle anyone to inflict harm on others. This is above all the case if the others are defenceless, as children are. It seems to me reasonable to expect that the national Department of Health, as a minimum, should not condone or encourage it.

I have not come across a psychological study of the effects on a boy (Muslims are often aged six to eleven) of his loving parents informing him that they have just arranged for a man to cut off part of his penis. A website, NetDoctor.co.uk, gives an extensive run-down of medical reasons against it, but bizarrely concludes with the assurance that the author has the greatest respect for all religions, and apologises if his (or her) words have given offence. Personally I feel no such respect indeed, this barbaric remnant of primitive behaviour would by itself destroy any vestige of it.

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

Stoning Satan is a lethal pastime

AT least 345 Muslim pilgrims were trampled to death and almost 300 injured last month as they tripped over luggage in a scramble to hurl pebbles at symbols of Satan during the annual pilgrimage. It was the latest in a succession of stampede tragedies to hit the *Hajj* pilgrimage despite efforts of the Saudi authorities to avoid a repeat of disasters like the one that killed 1,426 people in 1990.

At least 345 people were killed and 289 other pilgrims wounded in a stampede caused by "unruly pilgrims, and a problem of luggage", Saudi Health Minister Hamad bin Abdullah Al-Maneh told reporters.

"There was a big rush among the pilgrims which led a group of them to be killed or wounded," he said.

The Saudi-owned *Al-Arabiya* news channel showed footage of the bodies of dozens of pilgrims lying on the ground, covered with white shrouds. It was the last day of the pilgrimage.

Interior ministry spokesman Mansur Al-Turki said the incident occurred when falling led to a rush at the eastern entrance of the Jamarat bridge, where the pilgrims stone three pillars symbolising Satan in the valley of Mina, east of the "holy" city of Mecca.

One Egyptian pilgrim at the scene said: "Just when we went to throw the stones, I saw a huge rush and pilgrims falling under the feet of thousands of other pilgrims."

The stoning of Satan is the riskiest episode of the *Hajj* as the pilgrims jostle to make sure their pebbles touch the pillar. The weaker ones risk being trampled by the masses.

The stoning ritual, which is spread out over three days, marks the final part of the *Hajj* pilgrimage for the more than two million Muslim

pilgrims who flock to Mecca from around the world.

In 2004, 251 pilgrims were trampled to death in a 27-minute stampede. In 2003, 14 pilgrims, including six women, were killed in a stampede during the first day of the stoning ritual, and 35 died in 2001. In 1998 the *Hajj* saw 118 killed and more than 180 hurt at Mina.

The deadliest toll of the pilgrimage was in July 1990 when 1,426 pilgrims were trampled or asphyxiated to death in a stampede in a tunnel, also in Mina.

The *Hajj* is one of the five pillars of Islam and a once-in-a-lifetime duty for those able to complete it.

The latest tragedy came within days after 76 people were killed when a hostel in the heart of Mecca collapsed.

A report posted on **Middle East Online** after the 2004 stampede points out that many pilgrims "are certain that those who die during the *Hajj* are guaranteed entry to paradise."

"The death of 251 Muslims shocked no one. Even the Saudi authorities declared the incident the 'will of God'. After the incident Saudi's *Hajj* Minister Iyad Mandani said: 'All precautions were taken to prevent such an incident. But this was God's will. Caution isn't stronger than fate.'

"I wish I was among the pilgrims who died,' Kamal Shahada, an Egyptian pilgrim, said. 'I would have gone to heaven, because dying in these holy sites of Islam would assure one a place in heaven.'



They're off to stone the pillars, the deadly pillars of Hajj. These muslim-draped Muslims are dressed in this manner because they may not wear clothing with stitching during the Hajj

"Libyan Mohammad Taylamun agreed. 'The two million faithful who gathered every year at the holy sites for the pilgrimage hope to have the honour of being buried in this sacred soil,' he said after casting stones at the symbols of Satan.

"The scale of the tragedy, which cast a shadow over the *Hajj*, certainly provoked compassion among the gathering, but fatalism predominated among 'the guests of God'. That fatalism was abundantly evident as hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims flocked again from dawn to the dangerous esplanade to 'stone Satan'.

"Those who died will be missed by their families and friends but they have a chance no one else can have by dying on the holy land of Islam where they are then buried,' said a Bangladeshi who declined to be named."

JUDAS Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus with a kiss, is to be given a make-over by Vatican scholars.

The proposed "rehabilitation" of the man who, according to Christian mythology, was paid 30 pieces of silver to identify Jesus to Roman soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane, comes because he was not deliberately evil, but was just "fulfilling his part in God's plan".

Christians have traditionally blamed Judas for aiding and abetting the crucifixion, and his name is synonymous with treachery. According to St Luke, Judas was "possessed by Satan". Now, a campaign led by Monsignor Walter Brandmuller, head of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Science, is aimed at persuading believers to look kindly at a man reviled for 2,000 years.

Mgr Brandmuller told fellow scholars it was

Judas in line for a make-over

time for a "re-reading" of the Judas story. He is supported by Vittorio Messori, a prominent Catholic writer close to both Pope Benedict XVI and the late John Paul II.

Signor Messori said that the rehabilitation of Judas would "resolve the problem of an apparent lack of mercy by Jesus toward one of his closest collaborators".

He told *La Stampa* that there was a Christian tradition that held that Judas was forgiven by Jesus and ordered to purify himself with "spiritual exercises" in the desert.

In scholarly circles, it has long been unfashionable to demonise Judas, and Catholics in

Britain are likely to welcome Judas's rehabilitation.

Father Allen Morris, Christian Life and Worship secretary for the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, said the "rehabilitation" of Judas could help the Pope's drive to improve Christian-Jewish relations, which he has made a priority of his pontificate.

Some Bible experts say Judas was "a victim of a theological libel which helped to create anti-Semitism" by forming an image of him as a "sinister villain" prepared to betray for money. But some Vatican scholars have expressed concern over the reconsideration of Judas. Monsignor Giovanni D'Ercole, a Vatican theologian, said it was "dangerous to re-evaluate Judas and muddy the Gospel accounts by reference to apocryphal writings. This can only create confusion in believers."

Following Sir Iqbal Sacranie's contentious remarks concerning same-sex unions earlier this year, I decided the time was ripe for an examination of sex and sexuality within Islam. To do so I visited a large number of Islamic websites where advice is given by "cyber counsellors" (invariably male) to young, often guilt-ridden Muslims trying to come to terms with their burgeoning sexual feelings. It made for grim reading because so much of the "help" offered by these "counsellors" (among whom was at least one medical practitioner) is of such poor quality that it can only have the effect of adding to a youngsters' *angst*.

One of the most sophisticated Islamic websites is *IslamOnline*, where the very best in web technology is used to dispense utterly foolish and long-discredited myths about sex. Here is the answer given to one young man who was riddled with guilt over his "addiction" to masturbation:

"You already know that masturbation is not good for you albeit *makruh* (disliked), and not *haram* (forbidden).

"Long-term masturbation has the following effects as a result of changing the body's chemistry.

* Over-stimulation of the nervous system causing over-production of sex hormones and neurotransmitters, eg, acetylcholine.

* Fatigue.

* Lower back pain.

* Stress or anxiety.

* Thinning hair or hair loss.

* Soft or weak erection.

* Eye floaters or fuzzy vision.

* Groin or testicular pain.

* Pain or cramp in the pelvic cavity or tail bone or both.

* Reduced ability to be intimate and sensitive with one's wife; one experiences premature ejaculation adding to unsatisfactory sexual relations.

Fortunately, there are Muslims who will have none of this nonsense, and recognise the harm such "advice" can do. One such critic is Abul Kasem who lives in Australia. In a lengthy essay posted on the *Islamreview.com* website, he writes: "It was not easy to unmask the truth behind the seemingly pious look of Islam regarding sexual matters. Islam gives the impression that it is the only 'moral policeman' and 'ethical guardian' in the world who has the final say on sex and sexual matters. This is completely untrue. When the veneer of piety, morality and the '*hijab*' that is forcibly put on sexual matters is lifted, what we see is a completely different picture with regard to sex in Islam. These observations can be summarised as follows:

"1 The true meaning of sex in Islam is the possession of female sex organs either through dowry in marriage or through the capture of enemy/infidel women by Muslim men.

"2 The Islamic version of sex primarily means the sexual pleasure/enjoyment of men that culminates in the 'injection of sperm' in a female vagina.

"3 Men are the actors in sex and the women are the objects who are acted upon.

"4 In the Islamic concept of sex, there is virtually no room for female sensitivity, her likes and dislikes and the consideration of her sexual satisfaction. It is nearly impossible for a Muslim woman to express her sexual desire. If she is a little demanding on sexual matters, she is treated as a whore.

"5 The thought of love, feelings, empathy, and consideration, especially on the part of a Muslim woman is sadly missing in the legal provision for the supply of sexual pleasure to a Muslim man by a woman. Sex is viewed as a compulsive desire of men, and brute force can be used, if necessary, to impose sex on a woman.

6 In Islam, homosexuals and other sexual deviants are worse than murderers. There is no

Islam &

A morass of misogyny, insect

room of mercy for them.

"7 Islam gives an open licence to Muslim men to have sexual intercourse with women as long as these women are not Muslims and/or when these Muslim men are living in an infidel country.

"The concept of sex in Islam is totally flawed, if not completely wrong. It is solely based on the medieval and barbaric Arab/Bedouin culture where 'male orgasm' was the only concept of sex. With this outdated idea of sex in Islam, it is impossible to have a sexually satisfying relationship except for gratifying one's base and raw carnal desire."

Cutting-edge internet technology is used to spread medieval ideas about sex among Muslims. BARRY DUKE reports.

He describes his essay as "an attempt to expose the hypocrisy, double standards, unfairness, absurdity and sheer irrationality of Islam when it comes to sex. It also examines the barbaric rules that Islam inflicts on innocent people for having a simple sexually satisfying relationship that Islam unjustly and illogically construes as '*haram*'." He also poses the question: "Who do you think is the 'real' owner of our sexual organs, in particular the sexual organs of women? No, it is not we, humankind. It is Islam. Believe it or not, Islam owns the sexual organs of every Muslim man and woman in this universe – all of it, including even the pubic hairs that grow there!"

Here are some ground rules regarding sex laid down in *Islamonline* by Ahmed Adam, a doctor working at a private hospital in South Africa. He is described on the site as "a human rights activist, writer, speaker, and student of Islam. He is passionate about showing people how to unlock the potential within themselves."

1 Boys and girls should not have sex before they are married.

2 Sex is only permissible between legally married partners.

3 Within the arena of the marriage contract, sex is a sacred, private, and personal act



"It is nearly impossible for a Muslim woman to express her sexual desire."

& Sex:

f miseducation, ecurity and guilt

between the married couple only; this means that the husband and wife should guard their "bedroom secrets" from all prying ears and eyes.

4 Neither of the partners is allowed to have sex with anyone else. This means that neither the husband nor the wife can indulge in the un-Islamic practices of wife-swapping parties, visiting prostitutes, or having sex with another married or single person.

5 If the husband is legally married to more than one wife (up to a maximum of four) then he is legally allowed to have sex with all four wives provided that he treats all of them equally.

6 When in doubt about anything, use the Koran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) to give clarity on any matter.

Kasem, however, points out that a Muslim male who needs sex in a hurry but does not want to go through the elaborate ritual of marriage can quite legally enjoy any number of one-night stands.

"The Islamic counterpart of the one-night stand is known as the *M'uta* marriage. In this kind of contract marriage, a man simply contracts a woman to sleep with him for a brief period only. Although the Sunnis have banned the *M'uta* system, it is very much in practice among the Shi'ites. It is quite possible to have a *M'uta* marriage every night and kick the woman out next morning. There is no need of divorce in a *M'uta* marriage. This type of marriage is a contract to sleep together, and that is all. Also, remember that though there is a restriction of up to four permanent wives at any time, there is no such restriction on the number of temporary wives that one can have at any given moment. *M'uta* marriage has absolutely no time limit either. So, 'one night's play' is perfectly Islamic. It is stated that Imam Hasan, the grandson of Mohammed, collected up to 300 sex partners (the Islamic terminology is 'temporary wives') besides his regular wives. Imam Hasan was definitely an Islamic 'playboy' of his time. How clever of Islam to have a solution even for the playboys of their Ummah (brotherhood)."

Another angst-ridden Muslim, aged 15, wrote this to *Islamonline*: "I think I may be turning gay. I know it's *haram*, and I love Allah too much to do such a bad thing. It's a test from Allah and I feel that I'm failing. The

only bad thing I'm doing is thinking about men. I've looked at bad pictures (which I regret). It's getting addictive and I masturbate. I want to stop because I feel depressed knowing I'm not doing what I should do. It is very hard to say all of this to someone and it's very hard to be in this situation, for I know I can get through this, but I need that push."

Counsellor Abdullah Abdur Rahman provided this less-than-helpful reply: "First, we are very relieved to read that you are aware that homosexuality is forbidden in Islam and that you want to change. We appreciate that you took the effort to reach out to us to seek help. Allah Most High has endowed human beings with the ability to experience sexual stimulation within the framework of marriage where they can enjoy fulfilment of their sexual desires. Starting from puberty, young people become aware of their sexuality with the onset of new experiences such as wet dreams. There is great emphasis in Islam on maintaining one's chastity before marriage because Satan works overtime to tempt young people to give in to their desires.

"As a young Muslim, you should have the goal now to turn back to Allah, to repent to Allah, and to seek forgiveness from Allah. None of this can happen, of course, unless you understand a little more about yourself and your own sexuality.

"Second, you are not gay and, *in sha' Allah*, with Allah's help and guidance, you will return to the straight path. For youth who remain chaste and righteous, the process of coming of age is sinless and smooth. Unfortunately, for youth who fall victim to Satan's whispering, the process of coming of age is marred with sinful detours. For example, you note that you look at 'bad pictures,' a habit which is becoming 'addictive', and then you masturbate. We are not sure if those pictures are of women or men, and it does not really matter, but it is a sin to allow your eyes to look at forbidden pictures. The more you look at such pictures, the more stimulated you will become and you will need some outlet to release all of your sexual frustration."

For all his talk of Satan and sin, what Rahman inexplicably failed to tell the teenager was what punishment Allah has in store for the die-hard masturbator. Kasem provides the answer: "If you are one of those 1-or 2 percent of men who have never masturbated in their lifetime, then you are extremely lucky, for you will not have to undergo the terrible punishment that is reserved for those men who do 'adultery with their hands'.

"As physical punishment for masturbation is almost impossible to be meted out in this world, all the masturbators must be prepared for their punishment in the hereafter. So, what punishment can these DIY sex maniacs expect from an angry Allah? Well, if we go by some Islamic authorities, all those who have ever

masturbated will be resurrected with their hands pregnant!

"How will this be possible? We always thought that only women get pregnant. Nope! Allah can do anything. I do not know for certain what will happen to the women masturbators. *What?* Do women masturbate too? Let us hear from an expert on female sexuality. Shere Hite, the famous researcher on female sexuality, reports that 82 percent of women surveyed in a research project indicated that they masturbate regularly. To this figure, I would safely add another eight percent (at least) to make it a nice figure of 90 percent to include those women who did not respond to this question due to embarrassment. Will these women have a double pregnancy after resurrection? Will their hands, as well as their bellies get pregnant?"

While Islam has no power to punish the wankers in its midst – apart from imbuing them with a crushing sense of guilt – it can and does mete out inhuman punishments to gay men and lesbians.

On this subject, Kasem says "In Islam, homosexuals are condemned to receive the severest form of punishment. According to the narration of al-Tibrani and al-Baihaqi, Prophet Mohammed is reported to have said: 'Four types of people get up in the morning while they are under the wrath of Allah and they sleep in the night while they are under the displeasure of Allah.' He was asked: 'Who are they, O Messenger of Allah?' The Prophet replied: 'Those men who try to resemble women and those women who try to resemble men (through dress and behaviour), and those who commit sex with animals and those men who commit sex with men.'

"However, when we look into the Koran, we find complete hypocrisy on this matter. In the description of paradise, Allah says that he has reserved young and beautiful boys as servants for those who qualify to enter the garden of paradise. Here are a few samples of verses from the Koran.

052.020 They will recline (with ease) on Thrones (of dignity) arranged in ranks; and We shall join them to Companions, with beautiful big and lustrous eyes.

052.024 Round about them will serve (devoted) to them, young male servants (handsome) as Pearls well-guarded.

052.025 They will advance to each other, engaging in mutual enquiry.

"Here is another sample of Koranic 'boys' in paradise:

076.019 And round about them will (serve) youths of perpetual (freshness): If thou seest them, thou wouldst think them scattered Pearls.

076.020 And when thou lookest, it is there thou wilt see a Bliss and a Realm Magnificent.

"If you have the time to search the Koran,

you will surely find many other verses that promise the company of 'beautiful' and 'pearl'-like boys used as bait to convert the sex-hungry Bedouin Arabs to Islam.

"We often hear from the Islamic apologists saying that those 'boys' are simply the servers of wine and not providers of sex. What a great hypocrisy this is! Why did not Allah engage exquisitely beautiful 'Hurs' to serve the wine? Why has Allah to resort to 'pearl'-like beautiful boys/youths? As it was the practice of those days, why not let the black 'habshi' slaves be the servers of wine? The truth is that many Arabs of those days were fond of sex with children – both girls and boys. We find plenty of examples of this type of abuse in the child brides of many of the holy men of Islam – including the Prophet himself."

Kasem points out that, although Mohammed outlawed child sex practices, he cleverly let it be known to his followers that they would be free to indulge their desires in paradise. This promise of "anything goes" in heaven "became a great temptation for the Jihadis to join Mohammed's wars and to die for the taste of his promised lustful paradise".

Kasem concludes: "The concept of homosexuality, as perceived by Islam, is totally flawed. It is not fair to inflict terrible punishment on those who have desire to take a partner of same sex. The Islamic rules on homosexuality are completely inhuman and out of time. One may not like gays and lesbians, but it is totally unjust to deny them the right to live if they happen to fall in love with someone of the same sex, without infringeing the rights of others."

Although **Islamonline** states "it is permissible for the husband to practice *'azl* (withdrawing the penis to ejaculate outside the vagina) if he does not want to have a child" and that "it is permissible for him to use condoms", certain Islamic groups are implacably opposed to their use.

Last month, for example, the BBC reported that Islamic leaders had outlawed the use of condoms in Somalia, where the vast majority of the population is Muslim.

The umbrella Somali Ulema Council said it will use *sharia* law, including flogging, to punish those selling or using condoms.

The Council was responding to a United Nations-funded campaign to raise awareness about Aids. Sheikh Nur Barud, the chairman of the Ulema Council, told a public meeting that the use of condoms would increase adultery, and those promoting its use deserve punishment.

At the end of 2005, the pro-life, anti-condom Christian website, **LifeSiteNews.com** reported that attempts to install condom vending machines in India's capital had met with fierce resistance by Muslim groups. Street

protests followed the government's announcement that it plans to install 500 condom vending machines in the capital and 1,000 more throughout the state. "We must fight AIDS, but these machines in public places will only promote sex outside marriage among the younger generation," said M H Jawahirullah, head of the Muslim Progressive Party.

"The government is spreading condom culture through these machines under the pretext of fighting AIDS," said Fatheema Jalal, convenor of one Muslim group. "Our society will get more permissive and our youth will be ruined."

HIV/AIDS infection rates in India are second only to those in South Africa, with more than five million people carrying the disease.

But one Muslim country that has no reservations about condoms – in fact it actively encourages their use – is Iran. The BBC's Tehran correspondent, Jim Muir, recently reported that, in little more than a decade, Iran had scored a stunning success in reducing its population growth rate, thanks to a vigorous state-supported family planning campaign.

It means that in 2006, the country's population is expected to be 37 million less than it would have been at the birth rates prevailing in the late 1980s, when the campaign began.

Contraceptive pills for women are also on sale. No questions are asked. These and other contraceptive methods – along with advice – are also dispensed, free, at government primary health centres all around the country.

"All this has fundamentally changed the way Iranians think about the family. In the past, big was the norm," said Muir. "Now people are opting for fewer kids and an improved quality of life."

International population experts say this rapid transition from third-world to virtually European birth-rate levels is almost unprecedented, and all the more remarkable because it has taken place in a conservative Islamic country, which has now become an international success model. To achieve this, the authorities had to reverse a trend set shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The gruelling 1980-88 war with Iraq prompted the Islamic government to encourage people to have more babies.

The birth rate soared, and the population rose by 50 percent, from 33 million to 50 million. If the trend had continued the census for the year 2006 would have registered 108 million Iranians. But levels have been brought down so much that the current projection for 2006 is a much more manageable 71 million.

This will not sit well with Muhammad Saleh Al-Munajjid, a mufti who, in a sexual guidance *fatwa* posted on **Islamonline**, said that a prime objective of sex was "to increase the number of the *Ummah* so as to raise its status, for there is honour and pride in large numbers." It was the duty of every Muslim to prop-

agate the human race, until it reaches "the number of souls that Allah has decreed should be created in this world."

I concluded my investigation with the depressing realisation that Islam was a religion designed to keep its adherents in a perpetual state of infantile querulousness, confusion and insecurity. With its plethora of bizarre, irrational and contradictory rules and customs, and its determination never to allow Muslims to engage their brains and think for themselves, it cynically turns its followers into puppets who cannot do anything at all without first asking an imam, counsellor, mufti, sheikh or teacher whether it is permissible or forbidden. And once they have done so, they are more than likely to come away in an even greater state of confusion.

Even so trivial an issue as the eating of garlic apparently needs official clarification. When a question about garlic use was asked on **Islamonline**, an entirely incomprehensible reply was given: "The scent of garlic is one of its potentially harmful side-effects. Scent has a powerful but subtle effect on the mind-body relationship. The Prophet Mohammed once informed his followers: 'Whoever has eaten [garlic] should not approach the mosque' (Sahih Bukhari 7:65 No 362). At first this might seem like a personal request, but when one looks deeper, a larger picture can be seen through vibrational medicine.

"Within the subtle energies of the human body, the odour of garlic blocks the throat, abdominal and base *chakras*. *Chakras* are energy centres in the body. All things being related, when the throat *chakra* is blocked there is an inability to express oneself emotionally. When the abdominal *chakra* is blocked there is a sense of self-affliction with psychosomatic illnesses. Awakened, there is an ability to master one's desires, followed by increased intuition. Pertaining to the environment of the mosque, the odour would disturb one's intent, and affect one's ability to submit in prayer.

The base *chakra* is concerned with the sense of being grounded. It influences the lower extremities as used in *sujud* (prostration), especially the thigh muscles and tissues and the circulation in the feet. When one isn't grounded, there are hidden fears and an inability to focus on important issues.

When this *chakra* is awakened, one is calm and more able to initiate spiritual practices. If one's mind is agitated in the state of prayer, then the act of prayer becomes purely physical. Therefore, the unity in congregational prayer becomes disturbed on an energy level. As such, the sulphur content in garlic interferes with vibrational healing remedies and methods (*Gurudas*, p 62, 63). Fortunately there is a quick cure for this odour: chewing a sprig of parsley can eliminate any odour before visiting the mosque."

"I DO not believe in an afterlife and do hope I'm right: I'd bet on it if I thought I could spend my winnings."

"Two loved wives in heaven would be a bit much."

"I joke I have another ten years to live – but this is a rolling ten years."

"God could help his case by offering more evidence."

"Who wants to spend eternity with the relatives we didn't choose?"

"I will in due course join all the farm animals I have buried and help to fertilise the ground."

"The living world is so ordered and purposeful that I have no doubt that the life and death of each individual makes some contribution to a higher purpose."

"One hopes not to be forgotten."

"I am a committed Christian, so the answer is straightforward for me and an exciting one!"

The above nine quotes were among the many comments I received last year during a survey I made of 1600 individuals listed in *Who's Who* on "What survives?" when one dies – in total, 761 gave me their views. An amazing 48 per cent response!

Surely everyone, especially as they become older, wonders what might happen to them after this unexplained life? Is there a "soul" going to some "afterlife", a recycled "life force", or simply nothing?

Of course, nobody on earth can be 100 per cent certain of the answer. But, beginning with December 2004, I thought that it would be interesting to write to individuals – picked at random from the right-hand column of the right-hand pages of my 2002 edition of *Who's Who* – to seek their views on this subject. The only names automatically excluded from receiving my letter were those living outside the UK (as I also sent a British first-class stamped-addressed envelope, encouraging a reply) and those who did not give a home address in *Who's Who* (I knew that a reply was more likely if my letter was not vetted by a protective secretary).

In addition to enclosing a stamped-addressed envelope with my letter, I believe that the other main reason for getting such a high response was that I identified myself, in my opening sentence, as also being listed in *Who's Who*.

Although it was optional for respondents to give their names when they replied, 449 did identify themselves. But more surprising was that 389 also added further comments to answer the question as to "What survives?": not always just a sentence or two but, in 84 instances, much more than this. Of course, a few remarks referred to the actual survey, like "I'm not sure why the views of a random selection of people picked from *Who's Who* are

any more interesting than travellers on the Clapham omnibus" and "I'm not sure individuals in *Who's Who* can be considered other than atypical".

That last statement turned out to be true. If one surveys the British public in general – for example, referring to a *Reader's Digest* poll reported in March 2005 – one discovers that 64 percent believe in the existence of God and 58 percent trust that there is an afterlife. But, the analysis of my 761 *Who's Who* responses (received between December 2004 and August 2005) showed somewhat different results.

A belief that a "soul" continues to exist (in what is generally known as the "afterlife") – 220 (29 percent).

No belief in individual "souls" surviving, but the possibility that there is a non-specific "life force" energising all of us on Earth – 35 (5 percent).

What happens when we die? MICHAEL IRWIN conducts a fascinating survey.

Expectation that nothing survives death except for one's descendants, other people's memories, and one's writings and similar memorabilia – 353 (46 percent).

Uncertainty as to what really happens upon death – 153 (20 percent).

In conclusion, let me simply provide several more quotes, from the many I received, regarding "What survives?" when we die:

"God knows!"

"All I expect is complete oblivion."

"The life of the universe proceeds, like music, in cycles, and if I have inherited a bit of Schubert's carbon, I'm to be grateful that someone or something that I don't know of will in time make use of mine."

"But I will take Pascal's wager – that it is wiser to bet on God existing rather than on his not existing."

"God will decide where I go next, and next, and next and so on until there is no next, but eternal bliss in His company. But I do plead with Him daily to continue in all the 'nexts' the bodily form of an aristocrat and gentleman."

"I cannot in all honesty say I truly believe, however much I may say so in church."

"I try to lead a good life so that if there is something after death I will qualify for it."

"If there were an afterlife, is it something that we should look forward to or fear?"

"The world will survive, I won't."

"An entry in *Who Was Who*."

"It is really only reasonable to suppose that 'nothing is lost' and all is somehow recycled."

"I must say I anticipate this extinction with

a certain amount of resentment. A life's passion for acquiring knowledge which shows no signs of abating – it does seem to be a fearful waste of resources."

"Resurrection of the flesh raises even more questions. How old should my restored body be? Supposing I were restored to the twitching body of my final illness? And what about those whom I hope to meet? Will my mother be young or old? What if she had a say in the matter and chose an age before I was born? The Almighty would be hard put to reconcile all the demands of the Saved."

"The American Indians had it right ... 'we are one with Nature' ... and should nurture and respect it."

Editor's note: The full results of Michael Irwin's survey appear in a highly entertaining booklet entitled *What Survives?* It is available directly from Michael Irwin at at 9 Waverleigh Road, Cranleigh, Surrey GU6 8BZ. Please send £1.50 in stamps to cover the costs of printing and postage.

Faith School Tussle a sign of impending conflict

AN Islamic campaign group wants a Scottish Catholic primary school to be changed into a Muslim school. The Campaign for Muslim Schools said 90 percent of pupils at St Albert's Primary, in the Pollokshields area of Glasgow, are Muslim, yet children are having to take part in Catholic rituals like saying the Lord's Prayer and attending mass.

Osama Saeed, co-ordinator of the alliance of Glasgow's main mosques and Muslim organisations, said he could see no reason why the main faith of the school should not change. He said: "Clearly the parents of that area find a faith school, even if it is of another denomination, preferable to a secular one. But surely it should be possible for them to have one that is relevant to their own faith. To move towards this would be a fantastic example of good faith in more ways than one – on the part of the Church."

The call came just days after Scotland's most senior Catholic, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, sparked controversy by stating that Scotland's core faith was Christianity and that other faiths should recognise they were "living in Scotland as a Christian country".

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said: "This argument over who should be in control of this school is a small indicator of what is to come as two basically totalitarian religions fight it out for power and influence."

"They should not be permitted to use schools as a battle ground. If it is not appropriate for this school to be Catholic, and it never could be, then it should be returned to community control."

IN A voice dripping venom, a Jewish convert to Islam orders leading evolutionary scientist and outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins to “fix your women!” All that is wrong with Western society, the American-born Jew turned Gaza-based hard-line Muslim called Yousef al-Khattab (formerly Joseph Cohen) says, stems from the fact that men in the West allow their women “to appear on the street dressed like whores.”

The violently misogynistic manner in which this young Bin Laden wannabe alludes to women makes us sound like defective possessions – like a dripping tap or a car with a noisy exhaust pipe – and I am reminded with a shudder, as if I needed reminding, why it is I harbour the deepest revulsion of all things Islamic.

This chilling confrontation with al-Khattab – who wants Islam to take over the world, and believes it ultimately will – is contained in the first part of Dawkins two-part Channel 4 TV series, *The Root of All Evil?*, broadcast in last month.

In this section, subtitled *The God Delusion*, Dawkins expresses his astonishment that religious faith is gaining ground in the face of rational, scientific truth based on hard evidence, and he challenges what he describes as “a process of non-thinking called faith”.

Science, based on scepticism, investigation and evidence, must continuously test its own concepts and claims. Faith, by definition, defies evidence: it is untested and unshakable, and is therefore in direct contradiction with science.

He points out that while religions preach morality, peace and hope, they bring intolerance, violence and destruction. The growth of extreme fundamentalism in so many religions across the world not only endangers humanity but, he argues, is in conflict with the trend over thousands of years of history for humanity to progress – to become more enlightened and more tolerant.

He explores the state of the three Abrahamic religions in the world today, from the political influence of rich and powerful Christian fundamentalist institutions in America to the deadly clash of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East. He describes the



Professor Richard Dawkins

Holy Land as the least enlightened place in the world, a microcosm of the threat to rational values and civilisation posed by religion, whose irrational roots, he says, are nourishing intolerance and murder.

Dawkins wheels a variety of charac-

ters to support his argument. One is the creepy Pastor Ted Haggard of the sprawling New Life Church in Colorado, where evangelism meets show business in a cheesy fusion of faith, obesity and crap music.

In a moment of pure comedy, Haggard’s face freezes when Dawkins compares his show business techniques to those used in the

JAN REILLY reports on Richard Dawkins’ two-part broadside against religion

Nuremberg rallies. “Goebbels”, says Dawkins, “would have been proud.”

“I don’t know anything about the Nuremberg rallies, but most Americans would just see it as a rock concert,” Haggard replies.

Things get more heated when Haggard claims that, despite the fact that it is 1,500 years old, and was written by 40 different writers (puzzlingly, he holds up three fingers to make the point), nowhere does it contradict itself. But in certain areas of science, he declares triumphantly, you cannot get two – TWO – experts to agree. (He holds up two fingers). He goes on to say that “as American evangelists, we fully embrace the scientific method. We think that as time goes on we will learn more and more facts that will show how God created the heavens and earth.”

When Dawkins points out that the scientific method has shown the world to be 4.5-million years old, Haggard retorts: “You are accepting some of the views accepted in some portions of the scientific community as fact. Your grandchildren might study this interview in the future and laugh at you.

“Wanna bet?” Dawkins angrily retorts.

Haggard continues: “Sometimes it is hard for a human being to study the ear or the eye, and think that they happened by accident.”

Dawkins: “I beg your pardon? Did you say by accident? What do you mean by accident?”

Haggard: “Yeah, by accident. That the eye just formed itself somehow.”

Dawkins: “Who said it did?”

Haggard: “Some evolutionists.”

Dawkins: “Not a single evolutionist I have ever met has suggested that. You obviously know nothing about the subject of evolution.”

Haggard: “And maybe you have not met the people I have”. He then accuses Dawkins of intellectual arrogance. Later, while Dawkins and his camera crew are packing up to leave, Haggard turns nasty. “Get off my land. I’ll have you thrown in jail,” he bellows.

“It was a curious business,” says Dawkins.

“He accused me of calling his children ‘animals’, which I can only assume was a reference to my advocating evolution.”

The first programme also studies those carrying burdens of disability or disease, who are among the 80,000 people a year who make the pilgrimage to Lourdes. Dawkins does the maths: out of the millions who, over a century, have placed their faith in a miracle restoring them to good health, there have been only 66 authenticated cures. This is hardly a strong record, he says, arguing that it is better for us to embrace truth than false hope.

I unfortunately missed the second part of Dawkins’ programme, *The Virus of Faith*, but found a report of it by Julia Bard on the Channel 4 website. In this section, according to Bard, Dawkins asks how is it, that despite science having exposed old religious myths, militant faith is back on the march? The mechanism for perpetuating beliefs which lead to

The Root of

murderous intolerance, he says, is the imposition of religion on children who are too inexperienced to judge it for themselves

We wouldn’t categorise children according to their parents’ political stance, says Dawkins, since they are too young to make up their minds about such matters. But we segregate them in sectarian religious schools, where they are taught superstitions drawn from ancient scriptures of dubious origin, which promote a “contradictory and poisonous system of morals”.

Dawkins compares this to a virus, which infects the young and is passed down the generations. The number of faith schools is increasing. More than half the Government’s proposed City Academies will be run by religious organisations and there is a growing number of private evangelical Christian schools. ACE – Accelerated Christian Education – has developed a curriculum which includes a mention of God or Jesus on every page of its science text book. The head of a school which uses this material argues that if there were no lawgiver, there would be no reason to see rape and murder as wrong.

Transmitting such a “warped reality” to young people, says Dawkins, amounts to indoctrination. Children are uniquely vulnerable and if they fail to question and shake off such superstition, they remain in a state of perpetual infancy. He talks to a woman brought up in a strict Christian sect who describes the terror of eternal damnation, which dominated her childhood, as a form of abuse.

Hellhouse movies are a new growth industry in the USA today. Graphically filmed, they demonise abortion and homosexuality with the

explicit aim of scaring the viewers. Pastor Keenan Roberts explains that the aim is "to leave an indelible impression on their lives that sin destroys ... and Jesus saves". The result, says Dawkins, is a mindset which can justify the murder of a doctor who carries out abortions on the grounds that he is destroying a being created in God's image!

Physicist and Nobel prize-winner Stephen Weinberg describes religion as an insult to human dignity. "Without it," he says, "you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion." Dawkins agrees. It is more moral, he says, to do good for its own sake than out of fear. Morality, he says, is older than religion, and kindness and generosity are innate in human beings, as they are in other social animals. The irony is that science recognises the majesty and complexity of the universe while religions lead to easy,

of All Evil?

closed answers.

Stephen Phelan, in a review of the programme in the Glasgow *Sunday Herald*, says that when it comes to the question of its own existence, humanity is roughly divided between three possible answers: "Creation" "Evolution," or, "Don't know."

"In competing for the largest possible audience share, television networks now generally cater to viewers whose beliefs fall into each of those categories, while trying not to alienate any of them. Which makes programmes such as *The Root Of All Evil?* so rare as to seem almost revolutionary.



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Ted Haggard

Saving souls and shrinking waistlines: Fundy Pastor Ted Haggard, who ordered Professor Dawkins off his New Life Church compound in Colorado, is now adding to his millions with his book *The Jerusalem Diet*. Haggard is the President of the 30-million-member-strong National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the largest evangelical group in the US.

Shalom	Salam	Peace
BEFORE	AFTER	=
Ethnically Jewish,	Spiritually Muslim,	Jews for Allah

The Jews for Allah website has these "before" and "after" pictures of Yousef al-Khattab. His mission statement says that the Jews for Jesus organisation has been very successful, and has nearly 300,000 members worldwide. "If Christians are able to get Jews to believe in something that essentially amounts to polytheism, why not then, Muslims invite Jews to advanced level monotheism! (*sic*). I would think a Jew would pick a monotheist religion over a tritheist one any day! Therefore, Jews for Allah. To some, the idea of a Jew being a Muslim seems to be a contradiction. On the one hand, you have Jews and Judaism and on the other hand, Muslims and Islam. You are either one or the other ... so they think. In reality there is nothing more Jewish than becoming a Muslim.

"For a Jew to become a Muslim is for him to turn to the Elohim (Lord) of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and King David. Join our effort to re-unite the children of Abraham."

According to a report on Israel TV, Yousef al-Khattab came to Israel a devout Jew and within three years converted to Islam. He is a supporter of the militant Palestinian Hamas group, and describes Osama bin Laden as "the Number One Muslim." He does not believe that Bin Laden was responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York.

"As writer and presenter of the films, Dawkins agrees that 'polemic' is the only word for them. 'There are different ways of making a programme like this,' says Dawkins. 'One would be to let each viewpoint speak for itself and be very even-handed, which is what the BBC has very often had to do. The other is this kind of single-minded argument, a perspective which makes no attempt to disguise itself.'

"As one of the world's foremost evolution-

ary scientists, Dawkins has gained exceptional prominence as a professional atheist. Since publishing in 1976 his first neo-Darwinian textbook, *The Selfish Gene* – which traced the origin and proliferation of the species down to a tiny urgent signal on our DNA strand – he has been on public record as an enemy of God. Or, to put it another way, as an ambassador for rationality. He prefers the latter term. 'I would,' he says, 'really rather like to be thought of in that way.'

"Dawkins is so unequivocal that he may come across as didactic even to those viewers who agree completely. 'I don't suppose I thought too much about the persona I present on television,' he says on reflection. 'I mean, I am what I am. But I hope you can see I didn't browbeat anyone I spoke to. I didn't interrupt them in the way that certain political interviewers do. I let them speak their lines, and, you could say, gave them enough rope to hang themselves.'

"This is probably true. While Pastor Haggard, for example, may have a point when he counter-accuses Dawkins of 'intellectual arrogance' on camera, he does himself no favours by later throwing the film crew out of his Christian-industrial mega-compound.

Phelan reveals that when Dawkins was commissioned for *The Root Of All Evil?*, he was already writing a book on the same theme, titled *The God Delusion*. The programme is

National anthem

THE letter (January *Points of View*) from Dorothy Lewis calling for a new British national anthem echoes many such appeals in recent years, the religious sycophancy and belligerent xenophobia of the present words being increasingly at odds with modern sentiment. But Ms Lewis's suggestion of "I vow to thee, my country" as a replacement is hardly any better. The most widespread proposal of all is Blake's *Jerusalem*; however, the opening verse is based on a silly Christian legend, while "dark satanic mills" are happily a thing of the past.

Anyway, changing the tune of a national anthem only leads to confusion, especially in the Olympic Games, so we really are stuck with the traditional tune, even if unloved; but not necessarily with the words. I would therefore suggest writing a new lyric to fit the old

tune. Here is my own stab at it. (Sing it, to get the rhythm.)

*Britannia's people, we,
Bound to her rule, yet free,
Since it is just.
Newcome or British-born,
Great Britain is our home.
Her human rights our own –
Hold them in trust.*

Yes, it is a bit overstated but that is in the very nature of patriotic anthems. Can any FT reader improve on it? My intention is to promulgate the final version in the national press. Not, of course, that I would expect it to be adopted officially overnight: on the evolutionary principle, however, when a new alternative to some outworn usage becomes available, the better often gradually ousts the worse.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

DOROTHY Lewis (*Points of View*, January) calls for a new national anthem. I agree with Thomas Paine that my country is the world, and modern technology in communications, and sadly weapons, has made the nation state redundant.

Unlike our Celtic neighbours, the English are none too good at singing. But if we must do so I would suggest Edward Carpenter's 1886 poem *England, Arise!*, which was sung with great gusto by the early Labour movement. And there are many suitable poems by such as Shelley, William Morris and Ernest Jones, that are set to music.

Another favourite of mine is John Arnott's *Song Addressed to the Fraternal Democrats*. Set to the air of *Auld Lang Syne*, it was sung at their celebration of the French Revolution in 1846. The Fraternal Democrats, who had the atheist and republican George Harney as a leading member, were part of the Chartist movement, with members in several European countries.

Arnott wrote: "Though kings and priests might then combine to crush sweet liberty/ We tell them now that they must bow/ That man shall yet be free." Great stuff, and far better than hymns of praise to corrupt monarchs and non-existent gods.

TERRY LIDDLE
Secretary

Freethought History Research Group

The Root of All Evil?

not a TV adaptation of the book, he insists, but "most of the script for my voice-over and pieces to camera are pretty much taken from it". Producer Alan Clements will accept credit for the original "uneasy and timely idea" of making a documentary about the apparent "rise of faith and retreat of reason in modern society". He stands by the finished product 100 percent. "I think these are important films," says Clements, "and programmes like this need to be made and watched. But I can't take credit for the philosophy of it and the way it's expressed."

"This is, then, for better or worse, a programme that lets Dawkins be Dawkins," writes Phelan. "His views, already well known, are expressed here with often electrifying clarity. He deconstructs such 'fairy stories' as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary with witty, angry and rigorous academic passion. But by his own admission, he has nothing particularly new to say, or to learn, about this subject. 'I pretty much knew what I was going to find when I started making the films, which didn't make it any more palatable or acceptable, of course.'

"What, though, does he actually hope to achieve with these programmes, in this country? He must know that audiences will respond according to the polarities of their own faith or lack of it. True believers will be affronted, while the typical, liberal Channel 4 viewer will have their non-belief validated. Dawkins expects 'some pretty vocal complaints by the sort of people who tried to close down *Jerry Springer, The Opera*. And as far as atheists go, I am preaching to the choir. But I think a fairly substantial number of people haven't really given it a lot of thought, and only vaguely think of themselves as Christian. This programme just might open some eyes to the fact that you don't have to believe this stuff, that it's OK to be an atheist. It's a bit like being gay 30 years ago, when it was necessary to consciously come out of the closet. I'm hoping that I may sway people in that middle category, who might be shaken into thinking about it.'"

Dawkins tells Phelan that "you can attack people's politics or their football team, but not their faith. I think it's very important that this should be seen as complete nonsense. Why shouldn't people be required to defend their religion?" Dawkins refers not just to Islamist terrorists or the Catholic leaders whose dogma allows Aids to blaze through Africa, but to that majority of believers who consider themselves rational and progressive – if his documentary makes a single statement, it's that "all religion represents a danger to our society and future".

"I think moderate religion makes the world safe for extremists, because children are trained from the cradle to think faith in itself is a good thing. So then when someone says it's part of their faith to kill people, their actions need no further justification, and are almost respected as such."

"If his only core belief is in evolution, isn't he driven to despair, or even hate, by men like Yousef al-Khattab, who stand literally opposed to human progress?" asks Phelan.

Dawkins answers by alluding to a classic Fawty Towers scene. "Do you remember when Basil's car broke down and he thrashed it with a tree branch? That's what we do when we hate people who do what we think of as wicked things. Instead, we should think of them as Fawty's car. They have a faulty component. In this case, it's faith, which makes them think that belief has nothing to do with evidence. And instead of hating that, we should be trying to cure it."

PLEASE may I comment on Ms Lewis' letter re the national anthem (Jan 2006 *Freethinker*). I certainly support her suggestion for an alternative piece of music, with "I vow to thee my country" as an excellent replacement and with secular words or, better still, with no words at all. Most people, I'm sure, feel embarrassed singing archaic pompous words. When one really thinks about it, however, our national anthem is not an anthem about our nation at all – it is a hymn of praise to the monarchy, quite a different thing.

ALAN MANSE
Shropshire

Disconcerting reports

THE January *Freethinker* contained two disconcerting items. The first concerned Bristol Old Vic's production of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, which was altered to avoid offending "a significant proportion of one of the world's great religions". Needless to say, Islam was the religion in question.

The "offensive" episode in Marlowe's fictional classic involved burning a copy of the Koran. Rather ironic, that. There was nothing fictional about an Islamic mob publicly burning copies of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

The fallout continued regarding the editor-



ship of the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist* journal. Editors Andy Armitage and Dean Braithwaite could not continue following publication of an article containing uncomfortable truths about some immigrants. No doubt, as Stephen Moreton asserted (*Points of View*, January) objectors would have been given a right of reply. But the editors' critics preferred to bury their heads in the sand. Could it be that the perceived racism in *one* article was not the reason why the editors' position was made untenable?

Inevitably, the term political correctness has come into the debate. But those who are afflicted by the racists-under-the-bed syndrome are neither political nor correct. Political correctness is po-faced bigotry, intolerance and plain daftness. It is a blight on language and plays into the hands of real racists. We can but hope that the ethically pure in heart haven't got the *Freethinker* in their sights.

BILL McILROY
Hove

Right-wing contributors

MAY I appeal to all right-wing contributors to the *Freethinker* to try harder to distinguish between their dislike of religion (which is shared by the rest of us) and their dislike of immigrants (which isn't).

If they were to make an effort to stick to the former topic in these pages while reserving the latter for harrumphing letters to the *Daily Mail*, then we might avoid the kind of crisis that occurred recently at the *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* magazine.

GRAHAM NOBLE
Hampshire

ID versus UID

IT SEEMS to me that the creationists are faced with a rather difficult choice: their god must be either incompetent (in which case we should rename it UID, unintelligent design) or malevolent. How else can one explain an all-powerful god creating a world containing an abundance of carnivores, parasites and numerous other destructive organisms? Why have the continents float on unstable tectonic plates with the certainty that disasters will ensue, and if that threat wasn't enough arrange for it to be peppered with missiles from space?

ALAN WATMORE
Gwynedd

PS: Thought for the day: Does the BB in BBC stand for bible bashing?

Life after death

FURTHER to Jim Cass's comments about life after death (January *Points of View*), may I point out that surely it is not up to me to prove the non-existence of a fairy at

the bottom of my garden or of an invasion of green men from Mars.

Rather it is up to the theists to prove the existence of another world in heaven.

DAVID IBRY
London

Losing my religion

WHILE the whole of Barbara Smoker's contribution to *Losing my Religion* (November *Freethinker*) was very interesting, I would like in particular to register my emphatic if somewhat belated support for that part of her letter where she registers her opposition to the maintenance of the Father Christmas fairy story (but then, where would religion be without its fairy stories?).

Although it may seem harmless enough (to adults) my feeling is that the real purpose of this fabrication is to condition young children into unthinkingly swallowing nonsense and mystification – a nonsense disseminated by adults because it gratifies their sense of power. In a nutshell they enjoy fooling the young child, perhaps in part to revenge themselves for, when they in their turn were taken in. And, after all, would children enjoy "Christmas" (to use the term which the Church has imposed on an ages-old festivity) any the less for being told that it essentially forms part of the New Year celebrations to mark the earth's entry into a new cycle of Nature, heralded by the change from a shrinking to a growing amount of daylight? (Though not necessarily in these terms!) And if it is asked how we are to refer to this joyous occasion might I suggest that we use the term "Gifttide" or even "Joy and Gift tide", with the accompanying explanation that gifts are given to show, by giving happiness (or so we hope!) to others, our own happiness that we can now look forward to the promise of spring: in short, that we are indeed entering on a new year.

ALBERT ADLER
London

PS: For those who feel it is necessary, it can be further explained that not only do we give gifts to others but we also express our happiness in many other ways associated with this time of the year!

Queen's speech

THERE wasn't much encouragement for non-believers in the Queen's Christmas Day Message. We had the usual banalities, of course, such as "the world is not an easy or safe place to live in, but it is the only place we have." These kinds of comment are routine but what really stuck in my craw was her assumption that only those who had a religious faith had been motivated to help with relief or financial support for those stricken by disasters such as the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. According to Her Majesty, "relief workers and

financial support have come from members of every faith." Shouldn't someone tell Her Majesty that many of her subjects have no faith, and still made a contribution? Does she believe what she actually said? In her cloistered world has she any idea of how insensitive and offensive these comments are to non-believers who have not only contributed but whose atheist friends or relatives may have lost their lives.?

Her Majesty then ended with a comment which takes a bit of assimilating, as it is almost the opposite of what is really happening. Here is what she thinks the world, and its tragedies, has demonstrated: "I believe also that it has shown us all how our faith – whatever our religion – can inspire us to work together in friendship and peace for the sake of our own and future generations."

After two thousand years of faith, and the faith-inspired slaughter of the last year, don't hold your breath.

DENIS WATKINS
Wales

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Events & Contacts

Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group: Information: John and Kath Wayland, 13 Elms Avenue, Lytham FY8 5PW. Tel: 01253 736397

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, February 7, 7.30pm. Dr Sam Dick: *Complexity and Simplicity*. Tuesday, March 7, 7.30pm. Norman Bacrac: *The Christian God is a Myth*.

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

British Humanist Association: Information: 0207 0793 580. The 2006 Darwin Day Lecture by Dr Susan Blackmore. Chairman: Professor Richard Dawkins. Darwin Lecture Theatre, UCL, Gower Street, London. Monday, February 13. Tickets £5.00 (BHA members £3.00)

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, February 14, 2pm. Alan Taylor: *Tsunami and the Good God?*

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 Pintel 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. Friends Meeting House, Rainsford Road, Chelmsford Road, Chedmsford. Sunday, February 12, 7.30pm. Annual General Meeting.

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. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, March 2, 8pm. Terry Hurlestone: *Tracing My Family Tree*.

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, February 14, 8pm. Martin Schweiger: *World Trade Rules – OK?*

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, February 23, 8pm. Colin Swinburn: *Is Our Speech Free?*

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, March 1, 8pm. Robert Spooner, *Asylum Seekers*.

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.

The Thomas Paine Society. Information: 0115 986 0010. The 2006 Eric Paine Memorial Lecture by Dr JH Arnold: *The Politics of Medieval Unbelief*. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Saturday, March 4, 2pm.

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.

Humani - the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264.

E-mail: brianmclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

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.