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# Freethinker

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



**Farewell,  
funny lady!**  
Comedian Linda  
Smith, President  
of the British  
Humanist  
Association,  
succumbs to  
cancer – see *report*  
on *page 4*

Photo courtesy [www.chortle.co.uk](http://www.chortle.co.uk)

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I AM a gadget-junkie, shameless in my pursuit of my next technological fix. As a consequence of my addiction, my postie finds herself laden-down with kilograms of brochures from gadget purveyors from all over the UK, and my email box is full to the brim each day with newsletters containing the latest information about all manner of shiny things powered by batteries.

Given this daily diet of gadget updates, I was surprised at not having been alerted to the Christian Resources Exhibition in Exeter last month. The organisers probably thought I might just have gone along to take the piss out of the products on offer.

They would, of course, have been right. While enthusiastic to the point of near-ecstasy over things like the Eternal Waterproof Torch (£24.95), I react with horror whenever I stumble across examples of cutting-edge technology being used to advance irrationalism.

Take, for example, the digital hymnal, "a briefcase-sized karaoke player containing 1,500 hymns". This, according to its manufacturers, is "designed for use in churches without organists, and in old people's homes. It provides instant church music at the touch of a button. Churches without organists? Fine. But old people's homes? Surely inflicting church music on those too frail to run out the room screaming is nothing short of torture?"

This year, for the first time, manufacturers were given the chance of entering their products for an award – the rather oddly named McNoot prize. Another peculiar name that leapt out of reports about the CRE was that of the event's director. Brett Pitchfork is a rather unfortunate moniker – don't you think? – for someone in the business of organising product fairs for the faithful.

According to Pitchfork, "Old meets new in a unique way at CRE. The event is often dubbed 'the ideal church show' – and this special competition will give visitors a chance to see some intriguing new products. All of them show churches are taking a traditional message and making it accessible to a new generation."

Show organiser, Stephen Goddard, added: "We are supporting new ways of approaching communication. It's an antidote to the haemorrhaging of numbers from traditional churches."

Apart from the church music karaoke abomination thing, among other products competing for the McNoot (also known as "My Church Needs One of Those") Award, was the Godpod, a wafer-thin, solar-powered, electronic, speaking Bible (should that be babble?) which dispenses Christian superstition in a variety of languages. It is designed to help evangelists spread ignorance in Third World countries through various proselytisation programmes.

Also competing were holy socks, (gimme strength!), preaching puppets (just how do you discern them from the real thing?) and T-shirts

parodying the popular FCUK logo. This variation bears the letters JCUK (Jesus Christ, United King). Make sense of that, if you can.

The winner turned out to be an hydraulic lectern. Not being present to see how this "must-have" device works, I must rely on the description of the chairman of the judging panel, Rev Ian Coffey, from Mutley Baptist Church, Plymouth – a man not without humour. He said: 'Most of us clergy like to stand 12 feet

### Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE owns up to an expensive addiction



above contradiction – in the safety of our pulpits. But this new lectern encourages us to step down and engage with our congregations and communicate more effectively."

Hopefully what lowers clergymen also goes up – really high. What a boon this would be for the cleaners.

I AM a frequent visitor to Muslim websites. In this job one needs to keep abreast of what's happening in the collective orthodox Muslim mind – especially nowadays when so many of our freedoms are under assault from Islamic fundamentalists.

Trawling through page after page of mindless ranting, paranoia, and gripes about "Islamophobia" is bad enough, but even more hard to swallow are the "peace be upon him" which follow each and every reference to the Prophet Mohammed, or Jesus, or any other damn character Islam deems "holy".

So great was my irritation that, in casual conversation in the pub last month, I told a friend that if I ever saw the words "peace be upon him" one more time, I would ask my GP to put me on Prozac. The next day I discovered that the pbuh virus had spread – and had now affected the BBC.

Out of the corner of my ear, I caught the tail end of a Radio 4 broadcast – it might have been on the *Feedback* programme – in which a listener had demanded an explanation for pbuh appearing on the BBC website.

The answer, as I recall, was "to show deference for Islam".

Not quite believing what I had heard, I immediately accessed the site – and to my fury found that the BBC does, in fact, use pbuh, although in a limited manner – for now.

This is how it justifies the practice: "Throughout the BBC's section on Islam you will see Peace be upon Him (or pbuh) after the name Mohammed.

"Muslims say Peace be upon Him after every mention of Mohammed's name, as a mark of respect. Muslims do the same when

they write the Prophet's name, adding pbuh.

"The Arabic transliteration of Peace be upon Him is *sallallahu alayhi wa sallam* which is usually abbreviated as *saw*."

"The BBC uses the pbuh in the Islam section out of courtesy, and we would do the same for any other religion if they had a similar phrase that was universally used as a sign of respect.

"When the site refers to the Prophet on pages that are not in the Islam section, we do not use the phrase."

This appalled me. It also got up the nose of Roger Kimball, a contributor to the American magazine, *New Centurion*, who last month posted his thoughts on the NC website:

"In their continuing effort to raise consciousness, spread enlightenment, and deprecate the traditions that made Britain Britain, the BBC has posted extensive information on major world religions on their internet site. A friend directed us to the section on Islam. It makes instructive reading for anyone wishing to chart the progress of the virus of multi-culturalism – that odd compact of self-righteousness, nihilism, and pusillanimity – in elite British society.

"The site offers some standard historical exposition about the origin and doctrines of Islam as well as some inadvertently comical items such as the entry 'Muslim internet matchmaking', in which we learn that 'The internet has sparked a revolution in the way some Muslims are meeting potential partners.' (Similar, equally comic, pages exist for other religions.)

"But what is most striking about the section on Islam is its tone of careful piety. Compare, for example, the introductory caption describing Islam with the one that describes Christianity.

"'Islam began in Arabia and was revealed to humanity by the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him). Those who follow Islam are called Muslims. Muslims believe that there is only one God. The Arabic word for God is Allah.'

"Got it? Now here's the bit introducing Christianity.

'Christianity is the world's biggest religion, with about 2.1 billion followers worldwide. It is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ who lived in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago.'

"Notice anything different in the tone, in the approach?

"For starters, Islam 'was revealed to humanity', etc, etc, but Christianity is a statistic. And what's this 'peace be upon him' stuff – confessional language in the very secular setting of a BBC internet history lesson?

"In a religious setting, Catholics will often say 'Glory to you, Lord' or 'Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.' But in the context of an historical document? What's going on here?"

You may well ask, Mr Kimball.



## Archbishop's defence of faith schools attacked by NSS

THE Archbishop of Canterbury's defence of Church schools as promoting community harmony is described by the National Secular Society as disingenuous and self-serving. Keith Porteous Wood, the NSS's Executive Director said: "The concept of faith schools is self-evidently divisive. The existence and expansion of church schools simply provides other religions and denominations with a justification to demand their own schools. Religious schools divide society on religious lines, which often also correspond to ethnic lines.

"The best chance to encourage integration is to do so in schools that reflect the diversity of the whole community. We should make all state schools open equally to children of all faiths and none.

"The expansion of Church of England schools means that Muslim, Hindu and Jewish communities will demand more and more religious schools of their own – and this in turn will drive a bigger wedge between children from different communities. This increasing tendency to define children by their parents' religion will increase ignorance and suspicion between communities that will have even less opportunity to get to know each other.

"The whole point of faith schools is to give the impression that the religion or denomination they represent is superior. Some even preach that those who do not follow their religion will face eternal damnation, torment and burning in hell. Nothing could be more divisive.

"The most vociferous proponents of keeping or expanding faith schools are those with a vested interest. It is no surprise that the

Archbishop is so keen on these schools. His Church has got most to gain from them. With around a million pupils, his Church runs more state-funded schools than any other religious body. Schools are the only hope of saving the Church of England from extinction. Attendance has been in decline for the last six decades and this is set to continue as two thirds of secondary school pupils define themselves as not belonging to any religion.

"The increasing tensions between religions are only going to get worse if the Government continues on its religion-obsessed path of opening more and more 'faith' schools."

• Rowan Williams has stepped into the controversy between religious fundamentalists and scientists by saying that he does not believe that creationism – the Bible-based account of the origins of the world – should be taught in schools.

Giving his first, wide-ranging, interview at Lambeth Palace last month, the archbishop was emphatic in his criticism of creationism being taught in the classroom, as is happening in two city academies founded by the evangelical Christian businessman Sir Peter Vardy, and in several other schools.

"I think creationism is ... a kind of category mistake, as if the Bible were a theory like other theories ... if creationism is presented as a stark alternative theory alongside other theories I think there's just been a jarring of categories ... My worry is creationism can end up reducing the doctrine of creation rather than enhancing it," he said.

## The crazy world of religion

TWO years ago an American schoolteacher and professional wrestler, Rob Fields, was allegedly visited by God in a dream. God told Fields (wrestling name Rob Adonis) to take his message to the masses. As a result of this divine *diktat*, Adonis launched Ultimate Christian Wrestling in 2003.

"Like many American preachers, Rob Adonis delivers his sermons bathed in sweat, passion and a spotlight. But he is probably the only one who spreads the word while wearing a purple leotard decked out with Spandex crosses," said a recent report in the *Age*, Melbourne.

His faith-based wrestling mission is proving a hit, particularly in the south of the country, where pro-wrestling is hugely popular and the battle for souls shows no signs of letting up.

Adonis accepts that this particular brand of muscular Christianity is not for everyone, but disputed the idea that faith and pro-wrestling were incompatible.

He pointed out that, in the Old Testament, Jacob wrestled with an angel.

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EVERY month, Dale Lanier, who owns a convenience store in Snead, Ala., offers a special promotion to all his customers. If you memorise and then recite a Bible verse of his choosing, he'll give you a free soft drink or cup of coffee. Lanier told The Associated Press he does it as a way to get people to read and memorise Bible verses. He's been doing this for six years and typically gives away between two and 12 drinks a day. Sometimes an entire family will walk in and recite the chosen Bible passage.

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IT had to happen. Christians have miraculously found a *spiritual dimension* to *Brokeback Mountain*. Members of the online US DVD club the Spiritual Cinema Circle recently had the opportunity to vote for their best film of the year, and surprisingly put the bisexual sheep-herders' movie at the top of their poll.

"But not for the reasons everyone else is talking about", the club's Gay Hendricks hurriedly pointed out. "Circle subscribers resonated with *Brokeback Mountain* because its spiritual themes go much deeper than the issues about sexuality that captured much of the attention of the popular media. Whatever one's sexual orientation, the movie speaks to an eternal challenge of coming to terms with one's own inner nature and how to express it in the world."

One wonders whether some churches will now be handing out free tickets to parishioners, as they did for *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

## Church apologises for publishing satirical Mohammed cartoon

THE Anglican Church in Wales has recalled the current issue of its parish magazine because it contained a cartoon satirising the Prophet Mohammed.

The Church in Wales has also apologised to the Muslim community of Wales for the cartoon which appeared in the latest edition of *Y Llan* – meaning Church, which has a circulation of around 400.

The drawing – reprinted from the French magazine *France Soir* – satirises the Prophet Mohammed by depicting him sitting on a heavenly cloud with Buddha, Christ and other deities. He is being told "Don't complain... we've all been caricatured here."

The cartoon was used to illustrate an article about the shared ancestry of Christianity, Islam

and Judaism.

Sion Brynach, spokesman for the Archbishop of Wales, Dr Barry Morgan, said: "The Church in Wales is thoroughly investigating how this cartoon came to be reproduced in *Y Llan*.

"Despite the publication's small circulation, we are concerned about the possibility of causing any offence to the Muslim community in Wales – with whom the Church in Wales has an excellent relationship – as a result of the reproduction of this cartoon."

Saleem Kidwai, general secretary of the Muslim Council of Wales, said Dr Morgan had telephoned him immediately to apologise when he discovered that the cartoon had been published.





# How a top comedian became a standard-bearer for humanism

WHEN the British Humanist Association's trustees were discussing who should be invited to be the BHA's next President and Linda Smith's name came up, one of them commented that she would be "a brave choice". Perhaps he envisaged the Radio 4 *Just a Minute* team attempting to talk about humanism for one minute without hesitation, repetition or deviation; and it may be true that a comedian was not the most obvious choice, but the trustees – according to the BHA's website – were unanimous in approving Linda as their President, and delighted when she accepted the role.

On taking on the mantle of President, Linda said, "The BHA's work is more important than ever. With fundamentalism of many kinds on the rise, the rational voice of humanism needs to be heard. I see publicising humanism in order that other people might identify themselves not just negatively as atheists, but positively as humanists, as a vital part of my role. I'm looking forward to evangelising – if that's the right word. The future is bright, the future is human!"

Hanne Stinson, Executive Director of the BHA, said "Linda Smith was one of the few comedians to make me laugh out loud, but when I met her to talk about the President's role I was struck by how everything she said about her beliefs was completely in tune with the BHA's position, and her commitment to supporting the BHA's work was amazing. Although Linda's illness towards the end of her life meant that she could not give as much time to her role as she would have liked, Linda did great work for the BHA and for humanism in her time as President, particularly in the publicity she obtained for the BHA's campaign against faith and sectarian schools."

Sam Rimmer, chair of the BHA, said "Humanists celebrate life. It's very sad for us to have lost the explosion of humour that was Linda, but there is so much in her life to celebrate. Her many friends have described her personal qualities and achievements in obituaries throughout the media, but I want to celebrate Linda's wonderful contribution to humanism. When she first became our President, she said she hadn't realised that she had always been a humanist. When they read or heard Linda's comments, many other people identified with this and sought out other people just like themselves for support and like-minded company. I wish Linda was still around, but when I think of her it will always be with a warm and happy smile."

In a tribute to Linda Smith, Cahal Milmo, writing in the *Independent*, said that "after two decades of sharing her mirthful world-view, it was unsurprising that, even as Linda Smith entered her final days, she was working on one last public expression of her beliefs – her funeral. Hours before she died from the ovarian cancer which she had been privately fighting since 2002, the comedian laid down the law on her final farewell – small, private and, above all, humanist".

Linda's funeral last month was followed by a separate memorial service, attended by the likes of Paul Merton and Jeremy Hardy, fellow regulars on BBC Radio 4's *News Quiz*.

Caroline Black, the BHA celebrant who conducted the comedian's funeral and who visited her shortly before her death, said: "She didn't have time for authority-figures. Her ideas were driven by being self-determining and being responsible for yourself. She knew she was not going to live much longer and she was very clear that she wanted humanism to be at the heart of her funeral."

## Expanding band

"In choosing a ceremony deliberately denuded of any notion of a deity or an afterlife. Smith and her partner, Warren Lakin, join a rapidly expanding group of Britons who choose secular ideals rather than religion when it comes to marking an important event in their lives," wrote Milmo.

"Celebrants trained and registered by the BHA conducted more than 6,000 humanist funerals, weddings, baby namings and other ceremonies in 2004. The figures represent an increase in humanist ceremonies of more than 150 per cent in the last five years. Membership of the BHA has increased from 3,500 in 2000 to 5,000, including a host of high-profile scientists and intellectuals, while its number of celebrants now stands at 200. Unaffiliated celebrants are thought to carry out a further 8,000 humanist ceremonies across Britain every year.

"Among the celebrities to have had humanist funerals in recent years are three other fellow comedians – Ronnie Barker, Bob Monkhouse and Dave Allen – and the Olympic ice-skater John Curry. The preponderance of comics in this list is put down to their habit of saying what they think, according to Smith's fellow humanists. Hanne Stinson says: 'Comedians tend to say things as they see them. A lot of people who see themselves as atheistic tend to end up having a religious

funeral because it is the done thing. Perhaps comedians are more used to expressing a view and holding to it.'

"Marilyn Mason, the BHA's education officer, says: 'A lot of people are probably humanist without realising it. What humanism offers is a life-stance based on reason and experience. It isn't something you necessarily join or participate in, but it gives a philosophical support to daily life. It offers an ethical system, but often people only come to us when they want to have a ceremony that reflects their views.'

"Chief among these 'unwitting humanists' was Smith herself. In 2004 she said: 'I only found out that the beliefs I hold are humanistic when the BHA kindly invited me to be its president. I am sure that I'm typical of many unconscious humanists.'

Milmo revealed that the issue of public funding for faith schools "particularly irked Linda Smith", and quoted Sam Bradler, the BHA's community services officer, as saying: "Our aim is to promote non-religious life, to separate the religious from the public domain in areas such as government or education. We find it difficult to see why faith schools should be subsidised when someone who is a humanist could have no chance of getting their child into that school because of their beliefs."

"Humanists," wrote Milmo, "admit that their movement has a long way to go before it can claim influence on a par with the established religions it opposes."

"Its 5,158 funerals represent barely one per cent of the burials and cremations carried out by the Church of England in a year. One Midlands-based BHA celebrant says: 'We're kidding ourselves if we think humanism is on a par with Hinduism or Judaism in terms of its influence, let alone the main Christian churches. But there is a tremendous opportunity here to provide structure and solace in a society which increasingly finds the notion of God irrelevant'."

Smith recalled how her own experience of institutional religion was responsible for her conversion to humanism. She said: "It was secondary school that put me off God. I suddenly thought in assembly that this was all rubbish, the headmaster reading out this piffle." The comedian voiced a hope that she would one day organise a large showbiz benefit event to "bring in people who weren't necessarily humanism's normal audience". The tragedy is that the event she dreamed of will have been due to her death.



# Google censors anti-Islamic song

“THIS video has been removed due to terms of use violation.” This message became increasingly common on the internet last month as thousands tried in vain to access sites that, earlier in the year, had hosted a simple video clip that showed nothing other than the words to a catchy little song sung by American Patrick Henry. The reason it was expunged is simple. The song, called *It's in the Koran*, was deemed offensive to Muslims, and even Google Video was forced to pull the plug on it.

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, the only website we could find still offering access to the the song was [www.littlegreenfootballs.com](http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com).

For those readers without internet access, or find the link no longer in existence, here are the words to song:

In our days of glory  
Now centuries past  
The kingdom of Islam  
Stood mighty and vast  
Then we failed our faith  
And watched your power grow  
But soon our greatness will return  
And this is how we know ...

Because it's in the Koran  
It's written in the Koran  
A world united under Allah is  
The future of man  
How could it not be so  
When most opposing us panic  
And surrender once a few of them have bled.

We're happy to torture  
We're eager to rape  
We savor your last screams  
On videotape  
We massacre children  
We ransack a shrine  
And all our acts are sanctified  
By Suras 2 through 9.

Because it's in the Koran  
It's written in the Koran  
That we should fight and slay the infidels  
However we can  
We'll blow ourselves to bits  
If that gives us an advantage  
Or we'll slit your throats while you're asleep  
in bed.

Those heathens who scold us  
Are wasting their breath  
Over the millions we've butchered  
And starved  
We're men who would let girls  
Be trampled to death  
Rather than see them in public unscarved.

So don't look for mercy  
When you're at our feet  
The justice we'll give you  
Is harsh and complete  
We danced in delight  
When your Twin Towers fell  
And you'll weep with your slaughtered  
As you burn with them in Hell.

Because it's in the Koran,  
It's written in the Koran  
Your fate was settled long before  
This latest battle began  
We've found our holy purpose  
And we'll never abandon it  
As long as there's a sinner to behead ...

In other words we won't rest  
Till everyone in the West  
Is a slave, a Muslim or dead.

Explaining his motivation for writing and recording the song, Patrick Henry says “all the incidents I describe in it have happened, and all were caused by men who find in the Koran inspiration and justification for their horrible acts.

“To these men the Koran says that it's proper that girls fleeing a fire should be trampled to death because they aren't wearing headscarves. To these men the Koran says, even demands, that these girls die. The Koran says this, not to you, not to me, but to them.

“The same goes for the other deeds I name: rape, torture, massacre, beheading, defilement of shrines. To these men, the Koran insists that they commit such acts.

“I wrote the song from the point of view of these men because they're the dominant force in Islam now. If you don't believe me, remember this: Palestinians have just elected Hamas to lead their parliament, knowing that Hamas plan to institute sharia in Palestine. Muslims had a choice, and they chose as leaders the kinds of men my song is about.

“If you want more evidence, go to MEMRI.org and read the translations of interviews with influential Islamic figures. It's rare to find one criticising anything done by Muslims to non-Muslims, or even to other Muslims.

“Again, if you say that Islam doesn't permit such deeds, and that the men who perform them aren't behaving like true Muslims, I'll agree with you. But these men consider themselves true Muslims, the *only* true Muslims, and think that Muslims who disagree with them are apostates, the worst of betrayers.

“I stand by every line in the song; it's what such men believe. All I did was make their beliefs rhyme, scan and bounce like a vaudeville tune.

“To those of you who feel that I'm mocking Islam, I reply: I'm not. I respect your view of it. These men – the men I'm writing about – don't. You should be arguing with them, not with me.”

## Iraqi Shi'ite cleric wants gays killed in a “most severe way”

IN the midst of sectarian violence that has dragged Iraq to the brink of civil war, the country's influential Shi'ite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has issued a violent death order against gays and lesbians, according to London-based LGBT human rights groups OutRage.

Written in Arabic, and posted on the cleric's website, the *fatwa* follows a press conference given by Sistani. Asked about his attitude towards homosexuality, the Iranian-born Sistani replied: “Forbidden. Punished. In fact, killed. The people involved should be killed in the worst, most severe way of killing.”

Sistani was nominated by Iraqis for the 2005 Nobel Peace prize.

Given Sistani's stature and influence within the Iraqi Shi'ite majority, OutRage member Ali Hili said the cleric's words were extremely

d a n g e r o u s . Sistani's murderous homophobic incitement has given a green light to Shia Muslims to hunt and kill lesbians and gay men,” said Hili. “We will hold Sistani p e r s o n a l l y responsible for the murder of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Iraqis. He gives the killers theological sanction and encouragement.”

The Shi'ite sect in Iraq has approximately twice as many followers as the Sunni sect.



Ali Sistani



I HAVE put "veil" between quotation marks because, until recent times, as a piece of clothing it denoted for most of us something light and delicate, frequently even transparent, eg in the charming illustrations of our childhood editions of *A Thousand and One Nights*: Pastel coloured, gossamerfine. How different indeed from the black shrouds of Saudi Arabia's walking corpses or their Afghani sisters' odious burkhas. And the Islamic headscarves do not veil softly either, most of the time, but are pulled tight over skull and brow, recalling the stern headwraps of nuns in bygone days.

As to the three kinds of headgear listed in my title, they illustrate, of course, the fact that the sexes are treated quite differently when it comes to showing, even flaunting, one's religious identity by means of garb. Jewish men may wear the kippa, they are not from childhood forced to put it on (let alone go around baldheaded under a wig, as orthodox women are in Israel). Turkish men wore the fez until Kemal Ataturk outlawed it together with the "veil", but only the latter is now making a comeback in Turkey and its first appearance *en masse* in Europe. Though not (yet) walking about with a fez, Erdogan has certainly encouraged women to wear the "veil" – even sending his "veiled" daughters to foreign universities, as their Islamist scarf is prohibited by law in Turkish schools.

Come to think of it: Should Turkish

## Fez, Kippa and 'Veil'

Islamists in the EU, eg in Germany, not denounce as offensive to Allah their compatriots going fezless? And why does there not exist a headcovering for Muslim males from puberty to proclaim their "religious identity", as it is supposed to do for women and girls?

### NELLY MOIA argues that there is more to the veil than religious symbolism

Not every man manages to grow a good, strong beard, and younger chaps do not manage it at all; but already little girls are forced into those nauseating shrouds or obliged to cover their heads.

In Iran the thing was brutally imposed on women. Tariq Ali writes in *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* that "in March 1979 Khomeini issued an edict demanding that women veil themselves. Within 24 hours, 20,000 women came out and demonstrated against the ruling". They were denounced by the Communist Tudeh party as "bourgeois"! And the women were not successful ... Soon it was a matter of "the veil or death", as Chahdortt Djavann recalls in her bestselling pamphlet

(alas, in France only, not in Britain) *Bas les voiles!* (Down with the veils!). "From 13 to 23, I was repressed, doomed to be a Muslim female, a submissive female, and imprisoned under the blackness of the veil. From 13 to 23 years of age. And I won't let anyone say that those were the best years of my life."

The attractive young Iranian refugee, quite a success in televised debates, has studied anthropology and lived in Paris for ten years. She exerted an undeniably strong influence on French lawgivers. Eventually France banned the wearing of religious garb in schools (on September 12, 2003).

Humanist/secular/anticlerical citizens in the Western democracies have all too long focused on only the religious meaning of the "veil", unaware of (1) its role as a tool of Islamist propaganda; and (2) its sexist, misogynic element. It is indeed, above all, a sign denoting the inferiority of the female sex and, for young girls, their availability on the sex + marriage market (for Muslim males exclusively). It is therefore profoundly, essentially, revoltingly anti-democratic. I cannot stand the thing, and am glad to live in a country (Luxembourg) where you rarely see one. The last time I was in London, I suddenly came face-to-face with my first burkha, as I entered Harrod's. The sight of this faceless woman really came as a shock!

And it is sickening to think that it was Cherie Blair, the barrister, who successfully defended the right of that Muslim girl, Shabina Begum, to go to a British school in an Islamic bodywrap. I am pleased the decision has since been reversed.

It is high time the West woke up to the fact that misogyny is at the heart of the Islamic hatred of Western values. That archaic, macho culture just hates the sight of girls and women walking about free, bareheaded and unshrouded, openly enjoying their equal civil rights. Painfully resenting the tremendous scientific and technological advance of the West as compared to the backwardness of their own society, these males feel they must at least have the female to tread upon, look down upon, feel superior to. A Russian proverb says: "There is only one human being more miserable than the mujik: the mujik's wife." It may be applied to Muslim society too.

Instead of oppressing their wives, daughters, and sisters, Muslim men should heed the facts and figures (by Arab scholars, if you please!), in the shocking Arab Human Development Report 2003 UNDP. In short: Stop moaning, stoning and throwing bombs. Get rid of your "mind-forg'd manacles", your enslaving, paralyzing clericalism, as we in the West have done – to a considerable extent anyhow, if not yet fully.

## Adapt, or get out, Muslims told

MUSLIMS who want to live under Islamic sharia law were told on last month to get out of Australia, as the government targeted radicals in a bid to head off potential terror attacks.

A day after a group of mainstream Muslim leaders pledged loyalty to Australia at a special meeting with Prime Minister John Howard, he and his ministers made it clear that extremists would face a crackdown.

Treasurer Peter Costello hinted that some radical clerics could be asked to leave the country if they did not accept that Australia was a secular state and its laws were made by parliament. "If those are not your values, if you want a country which has sharia law or a theocratic state, then Australia is not for you," he said on national television.

"I'd be saying to clerics who are teaching that there are two laws governing people in Australia, one the Australian law and another the Islamic law, that this is false. If you can't agree with parliamentary law, independent courts, democracy, and would prefer sharia law, and have the opportunity to go to another country which practises it, perhaps, then, that's a better option," Costello said.

Asked whether he meant radical clerics

would be forced to leave, he said those with dual citizenship could possibly be asked move to the other country.

Education Minister Brendan Nelson later told reporters that Muslims who did not want to accept local values should "clear off". "Basically, people who don't want to be Australians, and they don't want to live by Australian values and understand them, well then they can basically clear off," he said.

Separately, Howard angered some Australian Muslims by saying he supported spies monitoring the nation's mosques.

### Free Inquiry reprints cartoons

*FREE Inquiry*, the American freethought journal, has reprinted four of the controversial cartoons portraying the Muslim Prophet Mohammed in the journal's April-May issue. While the vast majority of North American media shied away from printing the cartoons, the editors at *Free Inquiry* say that they consider this an opportunity to bring forth a strong statement in support of protecting precious media freedoms which are fundamental to a democracy.



## Ex-Muslim receives death threats after lambasting 'barbaric' aspects of Islam

UNTIL February, Dr Wafa Sultan was a largely unknown Syrian-American psychiatrist living outside Los Angeles.

But today, as a result of a startlingly blunt and provocative interview on *Al Jazeera* television on February 21, "she is an international sensation, hailed as a fresh voice of reason by some, and by others as a heretic and infidel who deserves to die," according to a report by John M Broder in the *New York Times*.

In the interview, which has been viewed on the internet well over a million times, Dr Sultan bitterly criticised the Muslim clerics, holy warriors and political leaders who she believes have distorted the teachings of Mohammed and the Koran for centuries.

She said the world's Muslims, whom she compared unfavourably with the Jews, have descended into a vortex of self-pity and violence. The world, she insisted, was not witnessing a clash of religions or cultures, but a battle between modernity and barbarism, a battle that the forces of violent, reactionary Islam are destined to lose.

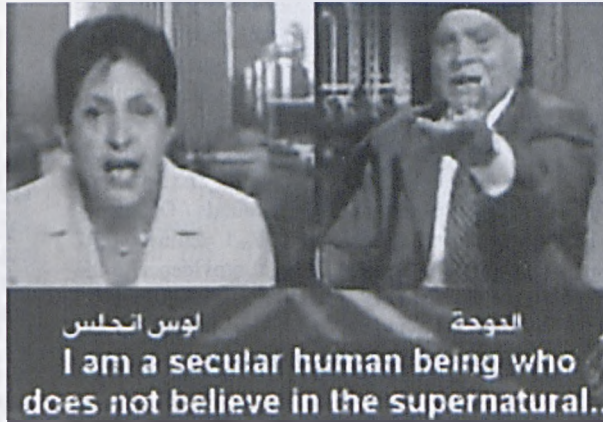
"The clash we are witnessing around the world is a clash between two opposites, between two eras. It is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21st century. It is a clash between civilisation and backwardness, between the civilised and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality, between those who treat women like beasts and those that treat them like human beings."

She said she no longer practised Islam. "I am a secular human being who does not believe in the supernatural," she said.

Gesticulating furiously, the other guest on the programme, Egyptian professor of religious studies, Dr Ibrahim al-Khouli, asked, "Are you a heretic?" He then said there was no point in rebuking or debating with her, because she had blasphemed against Islam, the Prophet Mohammed and the Koran.

Dr Sultan said she took those words as a formal fatwa, a religious condemnation. Since then, she said, she has received numerous death threats on her answering machine and by e-mail. One message said: "Oh, you are still alive? Wait and see." She also received an e-mail message, in Arabic, that said, "If someone were to kill you, it would be me."

Clerics in Syria denounced her as an infidel. One said she had done Islam more damage than the Danish cartoons mocking the Prophet



Dr Sultan invoking the fury of Egyptian professor of religious studies, Dr Ibrahim al-Khouli, on *Al Jazeera*

Mohammed. But Islamic reformers have praised her for saying out loud, in Arabic and on the most widely-viewed television network in the Arab world, what few Muslims dare to say even in private.

"I believe our people are hostages to our own beliefs and teachings," she said in an interview with the *New York Times* at her home in Los Angeles, following the broadcast.

Dr Sultan, 47, said "knowledge has released me from this backward thinking. Somebody has to help free the Muslim people from these wrong beliefs."

Her most provocative words on *Al Jazeera* were those comparing how the Jews and Muslims have reacted to adversity. Speaking of the Holocaust, she said, "The Jews have come from the tragedy and forced the world to respect them, with their knowledge, not with their terror; with their work, not with their crying and yelling."

She went on, "We have not seen a single Jew blow himself up in a German restaurant. We have not seen a single Jew destroy a church. We have not seen a single Jew protest by killing people."

She concluded, "Only the Muslims defend their beliefs by burning down churches, killing people and destroying embassies."

She strongly voiced her objection to Muslims referring to Jews and Christians as "people of the book" (meaning the Torah and the Gospels). They are not "people of the book, they are people of many books. All the useful scientific books that you have today are theirs; the fruit of their free and creative thinking."

Dr Sultan is "working on a book that – if it is published – is going to turn the Islamic world upside down. I have reached the point

that doesn't allow any U-turn. I have no choice. I am questioning every single teaching of our holy book." The working title is, *The Escaped Prisoner: When God Is a Monster*.

Dr Sultan grew up in a large traditional Muslim family in Baniyas, Syria, a small city on the Mediterranean about a two-hour drive north of Beirut. Her father was a grain trader and a devout Muslim, and she followed the faith's strictures into adulthood.

But, she said, her life changed in 1979 when she was a medical student at the University of Aleppo, in northern Syria. At that time, the radical Muslim Brotherhood was using terrorism to try to undermine the government of President Hafez al-Assad. Gunmen of the Muslim Brotherhood burst into a classroom at the university and killed her professor as she watched, she said.

"They shot hundreds of bullets into him, shouting, 'God is great!' At that point, I lost my trust in their god and began to question all our teachings. It was the turning point of my life, and it has led me to this present point."

Sultan first attracted the attention of *Al Jazeera* last year after she wrote an essay about the Muslim Brotherhood, and she was invited to debate with an Algerian cleric last July. In the debate, she questioned the religious teachings that prompt young people to commit suicide in the name of God. "Why does a young Muslim man, in the prime of life, with a full life ahead, go and blow himself up?" she asked. "In our countries, religion is the sole source of education and is the only spring from which that terrorist drank until his thirst was quenched."

Her remarks sparked debates around the globe, and her name began appearing in Arabic newspapers and websites. But her appearance on *Al Jazeera*, translated and widely distributed by the Middle East Media Research Institute (Memri), catapulted her up to a far higher level of notoriety.

Dr Sultan said her mother, who still lives in Syria, is afraid to contact her directly, speaking only through a sister who lives in Qatar. She said she worried more about the safety of family members here and in Syria than she did for her own. "I have no fear," she said. "I believe in my message. It is like a million-mile journey, and I believe I have walked the first and hardest ten miles."



**W**hile the question may reek of tabloid sensationalism, it can't be peremptorily dismissed. No one knows for sure what lay in the Bard's heart of hearts. In a popular lecture, Robert Ingersoll, the 19th-century American freethinker, extolled Shakespeare as a great infidel, "the sublimest man of the human race", who deemed all religions "simple phases of human thought, or the lack of thought". In 1783, Shakespearean scholar Joseph Ritson had broached a similar view. In *Remarks on the Last Edition of Shakespeare*, Ritson concluded that the poet was unshackled by "the reigning superstitions of the time, addicted to no system of bigotry [whether] Popish or Protestant, Paganism or Christianity". More recently, in *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, philosopher Walter Kaufmann described a self-sufficient Nietzschean superman (*Übermensch*) "abandoned to a life that ends in death, with nothing after that".

Traditionally, most Shakespeareans have opined that the Bard was a Christian. They note that he went to church all his life and that his plays have a hefty inventory of Christian paraphernalia, including allusions to church homilies, the catechism, and 40 or so books of the Bible. While some suspect him of papist sympathies, most would accede to the summation of A L Rowse in his study *Shakespeare the Man*: "He was a conforming member of the [Anglican] Church into which he had been baptised, in which he was brought up and married, his children reared and in whose arms he was buried at the last."

One needn't be persuaded by the assessment. Shakespeare cannot be Christianised by fiat. Yes, he went to church. But it doesn't follow that he believed what he heard. An agile, ranging intelligence like his, conversant with pagan mythology and thought, observant to a fault, isn't easily duped; it sifts and weighs every proposition. Moreover, in Shakespeare's England, one attended the established church or risked a stiff fine – or worse. Truants might be forced to restrict their movement or to abjure the realm. They were liable to the charge of treason, a capital crime in the etymological sense. Heads of the executed were hung on London Bridge.

If Shakespeare harboured impious thoughts, he would be circumspect in the way he expressed them. William Camden, an English historian who died a few years after Shakespeare, observed of his contemporaries: "Wise men do keep their thoughts locked up within the closets of their breasts." Anything written for public consumption was vulnerable to official scrutiny. Breaches of censorship could lead to draconian reprisals: imprisonment, branding, mutilation, death. To escape notice, scoff-laws had to be consummate artificers of indirection. Shakespeare had many

talents—an "absolute Johannes Factotum," said fellow playwright Robert Greene – but martyrdom wasn't one of them.

The heavy Christian cargo in the plays does not attest to Shakespearean orthodoxy. It may simply denote dramatic verisimilitude, the mirror held to nature. Since many plays have Christian settings, Christian characters predominate. We needn't wonder that they sometimes sound like Christians, alluding familiarly to Christian lore: "If men were saved by merit, what hole in hell would be hot enough for him?" (*Henry IV, Part I*). "Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorize another Golgotha, / I cannot tell" (*Macbeth*). "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (*Hamlet*). "They have been grand-jurymen since before Noah was a sailor" (*Twelfth Night*). "By penitence th' Eternal's wrath's appeased" (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*).

Read through aloud three times a year in church, the Bible offered the playwright a handy trove of stories, figures, images, and phrases familiar to his audience. It facilitated communication as well as characterisation.

To Christianise the poet, some Shakespeareans dilate the meaning of "Christian". Anyone who practises the gentler virtues qualifies. Whenever Shakespeare's characters, pagans included, display compassion, forbearance, or forgiveness, their conduct is adduced as evidence of Christian values in their creator. Using similar logic, one might conclude Shakespeare was a vulgar Rabelaisian libertine. After all, many characters display a relish for riotous carouse, raunchy innuendo, and locker-room lewdness. In his preface to Shakespeare's plays, Samuel Johnson complained that "the jests are commonly gross and the pleasantry licentious; neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy". In *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, a reference book by Eric Partridge, the glossary of risqué terms runs to nearly 200 pages. One of the anti-Stratfordians, who fancy some nobleman or university-trained playwright wrote the plays, opined that the commoner Shakespeare did the ribald passages.

We can never safely assume that any character replicates Shakespeare's own values or philosophy. Unless a revelatory personal testament is unearthed, motley speculation must remain the only wear. Objectivity may be as evanescent as Prospero's cloud-capped towers. "We find in Shakespeare," says Gary Taylor in *Reinventing Shakespeare*, "what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values." Having the values of an atheist, whatever those may be, I desecrate in the Bard a closet apostate who left a trail of clues to his infidelity. To wit: Though church sermons routinely propounded the efficacy of prayers, in Shakespeare prayers are often a prelude to disaster. In *King Lear*, Kent thanks Gloucester for a

# Was the an Ath

good turn: "The gods reward your kindness!" Shortly thereafter, Cornwall plucks out Gloucester's eyes. Having learned Edmund has commissioned Cordelia's death, Albany cries out: "The gods defend her!"

Enter Lear, his daughter's dead body in his arms. Hoping his amputated hand will ransom his two sons from execution, Titus Andronicus lifts his remaining hand heavenward in supplication: "If any power pities wretched tears, / To that I call!" Thereupon, a courier enters bearing his sons' decapitated heads. In *Macbeth*, having warned Lady MacDuff to flee, a messenger blesses her: "Heaven preserve you!" Moments later, she and her babes are in one fell swoop slaughtered. These ominous invocations vivify a comment by Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: "His worst fault is that he is given to prayer."

**GARY SLOAN, a retired, Louisiana-based English professor with a life-long interest in Shakespeare, examines the evidence.**

Throughout Shakespeare's plays, gibes at Christians abound. Lancelot twits Lorenzo for turning his wife Jessica, a Jew, into a pork-eating Christian: "We were Christians enough before, even as many as could well live one by another. This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs" (*Merchant of Venice*). "Now, as I am a Christian, I shall break that merry sconce of yours" (*Comedy of Errors*). "Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has" (*Twelfth Night*).

Three Mr Malaprops wield lethal tongues. Constable Elbow adjudges Froth, a whore-monger, "void of all profanation in the world that good Christians ought to have" (*Measure for Measure*). Dogberry insists the villainous Don John be "condemned to everlasting redemption" (*Much Ado About Nothing*). Consenting to marry a wench he doesn't love, Slender reasons, "If there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease it upon better acquaintance" (*Merry Wives*). Bottom confounds Scripture: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen,



# The Bard Theist?

man's hand is not able to taste," etc (*Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Shakespeare was a master of the double entendre. Some were transparent to the audience, if not to the characters. "The duke yet lives that Henry will depose" is an oft-cited example (*Henry VI, Part 2*). Will Henry depose or be deposed? Unknowingly, Othello names the instigator of a brawl (Iago) even as he seeks his identity: "'Tis monstrous. Iago, who began it?" With such stealthy juggling of diction and syntax, the Bard could slip sacrilege past the censor and, no doubt, many others, for whom he was, like Dogberry, too cunning to be understood:

Timon: Wilt dine with me, Apemantus?

Apemantus: No. I eat not lords. (*Timon of Athens*)

**D**oes the poet mock a theophagous Eucharist and a deicidal religion? After a long roll call of dead soldiers, Henry V, praising God for victory, unwittingly arraigns a cosmic butcher: "O God, thy arm was here! / And not to us, but to thy arm alone, / Ascribe we all."

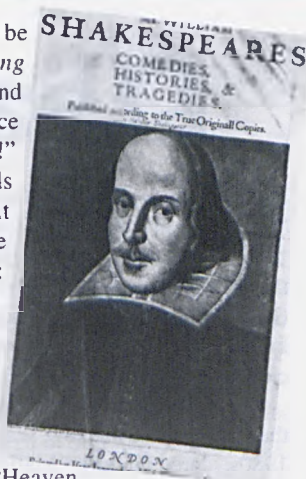
Does Hamlet limn God as an insensitive beast: "O God, a beast, that wants discourse of reason, / Would have mourned longer"? Does the innocent Miranda demonise the divine: "O the heavens! / What foul play had we, that we came from thence?" (*The Tempest*). Does Banquo allude to more than a dark night: "There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out" (*Macbeth*)? Is God ersatz: "O God, counterfeit?" (*Much Ado about Nothing*). Is heaven the abode of the dead: "The young gentleman is indeed deceased, or, as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven" (*Merchant of Venice*)? With his dying breath, does Hamlet repudiate immortality: "The rest is silence"? Does Dogberry demote deity: "Well, God's a good man" (*Much Ado*)? Does the bibulous Stephano rouse freethinkers? "Flout 'em and scout 'em / And scout 'em and flout 'em / Thought is free." (*The Tempest*.)

Shakespeare's characters are psychologically wedded to the here and now. With few exceptions, their theism is formulaic, intermittent, and social. They are actuated by carnal ambition, revenge, romance, love, hate, pleasure. They invoke deities largely to avouch, to shield, and to execrate: "Away! By Jupiter, /

This shall not be revoked" (*King Lear*). "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (*Hamlet*). Gods are celestial hit men and bellicose avengers: "Cancel his bond of life, dear God! I pray / That I may live and say 'The dog is dead!'"

(*Richard III*). "Heaven guide him to thy husband's cudgel" (*Merry Wives*). Gods are also indiscriminate sportsmen: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (*Lear*).

In war or peace, a robust Shakespearean naturalism keeps bursting the seams of other-worldliness. Quotations are easily adduced for a secularist manifesto: "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven" (*All's Well That Ends Well*). "While we are suitors to their [the gods'] throne, decays / The thing we sue for" (*Antony and Cleopatra*). "Dally not with the gods, but get thee gone" (*The Tempest*). "An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star" (*Lear*). "'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus"



(*Othello*). The only certainty is that life is transient:

What is love? 'tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth hath present laughter;  
What's to come is still unsure.  
In delay there lies no plenty.  
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty;  
Youth's a stuff will not endure. (*Twelfth Night*)

A poignant sense of mutability haunts Shakespeare's sonnets, a sequence of 154 poems, widely deemed autobiographical. Other than a few nodding references, they lack the otherworldly assurances and orthodox pieties in Christian poets like Edmund Spenser, John Donne, George Herbert, and John Milton. A L Rowse describes the sonnets as "altogether this-worldly and human, sensual and psychologically subtle" (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*). Philosopher George Santayana said they are spiritual, but not Christian. Throughout, the poet treats life and death as natural processes. The dead survive only in their offspring or in the memory of posterity. No supernatural agencies intervene, no Christian eschatology, no scheme of salvation. God is a no-show.

While I may be arraigned for citing scripture for demonic purposes, so do others who explore Shakespeare's religion (or lack thereof). So, again, was Shakespeare really an atheist? As I said at the outset, no one really knows. And that may be just the way the Bard wanted it.

## Hayes storms out of 'bigoted' South Park

Singer Isaac Hayes, best known for the hit theme tune to the 1971 film *Shaft*, is to stop providing the voice for a character in cartoon South Park because he objects to its "inappropriate ridicule" of religion.

Hayes, 63, who is the voice of the lustful Chef, has been a regular on the show since its US TV debut in 1997. But co-creator Matt Stone said Hayes had "never had a problem" until the Scientology Church, to which Hayes belongs, was parodied.

The show was insensitive to "personal spiritual beliefs", said Hayes. "There is a place in this world for satire but there is a time when satire ends and intolerance and bigotry toward religious beliefs begin," he said.

Stone said: "In ten years and over 150 episodes of South Park, Isaac never had a problem with the show making fun of Christians, Muslim, Mormons or Jews. He got a sudden case of religious sensitivity when it was his religion featured on the show."

The series tells the story of four boys in a dysfunctional Colorado town and regularly deals with sensitive subjects and sends up famous figures.

In a recent episode, one of the gang, Stan, did so well in a Scientology test that church followers thought he was the next L Ron Hubbard, the late science-fiction writer who founded Scientology.

Hayes did not take part in that episode but has talked widely about his work for Scientology, which he calls "an applied religious philosophy".

The show sparked another religious row recently when an episode entitled Bloody Mary depicted a bleeding statue of the Virgin Mary.

Catholics in the US criticised the show while church leaders in New Zealand called for a boycott of a broadcaster which planned to screen the episode.

New Zealand's Catholic bishops signed a letter urging the country's 500,000 Catholics to boycott C4 and its sister station TV3, which recently apologised for showing the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. They asked for the ban to extend to companies that advertise their products on the commercial network.



# Death of the Pope

ARCHBISHOP Paul Casimir Marcinkus died on February 20 in Sun City, near Phoenix, Arizona. You don't remember him? During his 18 years as president of the Vatican bank, *Instituto per le Opere di Religione* (Institute of Religious Works, or IOR), which manages the financial investments of the Vatican, Marcinkus was regarded as the second most powerful man in the most powerful Church in the world.

He was born in 1922 in Cicero, a slum sector of Chicago, of impecunious Catholic immigrants from Lithuania. They were neighbours of Al Capone, so young Paul grew up among gangsters. But he was a bright boy, and decided to study for the priesthood. Ordained in 1947 – the year Capone died and got a Catholic funeral – Marcinkus spent three years working as a simple curate in a Chicago parish, then moved to Rome, to study theology and canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University, and was granted a doctorate. In 1952 he took a holiday job in the Vatican Secretariat of State, where he struck up a close friendship with Giovanni Montini, who was to become Pope Paul VI.

After brief secondments to Bolivia and Canada, Marcinkus returned to Rome. When Giovanni, after five years' delay waiting for the elderly John XXIII to die, finally ascended the throne of St Peter in 1963, he promoted his young friend to the Vatican Diplomatic Service, where Marcinkus, having fluent Italian, French and Spanish, as well as English and Lithuanian, made himself useful as the Pope's interpreter and translator, political adviser, and papal tour planner. Standing at 6ft 4in and a burly 16 stone, he was known as "the Gorilla". His size and strength proved more than useful to Paul VI in November 1970, when, during a papal visit to Manila, Marcinkus saved the pontiff's life from the knife of a deranged would-be assassin.

Having thus won his spurs in the role of papal bodyguard, as well as a variety of other useful roles, which now included chief of security, Marcinkus was made the acting governor of Vatican City State – in charge of all its finances and administration, its newspaper, its radio station, and its 3,000 employees. Above all, the Pope appointed him to the Vatican Bank's top position; and, despite growing rumours of the extensive swindles in which he was involved, he retained that billet under the next pope but one, John Paul II, who consecrated him an archbishop in 1981.

The fact that Marcinkus and the Polish Pope were almost compatriots – both being Baltoslavs in an alien milieu, both hating the Soviet Union, and, unlike most of the prelates, both being keen on sport – no doubt stood him in good stead.

His liaisons, however, with two professional

bankers led to his downfall – and that of the Vatican Bank. First there was the Sicilian "whiz-kid" banker Michele Sindona, and then the head of Banco Ambrosiano of Milan (Italy's largest private bank), Roberto Calvi, known as "God's banker" because of his association with Vatican finances.

The triumvirate was largely responsible for the huge Italian banking scandals of the early 1980s, precipitating Mafio—Masonic murders and suicides (including those of two of the three) after the collapse of Banco Ambrosiano in 1982 with losses amounting to \$3.5 billion. With characteristic insouciance, Marcinkus blamed his involvement on his inexperience of high finance: "My only previous experience was handling the Sunday collection".

He was indicted by the Milan authorities in 1982, but evaded arrest through John Paul II giving him sanctuary within the Vatican. There he remained holed up, unable to accompany the Pope on any more tarmac-kissing trips, nor even daring to set foot on Italian soil, for five years – when the arrest-warrant was quashed on the grounds that, under the 1929 Lateran Treaty, a Vatican official was immune from Italian jurisdiction. His one penalty, it seems, was to be denied the cardinal's red hat that he coveted.

Anyway, the swindles may not have been entirely his fault: when the Pope got him to send \$50 million to Solidarity in Poland, did he enquire where the money had come from? And at least the frauds that Marcinkus perpetrated were not aimed at amassing a personal fortune for himself. But is the sacrifice of other people any less culpable for being in a good cause – even supposing the Catholic Church to be a good cause? It is the old ethical question of the end justifying the means.

Faced with assessed debts of \$1.4 billion, the Vatican finally (in 1984) agreed to repay \$224 million to the 120 creditors of Banco Ambrosiano, as "recognition of moral involvement" in their losses – though Marcinkus opposed even this amount of restitution. Later he commented: "The Vatican didn't have to put out a cent; and when you have to knock down your capital it hurts." Besides, paying up was almost an admission of guilt.

Marcinkus is also quoted as saying, after his return to America in 1990, "I may be a lousy banker, but at least I am not in jail." One wonders if he believed in hell.

He was almost certainly implicated in at least two suicides – those of Calvi's young secretary and of banker Michele Sindona. (When Sindona drank a cyanide-laced coffee in his prison cell in 1986, it was probably suicide,

though it could have been murder.) Also at least two murders – those of Pope John Paul I ("the smiling Pope"), who, just 33 days after his election in 1978, was found unexpectedly dead in bed, and, less directly, of Signor Roberto Calvi, who, four years later, was

## BARBARA SMOKER digs up an old Vatican gangster

found hanging by the neck under Blackfriars Bridge.

It is also alleged that in 1984 Marcinkus ordered the assassination of the Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov.

Only one month after being chosen by the Holy Spirit to ascend the papal throne, John Paul I ordered an audit of the Vatican Bank and was, it is thought, about to sack Marcinkus and blow the whistle on the burgeoning financial irregularities that he was horrified to discover he had inherited as pope. The nun who found him dead was instructed to lie about the details, and the Pope's body was quickly embalmed to forestall a post-mortem examination. All this circumstantial evidence was exposed by David Yallop in his best-seller *In God's Name*. My old friend Avro Manhattan, who lived in Kensington, also dashed off to Rome to carry out his own investigation, which contributed to his sensational book *Murder in the Vatican*.

For more than 16 years, to the distress of the religious Calvi family (and the gratitude of the life assurance company), the Church and its cronies contrived to pass off the murder of "God's banker" as suicide – though that would obviously have been a physical impossibility. Then Calvi's body was exhumed, and modern forensic technology proved that he was strangled before being strung up at Blackfriars in a Masonic rite – including tidal water washing over the body twice a day. Four men are now in custody awaiting trial for his murder, and they had been hoping to subpoena Marcinkus as a defence witness.

In a crime novel, *Killing Orders*, by an American woman writer, Sara Paretsky, her arch-villain, Archbishop O'Faolin, is unmistakably based on Archbishop Marcinkus – even holding the same financial position in the Vatican. Both of them boost Vatican funds in criminal ways, including the forging of American bonds and the creation of over banks as merry-go-round subsidiaries of the Vatican



# Pope's Pet Gorilla

Bank. And, of course, the homicides.

The one difference between the actual and fictitious archbishops is that though each was born into Catholic immigrant families in Chicago, the name Marcinkus is Lithuanian while O'Faolin is Irish. However, that hardly seems a sufficient difference to enable Paretzky and her publishers to get away with manifest libel, in spite of the usual disclaimer on the book's copyright page – especially as Marcinkus was still very much alive in the Vatican at the time the book was published in the mid-1980s. They presumably relied on the natural reluctance of the man and his Church to complain in court that the book's villain was too accurately taken from life!

At the time that Paretzky was presumably beginning work on the book, I wrote a long article for the June 1983 *Freethinker* about the murdered Roberto Calvi (whom she actually

mentions by name) and his connection with Marcinkus, the real-life O'Faolin. It is reprinted in my collection *Freethoughts* (pages 95 to 102) \*.

At the end of the Paretzky novel, the fictionalised archbishop is killed by a car-bomb. The real-life archbishop, on the other hand, has now died peacefully at the age of 84, in his nice retirement home in Sun City, overlooking the golf-course which helped him keep fit during his long retreat from public life.

The Gorilla was a genial extravert and sportsman, good at golf and tennis, and with a (literally) "wicked" sense of humour. He was also said to be a caring pastoral priest, and popular with parishioners.

Commenting on his demise, Pope Benedict XVI says he recalls "with gratitude the late Archbishop's priestly zeal, his years of faithful service to the Holy See, and his valued work



Marcinkus pictured with Pope John Paul VI

for the Vatican City State". How fortunate, after such a life, to have well-disposed obituarists writers in high places.

\* Still available from Barbara Smoker at 51 Farnfield Road, Bromley, Kent, BR1 4NF, at £10 post free.

## The Municipal Cemeteries problem

WE are told that many cemeteries cannot take any more burials and that one solution being resisted by the public is to dig deeper, re-bury the older corpses and put the new burials on top, but the real problem is the one caused by the living, not the dead.

The problem is one of emotions and irrational beliefs. The plain fact is that there is no such thing as a dead person. When my father died in 1955 I remember being asked whether I wanted to see him. For a moment I was shocked and thought to myself "Are they unsure whether he is dead, so why ask me, or do they want me to confirm that this dead body was once my father?" The thing in the mortuary was simply a corpse. It had served my father reasonably well for 70 years, even though he had had a reeking pipe in his mouth most of that time.

Unfortunately, at the time, my brother and I had no way of preventing the ceremonial nonsense of an expensive coffin, the restoration of a family burial plot in which his brother's corpse had been buried 56 years earlier, and the replacing of memorial stones surrounding it.

A dead body, any dead body, has only one thing to do and that is to decompose. The process eventually recycles the whole thing to be used by plants and animals. That seems fair, considering we have been surviving by eating plants and animals the whole of our life. Even vegetarians cannot help eating a few small animals. So the best thing we can do with dead animals is allow them to decompose, indeed to help them to decompose. Why play a pan-

tomime with polished furniture with knobs on, and priests in dresses, and all that weeping and gnashing of teeth? We all die, and the only thing that matters is that when alive we have been of help to our neighbours as far as we were able.

**There is no such thing as a dead person, says PETER ARNOLD**

We are no use to them when dead. In fact, as the municipal authorities have found, we are a nuisance, but this is not because we are corpses, but because our relatives and perhaps society as a whole have a hang-up about dead human bodies. We don't care much about other dead animals. We are likely to bury a dead hamster in a flower bed where it will become a useful bit of fertilizer, so maybe we should bury larger animals with a fruit tree on top, or an oak. There is a small oak tree close beside my father's grave and in 50 years I suppose it might at last be benefiting from some of the decomposition products below.

The human population in Britain is perhaps a hundred times as great as it was in the days of William the Conqueror, so maybe we actually need to speed up the decomposition process and put corpses where they can be recycled more rapidly, like most of those who died at Senlac.

The problem with crematoria is that they consume so much fuel. The amount of carbon-dioxide blown up into the atmosphere is prob-

ably three or four times as great as the corpse itself can provide, and those stories of spontaneous combustion seem to be rather difficult to reproduce in reality.

Perhaps the municipal authorities need to start by ensuring that the base of the coffin is actually a trap door, and that after the religious ceremony is over and mourners have departed, the coffin, minus corpse, is retrieved, cleaned up and made ready for the next occupant. The corpse would then decompose and be recycled much faster, and the ground would be ready for another body quite soon. Bones take longer to be recycled, and in limestone and chalk soils can last for millennia, though in acid soils can vanish quite quickly.

So I repeat: The problems for municipal authorities are the living, not the dead. The problem, as always, is to persuade people to use knowledge to think rationally, and by all means use priests and psychologists to calm the emotions and bring the grieving family calmly back to the reality of their own daily life. Priests have been doing this quite successfully for thousands of years, and psychologists are also getting better at it, and they need to because imagination and emotion are powerful stimuli and can sometimes get a bit out of hand.

By all means use the symbolism and poetry of religions if that helps relatives come back to normality after a close relative dies, but irrational beliefs really should not be allowed to complicate the simple process of the safe disposal of corpses in heavily populated areas of Britain.



WILLIAM Naphy is Senior Lecturer and Director of Teaching and Learning in the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy at Aberdeen University and has published three other books of history. The subtitle of the book is "a history of homosexuality", which may give rise to yawns in some prospective readers, but in fact the book takes us through the varied social attitudes towards those of untypical sexuality in the principal cultures for which we have written records, and shows how in later years the uncompromising viewpoints firstly of Jews, then Christians and Muslims, have coloured and even replaced these long-standing attitudes. But first Naphy is at pains to argue that the nature/nurture debate in this field is an over-simplification, since there are many people who ignore their genetic predisposition to seek same-sex partners and produce children in the socially approved way, while others overcome social conditioning and follow their homosexual inclinations.

He adds to the debate another distinction: essentialism versus constructionism. Essentialists argue that there are real identities such as homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual inherent to the human condition, however societies may respond to these labels, while constructionists argue that these terms are categories created by society and have no real referents, but simply describe behaviour on a sexual continuum. In another society one might have the categories of sporty, spectator-sporty and non-sporty, whereas in a society without organised sport such categories would have no meaning. The nature/nurture debate is focused on the individual, explaining why he or she engages in that behaviour, while the essentialist/constructionist argument is focused on how societies categorise and explain sexual behaviour and how individuals in the society understand their position in it.

The book is divided into six main chapters, each concentrating on a broad historical period and subdivided by culture. There is a great deal of rich detail with substantial treatment of homosexuality in India and China and other non-European cultures, but the following is a mere *tour d'horizon*, in which I focus mostly on the influence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on social attitudes to gays and lesbians.

In the first chapter, "Before Sodom and Gomorrah", Naphy makes two important points to which he returns repeatedly in later chapters. The first is that most early cultures were less concerned about the sex of one's partner than about penetration, the doing of something to someone, whether boy or woman. By contrast, the sex of one's partner mattered a great deal to the Jews, who placed the greatest emphasis on procreation, an attitude which Naphy describes as abnormal, in that no other society held it.

Israel's neighbours saw nothing intrinsically

wrong with consensual homosexual acts – indeed, there are texts asking for blessings on same-sex couples. However, male temple prostitutes were despised, though tolerated, because they were the passive partners.

The second point is that "it is a wholly modern belief that associates sex with emotional attachment – love." So, in India or China in this broad period, being in love with someone of same or opposite sex had nothing to do with one's ability to marry somebody else and have children, a socio-economic exercise.

**BARRY THORPE**  
**reviews *Born to be Gay*, by**  
**William Naphy, Tempus**  
**2004, b&w plates,**  
**bibliography, index,**  
**£20.00\***

Researchers investigating homosexuality in prehistoric Africa or the New World have a serious problem – the lack of indigenous written sources. Accounts written by Westerners have to be used carefully, since the writers were looking through Christian spectacles, and often misrepresented or misunderstood what they saw.

The second chapter, "The Birth of Homophobia, 1300-100 BCE" begins with Judaism: "While same-sex acts were completely condemned and death decreed as the punishment, the range of sins for which there was a similar punishment confirms that the emphasis was less upon sex *per se* than upon purity of behaviour and character", and "Every command in the biblical law which discusses sex focuses on ensuring procreation from a large gene pool. Thus incest and male homosexuality are explicitly condemned". The discussion of the Leviticus passages is exhaustive.

In India the myths, especially that of Krishna and Arjuna, suggest that deep emotional attachments between those of the same sex are highly regarded; these need not imply, but do not exclude, physical relationships. In China no specific opprobrium was attached to same-sex relationships, though unwillingness to procreate was much deplored.

Naphy ends the chapter with: The Judaic stress on procreation as the sole significant and legitimate function for sex was peculiar and unique. Elsewhere ... marriage was a separate institution, which was the focal point for procreation. It was most certainly *not* the lynchpin of society or culture, nor was it the normal place in which people saw close emotional and loving relationships developing. Love, emotion and friendship remained closely intertwined and, more often than not, involved individuals of the same sex. ... The change began in the centuries after the birth of the Christian faith.

Chapter three, on classical civilisations and

the birth of Christianity (100 BCE – 600 CE), covers the well-known ground in classical Greece. While attitudes to same-sex relationships varied between city-states, in general there was a widespread appreciation of the male form, and male-male bonds were commonly elevated above marriage bonds. In Rome, however, adult males had to be penetrators not penetrated, although indulgence might be shown to adolescents; both Caesar and Augustus had been passive partners in their youth.

Naphy notes again that Christianity developed its ideas about sex from the Jewish emphasis on procreation in a Graeco-Roman milieu. The result was a condemnation of any sexual contact not aimed primarily at procreation, and because sex between males was often associated with prostitution in pagan temples, homosexual activity was therefore doubly to be condemned.

In this period there are still no records of the state of affairs in Africa, but for India there is plenty of material for Naphy to explore the evolving attitudes of the Jains and the evidence of such works as the *Kama Sutra*, while for China there is also much for Naphy to bring to our attention: during the Han dynasty the emperors' same-sex relationships were no more noteworthy than their relationships with the opposite sex.

By the end of this period, about 600 CE, marriage was still an arranged affair with same-sex relationships still well-regarded, but the weight of Christian influence, increased by its official status, would, together with the newly-emergent Islam, change all of that.

In "Closing Minds" (600 CE – 1550), Naphy tells us that in spite of the first specifically anti-homosexual laws passed by Justinian (d 565 CE), attitudes in Europe did not change markedly, although there were several moves to change sexual mores, such as imposing celibacy on the priesthood, until the Black Death. Europeans tried to explain why God had been so savage and sought scapegoats in the Jews and those who flouted the church's rules on sexual behaviour; as Justinian had insisted, "sin" in the form of heresy, false religion and unnatural sex was the cause of plague, famine and war. And yet brothels were still being built with public funds and a Sunday visit to one was typical for single young men. Still, the priests insisted that legal prostitution also invited the wrath of God.

Islamic poetry continued to feature appreciation of the beauty of male youths and romantic homoeroticism, while Islamic law recognised the attraction but disapproved of any resulting action.

In African societies some males associated with magic and ritual engaged in behaviour more appropriate to women, even becoming the "wives" of men who have female wives. In Zulu society it was woman's work to be a



medium, so male mediums cross-dressed. Africans would not have made any assumptions about sexual activity based on this, but visiting Europeans did.

In the New World, the indigenes became the victims of previously unknown diseases brought by European conquerors who enslaved them and regarded their culture and practices as the work of demons. And so the newcomers were at pains to extirpate the sins and with them the cultural history.

The Jewish sex-for-procreation ideology spread from the Near East across the Mediterranean via Christianity down the coast of West Africa, via Islam down East Africa and parts of India and then catastrophically through Christian Europeans to the New World, displacing the almost universal acceptance that there was a place also for sex-for-pleasure, which need not be with a partner of the same sex.

Having presented the method and main thrust of Naphy's argument, I will content myself with

brief notes on the last two chapters.

Chapter five, "Spreading Christian 'Values'", continues in a similar pattern including among other topics a discussion of gay relationships among European royalty and a long section on the status of the berdache in Native American tribes. A berdache was a man who cross-dressed and accepted a woman's role in society to the extent of being married to a non-berdache male. There was sometimes a sexual relationship with a non-berdache. The details varied from tribe to tribe.

The final chapter, "Colonising Minds", includes a section on the contrast between the Enlightenment generally and the attitudes towards homosexuality, particularly after the French revolutionaries decriminalised sodomy, the hypocrisy of the Victorian pursuit of the sodomite and the toleration of homosexual activity in public schools. There is also an important section on homosexuality in Africa, with special emphasis given to Zimbabwe, giving the lie to Mugabe's claim that

Europeans introduced to the practice.

I found the book highly illuminating if a little over-detailed in places, and it showed yet again how the fanatical dogma of the Abrahamic superstitions imposed mind-control, in this case by twisting previously healthy attitudes towards sex and sexualities.

Finally, a few gripes: I should have liked section headings in each chapter where the author moves from culture to culture for ease of reference, and the grey type on off-white poor quality paper made me think from time to time that I needed new glasses.

The cover price of *Born to be Gay* is £20, but it is available more cheaply from various internet sites, and in particular from PostScript at £8.00 exclusive of postage: <http://www.psbooks.co.uk/Title.asp?Title=born%20to%20be%20gay&pg=Title+Search&ur=Search.asp?fld=Title> (Psbooks., 24 Langroyd Road, London SW17 7PL supplies a paper catalogue).

## Dutch Muslims slam new immigration test

TWO men kissing in a park and a topless woman bather are featured in a film that will be shown to would-be immigrants to the Netherlands, according to a *Sunday Times* report last month by Nicola Smith.

The reactions of applicants – including Muslims – will be examined to see whether they are able to accept the country's liberal attitudes. The DVD – which also shows the often crime-ridden ghettos where poorer immigrants might end up living – will form part of an entrance test, in Dutch, covering the language and culture of Holland.

Those sitting the test will be expected to identify William of Orange and to know which country Crown Princess Maxima comes from (Argentina), and whether hitting women and female circumcision are permitted.

Muslim leaders in Holland say the film is offensive. "It really is a provocation aimed to limit immigration. It has nothing to do with the rights of homosexuals. Even Dutch people don't want to see that," said Abdou Menebhi, the Moroccan-born director of Emcemo, an organisation that helps immigrants to settle.

Famile Arslan, 34, an immigration lawyer of Turkish origin, agreed. "I have lived here for 30 years and have never been witness to two men kissing in the park. So why are they confronting people with that?" she said.

She accused the government of preaching tolerance about civil rights while targeting non-Westerners with harsh and discriminatory immigration curbs.

The new test – the first of its kind in the world – marks another step in the transformation of Holland from one of Europe's most liberal countries to the one cracking down hardest on

immigration. The measures were prompted in part by outrage over the 2004 murder of Theo Van Gogh, who had made a film about the oppression of women in Muslim communities.

Jeroen Dijsselbloem, a socialist from the parliament's immigration committee, said the

film had been created to help prepare people for "open-minded" attitudes on issues such as homosexuality. "We have lots of homosexual discrimination, especially by Muslim youngsters who harass gay men and women on the streets. It is an issue here."





## Religion and Immigration

P T Lacey (*Points of View*, February) is probably correct in saying that "no meaningful discussion of Islamic extremism in Britain can take place without examining immigration policy".

But who set that narrow agenda? When did the *Freethinker*, and militant atheists in general, decide to restrict our ambitions to opposing a single religion in a single country?

The logical outcome of a successful endeavour to tame a major religion in one country through controls on immigration must be some sort of insular, apartheid state, which expels or excludes people according to their professed beliefs, while leaving Johnny Foreigner to stew in his own juices.

Even if such an "I'm alright Jack" isolationist position could be sustained (and history suggests strongly that it could not), I find it hard to believe that readers of the *Freethinker*, whatever their political leanings, would truly aspire to such a squalid, mean-spirited, short-sighted and parochial vision of the future.

We rationalists, if we choose to raise our eyes from the dust, are in a position to see a far bigger picture. We should set our sights on something much more ambitious, and much more important: as the world fills up with people, humanity faces increasingly urgent crises, of a scale and complexity that we have never before encountered.

The problems we face transcend national boundaries, and demand rational, clearly thought-out, internationally co-ordinated action.

But this cannot be done while the vast majority of the world's population are suffering from bizarre, intellectually crippling delusions that lead them to reject scientific explanations of their plight in favour of vain and worthless mysticism.

Isolationism is futile. We have to set our sights on ridding ALL people of their superstitions, whether or not they have the good fortune to reside in this green and pleasant land.

It's achievable. We know exactly how the infection spreads. Human ingenuity has eradicated smallpox, and it can eradicate this scourge, too.

Our whole species must be cured of the corrosive disease of the intellect we call "religion", or our whole species will perish – Little Englanders and all.

GRAHAM NOBLE  
Fareham

## Disposal of the Body

IN answer to some of the questions raised by R E Perry (*Points of View*, April) I offer the following:

1. The death certificate from a doctor is needed for the registration of the death at the Register Office and forms the basis of the paperwork allowing the funeral director to get on

with the disposal. A green form is the thing. You can buy a "Certified Copy of an Entry" in the register of deaths and it is worth having a few so that when you send one off for whatever purpose, to do with pension, insurance etc (photocopies are usually no good) you do not have to wait for it to be returned before doing something else.

2. Many FDs embalm the body without asking the family. Most people do not want to know. It involves inserting a tube(s) and replacing body liquids with a substance that includes formaldehyde. This preserves it and also makes you look OK – sometimes better than you did when you were alive (and ill). Viewing the body varies from place to place. Sometimes everyone has to have a look and sometimes the lid is off the coffin right up to the end – other times the body is put away for all time and not dressed in favourite clothes with glasses and hair etc. It's your choice but often no-one tells you that and you get carried along on the basis of "this is what everyone does."

I personally do not wish to be embalmed. It is not allowed in true green burials. It is a waste of money and not good for the planet. Nor is cremation, really, but it is so convenient that some 70 percent of funerals are cremations.

3. You do not have to go with an FD but they do save some of the hassle.

4. You can book a slot at the crem and be taken by relatives but you need to be in a container so that you can be shoved into the burner. Cardboard coffins can be cheaper if you get a thin one but a strong cardboard with all its preservatives etc. is no cheaper and not more 'green' than chipboard which is what most coffins are made of. Some FDs can provide a wooden outer coffin which is re-useable and contains a thinner cardboard coffin costing around £50. There is also wicker, Ecopods and so on. References at the end. For burials you do not need a coffin at all but can have a nice 'shroud'.

See the chapter Green goodbyes in Leo Hickman's *A Good Life*.

5. You just need permission of the owner and not be within a certain distance of any water course. I have done a humanist burial in a farmer's field and in a back garden but wonder if it will affect the value in the future because it has to be declared and the grave has to be marked in some way. You can only do one or two or else it becomes a graveyard rather than a back garden!

6. The British Humanist Association does ceremonies – BHA, 1 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HD tel: 020 7079 3582. email: [ceremonies@humanism.org.uk](mailto:ceremonies@humanism.org.uk) Website: [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk).

Green burials – Natural Death Centre [www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk) Tel 0871 288 2098. Inner Coffin – [www.coffincovers.co.uk](http://www.coffincovers.co.uk) Tel 01274 571021 and [\[centre.co.uk\]\(http://centre.co.uk\) Tel 0800 731 4972.](http://www.memorial</a></p>
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Wood from certified sources – [www.fsc-uk.info](http://www.fsc-uk.info) and [www.jcatkinson.co.uk](http://www.jcatkinson.co.uk)  
Tel: 0191 385 2599

Ecopod – [www.eco-funerals.com](http://www.eco-funerals.com)

JOHN BOSLEY  
Huddersfield

OUR council has a good recycling service: about the only thing this bunch of neo-fascists can be proud of.

If I pop my socks first, my wife has been instructed to put my stiff out with the other organic waste on a Friday as usual for composting. Dust unto dust. Ashes are not ecologically sound.

KEN BALDRY  
London

R E Perry raised memories of my father's funeral. At the time I was not a member of any secular organisation but knew my father thought of himself as a humanist. The humanist society were very helpful preparing and conducting the ceremony. However, I was horrified to see Christian symbols in the crematorium that "couldn't be moved". I was also shocked that his ashes were automatically scattered "in the shape of a cross" – without so much as the man asking us. He was also dressed in long black church-type robes which I found confusing and insulting at the same time. It seemed that the crematorium had a "one size fits all" attitude.

Perhaps we could pressure to ensure there are secular facilities and support for all. But how?

DOROTHY LEWIS  
Surrey

## National anthem

I HATE to be pedantic with Barbara Smoker of all people, but the official name of the UK Olympic team is "GBR and NI". I don't know why they don't call it the "UK Olympic Team" and have done with it.

On the subject of Pope John Paul's "miracle", I remember, in the early fifties, asking my "Reverend Brother" school teacher if he knew of any miracles where an amputated arm or leg had regrown. This resulted in a sharp crack on the head from his leather strap and a letter to my mother stating that I was "on the high road to Hell".

AIDAN GRIFFIN  
Woking

IS Terry Liddle (*Points of View*, February) seriously suggesting that a suitable national anthem might be "England Arise!"?

If so, on behalf of all the atheists and for that matter Christians and pagans, Buddhists and Baptists, Muslims, Mormons, Moonies and Muggletonians living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, may I cordially invite





him to get lost.

Alternatively, he should consider "Flower of Scotland" or "Land of our Fathers" as acceptable alternatives.

**JACK HASTIE**  
Scotland

### 'Unbalanced' Freethinker

THE *Freethinker* can be somewhat unbalanced in its treatment of issues in science and religion, and is perhaps inclined to give too much credence to the Richard Dawkins line that science and faith are incompatible, and to his view that no scientist worth his salt should believe in God.

The empirical evidence suggest otherwise. Many eminent scientists are men and women of sincere faith, and many of them have a degree of theological sophistication that puts Dawkins to shame. Let me cite a few examples.

1. Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project, was brought up without any religious beliefs, but as a mature thinker he came to embrace the Christian faith.

2. Alister McGrath, who was a teenage atheist, came to faith while an undergraduate, and went on to gain a PhD in molecular biology before turning to theology, of which he became an Oxford Professor. He has published a judicious critique of "Dawkins' God".

3. Francisco Ayala, the eminent geneticist, is also a Jesuit priest.

4. The late Theodosius Dobzhansky (1900-1975) made a huge contribution to evolutionary theory, and was also a devout Russian Orthodox Christian.

5. George Coyne, director of the Vatican Observatory, is a Jesuit priest and also a scourge of "creationism".

6. The chief witness against the Pennsylvania Dover School Board in the recent "Intelligent Design" case was Dr Ken Miller, an eminent cell biologist and practising Roman Catholic, who has published a book entitled *Finding Darwin's God*.

Certainly, there are many Christian fundamentalists who reject anything in biology, geology or cosmology which they regard as incompatible with their deplorably narrow understanding of the Bible. But it also needs to be stressed that, however much Richard Dawkins and his kind may despise the religious commitment of any scientist who embraces a religious faith (those I have named are just the tip of an iceberg), there is nothing necessarily obscurantist about them, nor, indeed, anything lacking in their scientific integrity.

**DANIEL O'HARA**  
London

### Alternative Christmas Stamps

I WAS surprised to find that the Christmas stamps last year went on sale near the beginning of November and I found it quite difficult to get secular commemoratives as an alternative, so this year I have got a stock for next Christmas of the Children's books of stamps that were on sale in January. More suitable, I think.

**JILL HARVEY**  
Surrey

### Blair's religion

I WONDER if Mr Blair could be prevailed upon to pen a few words on the influence his religious beliefs have had on his work as Prime Minister.

This might be helpful to atheists such as myself who are told, from time to time, that we cannot be expected to behave ethically as we live outside the moral framework of Christianity and do not expect to answer, eventually, to God.

**DENIS WATKINS**  
Pembrokeshire

### Proving a negative

I WAS rather surprised that Donald Room (*Points of View*, January) did not appear to realise that no-one is required to "prove" a negative. It is only someone who makes a positive affirmation who is required to substantiate his statement by a logical demonstration of its indisputable truth.

It was the poet, Shelley, who put it rather neatly and succinctly when he wrote: "God is a hypothesis and, as such, stands in need of proof: the *onus probandi* (burden of proof) rests on the theist."

I rather think the matter ends there.

**Martin O'Brien**  
Gwent

### Oh No! Not pbuh again!

DEAR letters editor (peace be upon you!), How about a National Secular Day (or Week) to highlight and celebrate the views and achievements of such luminaries as Percy Shelley (peace be upon him), Charles Darwin (peace be upon him), G W Foote (peace be upon him) and Richard Dawkins (peace be upon him)?

By the way, does anyone know if that Islamic so-called prophet Mohammed had a surname?

**R M ATKINSON**  
?????

### Cartoon issue

CONGRATULATIONS on the *Freethinker* cartoons special issue. I am pleased to see that at least one UK-based publication has been principled enough to publish a proper discussion of the Danish cartoon controversy, and to republish at least some of the cartoons in question.

The purveyors of religious censorship in the UK need to be opposed before dhimmitude overtakes us all. The UK press have failed in the task of upholding basic freedoms in the UK.

Sadly it has been no different in Wales lately. In February, the Cardiff University Students Union withdrew and pulped 8,000 copies of its paper *Gair Rhydd* after its editorial team had republished some of the cartoons, and now the February edition of the Church in Wales' own magazine, *Y Llan*, has been withdrawn from Welsh Churches, and its subscribers personally asked to return their copies so that they can be destroyed.

It would appear that Western freedom of speech are things which neither the Cardiff University Student's Union nor the Church in Wales now value.

**JONATHAN SIMCOCK**  
Leek

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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](http://www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html). The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, April 4, 7.30pm. Dr Michael Irwin: *What Survives When We Die?*. Tuesday, May 2, 7.30pm. Barry Duke: *The Freethinker's 125th Anniversary*.

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

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, April 11, 7.45pm. AGM and Review of the Year.

**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.

**Derbyshire Secularists:** Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website: [www.secularderby.org](http://www.secularderby.org).

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: [info@devonhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk). Website: [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.devonhumanists.org.uk).

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

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

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

**Essex Humanists:** Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

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

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

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

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: 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, Romford. Thursday, April 6, 8pm. AGM and discussion.

**Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland.** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: [brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com) website: [www.nireland.humanists.net](http://www.nireland.humanists.net)

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley. Tuesday, April 11, 7.30pm. AGM, members only..

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

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Friends Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, April 27, 8pm. Mark Bennett: *Opposition to Identity Cards*.

**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 second 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, May 3, 8pm. Joe Otten: *Faith and Ethics – Friends or Enemies?*

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

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

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

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

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Listings, the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD  
Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication.