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Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

125th Anniversary Blasphemy Special issue

PROSECUTED FOR BLASPHEMY.

THE FREETHINKER.

EDITED BY G. W. FOOTE.

Sentenced to Twelve Months' Imprisonment for Blasphemy.
Interim Editor, EDWARD B. AVELING, D.Sc., Fellow of University College, London.

William James Ramsey, as Proprietor, sentenced to Nine Months' Imprisonment; and Henry Arthur Kemp,
as Printer and Publisher, sentenced to Three Months' Imprisonment.

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January 27, 1884.

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The *Freethinker* front page of January 27, 1884, published while G W Foote was serving his 12-month prison sentence

FREETHINKER editors are a damned strange breed. In order to excel at the job one has to be a mistif – a black sheep of society, as it were. Thick-skinned, tenacious, bloody-minded, argumentative and frequently impolite. In short, prepare to make more enemies than friends.

One has also to set aside the notion that one will grow rich in the role. You won't. Your remuneration will barely keep the bailiffs from the door, but the level of job satisfaction is as high as it is possible to get. Dedication is what drives *Freethinker* editors – it must be, considering the length of time a number of them survived in the post.

George William Foote, the magazine's founder, edited the journal from 1881 until his death in 1915. His successor was Chapman Cohen, a regular contributor to the magazine from 1897. Cohen was editor until 1951 – shortly before his death. At the time of the *Freethinker's* golden jubilee in 1931, Cohen, commenting on its range and influence, wrote: "A friend of mine once called it the mausoleum of buried genius. In a sense it is true, in another sense it is decidedly not true. The paper has never had the circulation it ought to have had ... the circulation it deserved. In that sense the criticism is justified. But it has exerted influence out of all proportion to the circulation it enjoyed."

It is more than likely that my predecessor, Peter Brearey, who took over the *Freethinker* from another dogged and decidedly non-PC editor, one William McIlroy, would still be in the role had we sadly not lost him to cancer in 1998, the year in which I stepped in as caretaker editor.

Peter was another ideal man for the job: I believe it was at the age of eight that he was asked what he would like to do when he grew up. "Be editor of the *Freethinker*!" was his emphatic reply. But this accomplished Northern journalist had to wait until middle-age until the opportunity presented itself.

This talk, however, is not about FT editors. It is about one editor – the man who established the publication, and who stuck so rigidly to his principles that he endured a year's imprisonment for his pains.

From the day he launched the *Freethinker* – 125 years ago this month – George William Foote threw down the gauntlet to a pious Victorian Britain. Through a combination of ridicule and comic representation, he deliberately set out to challenge, offend and disgust the religious establishment.

The challenge was soon taken up, and in 1883, a defiant Foote, then aged 33, found himself in the dock – not once, but three times, on charges of blasphemy. Significantly, it was not so much his trenchant, sarcastic, witty and acerbic writing that brought about his 12-month sentence, it was a series of cartoons, published in the 1882 Christmas edition, that mainly did for him.

The cartoons demonstrated that, with a few strokes of a pen, a good cartoonist can raise more passion than a writer sweating out thousands of words of intellectual analysis. We were reminded again this year how provocative and visceral cartoons can be when the *Jyllands-Posten's* comic representations of the Prophet Mohammed sparked outrage and violence throughout the Muslim world.

**Freethinker editor
Barry Duke's address
to the Brighton &
Hove Humanist
Society, May 2, 2006**



This is not to say that the *Freethinker* cartoons were good. They were, if anything, childish, crude, and – by today's standard – rather lame. But they had the desired effect. They horrified Victorian England – a horror latched upon in Mrs Humphry Ward's sensational 1888 novel *Robert Elsmere*. Mrs Ward's hero, on encountering his first *Freethinker* amongst several street publications, was so shocked he needed the support of a lamp-post!

Nor is it to say that the *Freethinker* was devoid of good, analytical writing. On the contrary. Although Foote was destined to go down in history as a knock-about mocker of Christianity, his writings could be extremely scholarly. He was also an accomplished public speaker.

But his period in Holloway prison embittered him deeply. His writing became more polemic, his attacks on Christianity more vitriolic. In a letter he wrote from Holloway, and published in the *Freethinker* of June 10, 1883, he said: "I certainly lack space to express my bitter hatred of the brutal creed which has plunged me for purification in this mud-bath of rascality."

The case damaged his reputation as a serious writer. He became regarded as a working-class tub-thumper – and many secularists began

A century and a and still defiantly

feeling distinctly uncomfortable with his aggressive anti-clericalism, and the immoderate tone of his prose.

He dismissed their prissiness thus: "We have had to encounter the dislike of mealy-mouthed freethinkers, who want omelettes without breaking of eggs and revolutions without shedding of blood. They object to ridiculing people who say that twice two are five. They even resent a dogmatic statement that twice two are four. Perhaps they think four and a half a very fair compromise. Now this is recreancy to truth, and therefore to progress. No great cause was ever won by the half-hearted. Let us be faithful to our convictions, and shun paltering in a double sense. Truth, as Renan says, can dispense with politeness; and while we shall never stoop to personal slander or innuendo, we shall assail error without tenderness or mercy. And if, as we believe, ridicule is the most potent weapon against superstition, we shall not scruple to use it."

Foote was born in Plymouth in 1850. His father was a customs official who died when Foote was just four. He was brought up an Anglican, but soon passed through various stages of scepticism to become a Unitarian. He had not heard anything serious about secularism and/or atheism at that stage, although he remembers, as a little boy, "having an atheist pointed out to me in the street. Naturally I regarded him as a terrible monster".

At the age of 18 he moved to London and became a librarian in a West End library. This was entirely appropriate given his lifelong love of literature.



a quarter old – tly blaspheming!

He lodged with a school friend's family, who were "tainted with atheism". This atheism quickly rubbed off on him. Foote transformed himself into the "terrible monster" pointed out to him as a child – a full-blown atheist so fired with passion that he founded the Young Men's Secular Association, and took on the mantle of superintendent of the Hall of Science Sunday School. The Hall of Science was the successor to an Owenite and secularist meeting place and lecture hall. In 1890 he became President of the National Secular Society.

Foote's war against religion was given further impetus by the lengthy struggle Charles Bradlaugh had in taking up his seat as MP for Northampton. When Bradlaugh was elected MP for Northampton, he asked whether he could affirm rather than take the oath. As there was some doubt, Bradlaugh was prepared to take the oath. He was then informed that, as an atheist, he could not do so, since the Bible would not be binding upon him. Contrary to myth, he was refused the right to take the oath, rather than refusing it. The struggle for him to take his seat lasted six years – and became a *cause celebre*.

Secularism was now at its peak, and in 1881, when Foote launched the first issue of the *Freethinker*, there was a healthy appetite among militant freethinkers for a hard-hitting publication that, in Foote's own words, "will wage relentless war against superstition in general, and against Christian superstition in particular." The *Freethinker*, at the time of Foote's blasphemy trial, was selling 10,000 copies a week – and not just to "scurrilous apprentices", as one historian once suggested.

On resuming his role of editor, Foote declared in the first issue published after his release: "I promise the readers of the *Freethinker* that they shall, so far as my powers avail, find no diminution in the vigour and vivacity of its attacks on the shams and superstitions of our age. Not only the writer's pen, but the artist's pencil, shall be busy in this good work; and the absurdities of faith shall, if possible, be slain with laughter. Priests and fools are, as Goldsmith said, the two classes who dread ridicule, and we are pledged to an implacable war with both."

Given the fact that it was mainly a series of cartoons that led to the jailing of G W Foote for blasphemy, the *Freethinker* felt it was duty-bound to reprint a number of the *Jyllands-Posten* Mohammed cartoons. It was virtually alone in doing so, as most British publications proved too lily-livered to pick a fight with militant Islamists in the UK.

Although the *Freethinker* devoted most of its

columns to ridiculing the core beliefs of Christianity, the magazine, in the late 1980s – following the Rushdie affair – increasingly focused on what it regarded as a far more virulent threat to secularism in the UK and throughout Europe: militant Islamism.

In identifying this new enemy, the magazine has, on a number of occasions, quite wrongly been accused of racism.

To call the *Freethinker* racist flies in the face of its long tradition of attacking racism at all levels. Unfortunately, the efforts of devious Islamic fundamentalists

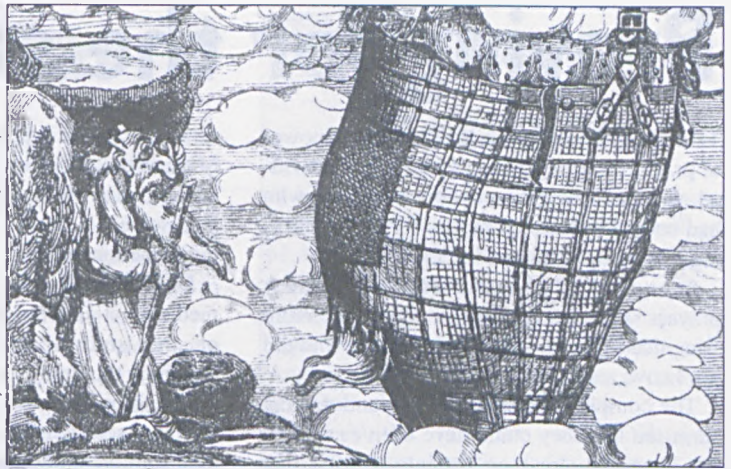
to equate anti-Islamism with racism has been disturbingly successful, and many naive leftists, libertarians and assorted apologists for Islam are now putting all their efforts into inflating this myth, and attacking journals like the *Freethinker*, which make no apology for pointing out the evils inherent in Islam.

The *Freethinker* always has, and always will, oppose racism. It has frequently pointed out that a great deal of racism stemmed from Christianity. For example, in articles about apartheid South Africa, the *Freethinker* demonstrated conclusively how scripture was used by the Dutch Reformed Church to shore up the ghastly doctrine of white supremacy.

As far back as 1925 the *Freethinker* picked up a report from the South African *Rand Mail* in which a member of the Dutch Reformed Church savagely attacked Church of England parsons who had been championing the cause of the black population of that country. The DRC member said that South Africa's two greatest dangers were "communism and the English parsons". He wanted "absolute segregation". Commenting on this not untypical rant, the *Freethinker* sarcastically declared: "Evidently God blundered when he made them [the blacks]".

Later, in 1936, the *Freethinker* was to draw parallels with religion and the rise of Hitlerism. "Germany, under Hitler, has had the doubtful honour of embracing a new religion. Like every new religion it is only a rehash of old ideas in a new form. It is the new religion of the State Supreme, founded to control the destiny of the German people and chosen by God, Nature and Hitler to rule the world."

When a correspondent, in 1936, accused the *Freethinker* of being "heavily biased against fascism", the journal retorted: "Of course we have a bias against fascism, as we have a bias for and against many things ... we will continue to be 'heavily biased' against such a system – if 'system' is not too dignified a name for it".



There is no explanation as to why the Almighty would want to expose his gargantuan arse to Moses, but this is how the *Freethinker*, in its Christmas edition, 1882, illustrated the Exodus xxxiii, 23 passage, which states 'And it shall come to pass that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and I shall take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts.' A selection of 'blasphemous' cartoons from early *Freethinkers* have now been posted on the internet. To view them, go to www.freethinker.co.uk, and follow the link.

The *Freethinker* was also, on occasions, accused of anti-semitism. This accusation stemmed mainly from the views of Chapman Cohen, who was himself from a Jewish background. Cohen had always opposed the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, because he thought it would create a religious state and would perpetuate the Judaic religious identity.

In 1919 he wrote an article entitled *The Myth of the Jew*: "They are no more a nation than are Freemasons or Roman Catholics." As far as Jews had anything in common, in Cohen's view, it was religion, preserved by Christian persecution.

"Does the world need to see another religious state set up? As Christianity weakens, so will Judaism disappear. It has been kept alive by Christianity, and the world will be the better for the disappearance of both."

He repeated this opinion in 1931, emphasizing that a Jewish religious state could itself display intolerance. "One of the avowed, but not, of course, the real reasons, for the settlement of the Jews in Palestine, was to remove them from the persecution of bigoted Christians.

"But it is quite certain that Jews, so long as they remain true to their religion, will be as ready to persecute as ever Christians were. From the *Jewish Chronicle* we learn that there was some rioting in Palestine owing to one lot of Jews trying to prevent another lot playing football on the sabbath. Really religious people never learn toleration from experiencing persecution, they are only more anxious to prove that they can be as intolerant as their persecutors."

So, what future for the *Freethinker*?

I do not know. But my hope is not to go down in history as the journal's last editor. My hope is that when I grow too feeble, too ga-ga – or too dead – to do the job, someone younger, but equally implacable, impolite and impious, will take over my role, and continue the battle until there is no enemy left to fight.



Praying for the sick does no good, an

THE largest study yet on the therapeutic power of prayer by strangers has found that it provided no benefit to the recovery of patients who had undergone cardiac bypass surgery, according to a recent report in the *LA Times*.

In an unexpected twist, patients who knew prayers were being said for them had more complications after surgery than those who did not know, researchers reported.

The complications were minor, and doctors surmised that they could have been caused by the increased stress on patients worried that their conditions were so bad they needed prayers.

Father Dean Marek, a Catholic priest who was involved in the research, said he wasn't surprised by the results.

"I am always a little leery about intercessory prayer," said Marek, director of chaplain

services at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. "What we have in mind for someone else may not be what they have in mind for themselves ... It is clearly manipulative of divine action and personal choice."

Dr Herbert Benson, associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and one of the study's lead researchers, added: "Nothing this study has produced should interfere with people praying for each other."

Some scientists hoped the results of the \$2.5-million study, conducted at six US medical centres, would bring an end to the long controversy over therapeutic prayer.

"There have now been two big studies, with hundreds and hundreds of patients, that show no effect," said Dr Harold G Koenig, professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at Duke University. "Let's move on now and direct our money somewhere else."

Some believers in prayer concurred. Sister Carol Rennie, prioress of St. Paul's Monastery in St. Paul, Minn, whose prayer group participated in the study, said faith couldn't be scientifically analysed. "God must be smiling broadly," she said. "It tells me, frankly, that God's way of working with people is a mystery and that technology really can't determine the effects of prayer."

Scientists have been trying for at least a decade to determine whether organised prayer on the behalf of others can influence the outcome of medical treatment.

Previous attempts, however, were flawed by experimental and methodological errors that led critics to dismiss findings, both pro and con.

The latest study was intended to settle the matter in the most scientific manner possible. It was funded primarily by the John Templeton Foundation, a group based in Pennsylvania that encourages the study of spirituality and science. The full results are published in *American Heart Journal*.

The study was designed as a randomised and blinded trial, meaning that most patients did not know whether someone was praying for them or not. Such trials are considered the gold standard for scientific proof.

More than 1,800 patients were divided into three groups: those who were told someone was praying for them; those who were told only that someone might pray for them and got prayers; and those who were told someone might pray for them but received no prayers. About 65% of the patients said they strongly believed in the power of prayer.

Two Catholic monasteries and one Protestant group offered the prayers. They were given patients' first names and the first initial of their last names. The groups started praying the night before surgery and continued for two weeks.

All members of the prayer groups recited the same intercession, asking for "a successful surgery and a quick, healthy recovery and no complications".

Researchers said they didn't ask family members of the sick people to stop praying because it would have been unethical to do so, meaning some people received more prayers than others.

'No Fire Insurance Company would grant a policy on a House of Prayer unless a lightning conductor were run up to prevent the Deity from making a mistake in a thunderstorm'

- G W Foote

The results showed that prayers had no beneficial effect on patients' recovery 30 days after surgery. Overall, 59 percent of patients who knew they were being prayed for had complications, compared to 51 percent of the patients who did not receive prayers. The difference was not considered statistically significant.

Atrial fibrillation, a fluttering of the heart that can be related to stress, was the most common complication in all groups but was more likely to occur among patients who knew others were praying for them.

All groups were just as likely to develop infections or to die. "We conclude that telling people introduces the stress response," said Dr Charles Bethea of Integris Baptist Medical centre in Oklahoma City and a study researcher.

He surmised that patients thought, "Am I so sick that they had to call in the prayer team?"

Dr Richard P Sloan, a professor of behavioural medicine at Columbia University School of Medicine, who was not involved in the research, said the study underscored the futility of trying to measure the power of prayer.

One problem in the study, he said, was that in addition to the organised prayer, some patients prayed for themselves and received prayers from families, friends, people they work with or their congregations.

"They have absolutely no idea how much prayer individuals in any of the groups received," Sloan said. "If we can't know that, we can't draw any conclusions whatsoever about the intervention."

Bob Barth of Silent Unity, the prayer organisation that was the Protestant group involved in the study, said the results didn't shake his confidence in prayer. "People of faith don't

Opus Dei wants a disclaimer inserted in *The Da Vinci Code*

THE conservative Catholic group Opus Dei has asked for a disclaimer to be included in the upcoming film based on the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

Opus Dei, portrayed as a murderous, power-hungry sect in the novel by Dan Brown, wrote in an April 6 letter to Sony Corporation that a disclaimer would show respect to Jesus and to the Catholic Church.

"Any such decision by Sony would be a gesture of respect toward the figure of Jesus, to the history of the Church and to the religious beliefs of viewers," Opus Dei said in the letter, which was posted on its Italian website.

The Da Vinci Code contends that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had descendants, and that Opus Dei and the Catholic Church were at the centre of a cover-up.

A spokesman for Sony Pictures Entertainment declined to say whether the film would bear a disclaimer.

"We have no plans to reveal any details regarding what is or isn't in the film until the release," the spokesman, Jim Kennedy, said in a statement. Kennedy said the film was "a work of fiction, and at its heart, it's a thriller, not a religious tract."

The film, starring Tom Hanks, is scheduled for release next month.

Opus Dei, which has close ties to the Vatican, has described *The Da Vinci Code* as offering a deformed image of the Catholic Church.

nd may even cause harm

need a prayer study to know that prayer works," he said.

But Koenig said clinical trials would never answer that question. "Science is powerful and wonderful in determining the orbit of the Earth, the speed of a bullet, the power of a new drug. But now we've asked science to study something that occurs outside of space and time.

"This shows you shouldn't try to prove the power of the supernatural," he said.

More than a century ago, *Freethinker* founder, G W Foote, expressed his view of prayer thus: "There was a time when Christians prayed against an eclipse – because they did not understand its causes ... They still pray ... against bad weather. When they do understand its causes, they will cease praying against it, and confine their supplications to what is still contingent. Contingency is nothing but ignorance. Where light obtains, you find we have nothing to do but submit to the necessity of nature."

Catholic priests furious over new Colombian condom law

ROMAN Catholic priests in a Colombian town are furious over a councilman's proposal that people aged 14 and older must carry a condom at all times to reduce unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

William Pena, a councilman in Tulua, recently said he would present a formal proposal requiring all men and women – even those just on a visit to the town – to carry at least one condom. Those caught empty-pocketed could be fined \$180 or ordered to take a safe sex course, he said.

"Sexual relations are going on constantly," Pena told Associated Press in an interview. "If you carry a condom, chances are you'll use it during the day. It's not going to be there forever." Tulua has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in Colombia, he said.

Roman Catholic priests in the Cauca Valley town, 150 miles southwest of Bogota, were fuming over the plan. The Rev Jesus Velasquez

And in the same treatise Foote went on to declare: "Is Prayer answered? I look abroad in the world, and find no practical recognition of the efficacy of Prayer. No Life Assurance Company would calculate a sovereign's life policy on the ground that her subjects asked God to 'grant her in health and wealth long to live.'

"No Fire Insurance Company would grant a policy on a House of Prayer unless a lightning conductor were run up to prevent the Deity from making a mistake in a thunderstorm.

"Underwriters never think of asking whether the captain prays. When the Peculiar People use prayer, without medicine, they are brow-beaten by Christian coroners and jurymen.

"Mr Francis Gaiton, keen scientific writer, points out that in all the medical literature of modern Europe he has been unable to discover 'any instance in which a medical man of any repute attributed recovery to prayer'. By the aid of historical and statistical tables, Mr Galton discovers no trace of Prayer as an efficient cause."

said it would only encourage sexual relations and ridiculed it as absurd. "I would have to have a condom even though I'm a member of the clergy," he was quoted as saying in the newspaper *El Tiempo*.

Another town priest, the Rev Roberto Sarmiento, said improved sex education would be a better solution. "Nobody can force someone to carry a condom in their pocket," he said. "They should instead carry the responsibility of what sexual relations mean."

Ramiro Cano, a 19-year-old labourer in Tulua, said the proposal was the talk of the town and most young people he talked to support it.

"I try to always carry a condom on me, especially if I go to a discotheque, in case I can pick someone up," Cano said.

The proposal is perhaps the most radical in a series of pro-condom efforts across Colombia, where 190,000 people are infected with the HIV virus, a figure only surpassed in Latin America by Brazil, according to the World Health Organisation.

The capital city of Bogota handed out more than two million free condoms last year as part of a campaign titled "Use it instinctively – make yourself sexy."

In the city of Tunja, where 17 percent of all pregnancies last year were to women under 18 years of age, condom dispensers were installed in bars and movie theatres in February.

The crazy world of religion

A HINDU couple whose sacred cows were banished from the western New York village of Angelica in 2003 have renewed their fight to bring them home.

Stephen and Linda Voith are appealing a state Supreme Court decision that sided with Angelica officials, who cited rules governing farm animals within village limits.

The Voiths, members of the Krishna Consciousness branch of Hinduism, insist that their six cows are not farm animals but part of the family and integral to the practice of their religion that protects and celebrates cows.

During the earlier court proceedings, neighbours called by the village as witnesses testified about the smell, manure and flies – complaints the Voiths chalked up to religious intolerance.

WHEN Bob Bernstein arrived at his coffeehouse in Nashville, Tennessee, to assess the scene of an early morning break-in, the one thing he noticed missing was the cinnamon bun that bears a striking likeness to Mother Teresa.

Bernstein said he believes that the culprit is someone angry over the shop displaying the world-famous pastry, which has been preserved with shellac. A jar of money next to the Nun Bun was not stolen.

"They went right for the bun," he said. "Unfortunately I think it's somebody who wanted to take it to destroy it."

The Nun Bun gained worldwide attention in 1996 when a customer nearly took a bite of it before recognising the revered nun in the folds of flaky pastry.

The shop, Bongo Java, sold T-shirts, prayer cards and mugs with the bun's image before Mother Teresa wrote a personal letter to the coffeehouse asking the sales be stopped.



A LEADING Israeli rabbi has ruled that the anti-impotency pill Viagra can be taken by Jews on Passover, reversing a previous ban.

Viagra had been deemed not kosher since 1998 under strict dietary laws over the week-long Jewish spring holiday.

Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu says the pill can be swallowed if it is encased in a special soluble kosher capsule first.

Quotable quote

RELIGION is a disease. It is born of fear: it compensates through hate in the guise of authority, revelation. Religion, enthroned in a powerful social organisation, can become incredibly sadistic. No religion has been more cruel than the Christian.

– US anthropologist Dr George A Dorsey

Respecting religion

HIS Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, bless his red Prada shoes*, said on February 20, 2006 that mutual respect for all the world's religions and their symbols was "urgent and necessary" for peace and understanding, in the wake of Muslim outrage over caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed (www.News24.com). Like so many religious pronouncements, it is not easy to see just what this means. The Holy Father must surely be aware that the one sin which Allah will never forgive is *association*, the idea that there is any other deity, or that Allah is not single, complete and unique.

But this is exactly what the Pope believes most profoundly and teaches to his millions of followers: God is triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was a man, who was (and is) also divine. The Pope and his followers will accordingly spend eternity in hell. The Holy Koran makes this clear. And this is the actual word of God, final and for ever. How can the Pope respect a religion which condemns himself and so many more to hell, and regards his beliefs as the ultimate blasphemy? How can he ask for respect from Muslims? How could he even envisage agreeing to differ, which might be all he meant?

There are calls for respect for religion on all sides. I have thought of declaring myself an Aztec, and demanding respect for my regular human sacrifices, without which the world will come to an end. There seem to be two unstated assumptions. One is that respect is due because religion has some divine authority. But if so, there are either several quarrelling gods, or one god who gives contradictory messages. The other assumption is that any deeply and sincerely held belief must be respected. I have no doubt that Hitler sincerely believed the Jews ought to be eliminated, and there are innumerable other examples. Strength of feeling cannot be a justification on its own. It may, however, be a reason why one should not gratuitously offend people with such feelings.

Confusion arises partly because the word "respect" is used with different shades of meaning, which tend to slide into each other. Most simply, there is respect meaning "admire", and respect meaning "accept", or "tolerate". There is also, of course, "respect" which really means fear. Fear of violence, of trouble, of losing votes. There are people I respect, that is admire, for their learning, wisdom, generosity, courage and so on. I don't admire my neighbour's wish to have a noisy party, but I accept it, or respect it, now and again, within limits. Respect is often tied up with rights, which in turn are often confused between what ought to be allowed, and what is somehow inherent in people. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) refers to "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family". Article 18 states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom ... to manifest his religion or belief in

teaching, practice, worship and observance". So my Aztec sacrifices are all right, and so presumably are other sacrifices, cutting the hands off thieves, killing apostates, persecuting heretics and so on. At the very least, most religious groups indoctrinate their children with their beliefs. Of course they believe they are acting for the child's good. But since religions differ radically on what is true, at least some religiously reared children (if not all) must be being taught falsehoods and sin. How can that be an inalienable right? (The European Convention on Human Rights, 1950, leaves out "inalienable".)

JOHN RADFORD, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London, asks how far we should respect religion

How far should we respect religion, in either sense? For my part, there are some things that some religions, or rather religious people, say and do that I can admire. Many individuals are kindly, compassionate, generous and so on. I think the root of their being so is their common humanity, though religious teaching (by other kindly people) may well have contributed. But equally, of course, there are those who are authoritarian, prejudiced, violent or full of hatred. These I neither admire nor wish to accept. The problem here is that religion itself cannot distinguish the two. What we commonly hear from the advocates of respect is, that the nasty aspects are not the "true" religion. But there is no way of determining what that is. It usually turns out to be just the bits that the speaker likes. The fact is that all religions I know anything about contain both nice and nasty, though not necessarily in the same proportions. Thus, we cannot give a *carte blanche* of respect to any religion, in the sense of either admiration or acceptance. And in practice we do not. No country, however liberal, actually permits everything that all religions demand.

David Pannick QC (in *The Times*, February 14, 2006), discussing the case of Shabina Begum, who wished to wear a jilbab instead of school uniform, argued for a general right to believe, but (1) with no legal protection against criticism or ridicule, and (2) no right to conduct harmful to others. He admits this leaves many issues unresolved, particularly over what is harmful. Where the lines are drawn is largely arbitrary (Shabina's case went against her, but only because the school already permitted an

agreed form of Muslim dress.) With limitations, I can respect the rights of religious groups even when I do not admire or approve them. But it is the people, not the religion, that I respect. In no way do I respect Hitler's vile policies. But I would defend his, and anyone's, right to a fair trial (Article 10 of the UDHR, and 6 of the ECHR). There are disabled people I greatly admire for their personal qualities. And I fully acknowledge the rights of all such people to (for example) employment, or access to buildings and transport. But I don't in any sense respect disability as such.

There is a further difficulty. Religions are, to a greater or less extent, ultimately based on faith. Adherents hold their beliefs to be true, in the end regardless of argument or evidence. I certainly do not admire this, and I regard it as in a way analogous to a disability. It seems to me a failure of the human attribute of reason. Faith, or belief, can be a powerful motivation. It can also be a great comfort. Millions are sustained by the thought that they will meet their lost loved ones in a happy land far far away. I don't think they have or should have an inalienable right, still less a legal one, not to be mocked. But I think I have a moral, or civic, obligation not to do so, when it can do no good and is merely hurtful.

Each case (like the Mohammed cartoons) must, I think, be decided on its merits. Nevertheless faith is, in my opinion, in general a dangerous thing. It implies that one view is absolutely right, and worse, cannot be questioned. In trying to think out these problems, I always come down in the end to the bedrock, that reason and empirical enquiry are a better way, and are continually shown to be so by practical experience. Many turn to priests when faced with death or disaster, or to faith healers when medicine fails. I have yet to see anyone rely on a faith plumber when the pipes burst, or a faith accountant or civil engineer.

I don't respect religion. I respect people, some of whom happen to be religious. I respect all people as having basic human rights, essentially as in the European Convention. But with some people, I would go no further.

* Editor's note: The Pope, according to a recent AP report, is a bit of a *fashionista*. While his predecessor shunned fancy accessories, Benedict enjoys donning Prada and Gucci, as well as camp ecclesiastical costumes. He has been spotted wearing Gucci sunglasses and bright red Prada loafers. Will he go down in history as the Vatican's answer to Liberace?



The late Liberace, left, and Pope Benedict

US doctors receive death threats from Muslims for performing hymen repairs

MANY women who seek hymen-repair surgery do so under threat of death if family members in fundamentalist Muslim households find out they are not virgins. Now, US doctors who help them are also receiving death threats, reports Los Angeles-based Sandy Kobrin, who frequently writes about the plastic surgery industry.

The patients are most often women of Middle Eastern descent, some with origins from countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. They frequently give false names and pay in cash. They arrive alone, faces hidden, under elaborate hats, wigs, scarves and sunglasses and are clearly afraid, say doctors.

They are there for hymenoplasties, or the repair of hymens, which, when intact, are widely recognised as evidence of virginity. The surgeries could save their lives, noted the physicians who perform them, because, according to some interpretations of Islamic law, if a male relative suspects them of having premarital sex, the woman is a criminal. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, the penalty could be death.

Although for the most part, many of the women who seek these surgeries live in the US with family members, large numbers return to their home countries when it is time to look for a husband.

Doctors say that while there are no official statistics, they have seen an increase in requests for more hymen repair surgery in recent years. In addition, more doctors are

receiving threats.

Dr V Leroy Young, of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, told *Women's eNews*: "Yes, there has been a degree of danger to doctors from fundamentalist groups who believe you are violating a law or culture." He said a number of American physicians who perform these surgeries have received death threats from some who identify themselves as Muslims.

Many doctors interviewed who have heard about the threats or have been threatened themselves would only talk off the record to *Women's eNews* for fear of reprisal. They did not want to advertise the fact that they perform the surgeries, and said they like to keep a low profile on their work with hymen repair.

Dr David Matlock, a Beverly Hills gynaecologist, was an exception. Matlock, who pioneered laser vaginal rejuvenation, said he has been performing hymenoplasties on hundreds of women for over 21 years. Most, he said, were of Middle Eastern descent.

He said he recently received death threats in the mail, and his office has received numerous calls from men, identifying themselves as Muslims, who threatened to kill him and his office workers if he did not stop performing hymen repairs.

"They called my office numerous times and sent letters to my office with pictures of dead and bloodied people," he said. "It was unnerving to say the least. I can now better understand when these women come in and say to me: 'I must do this. I'm going back to Iran and

I could be killed.'"

It's not just women with Middle Eastern backgrounds seeking the surgeries. There has also been an increase in the number of women requesting hymen repair from both the Orthodox Jewish and Christian fundamentalist communities, as well as from women of all nationalities who want the surgery as a sexual enhancement.

"Within the fundamentalist Christian population as well there has been an apparent recent movement towards 'traditional family values' and there is pressure put on women to be virgins," Dr Young said.

The hymen is the thin, fleshy membrane found at the opening to the vagina, long treated as a sign of virginity because it is usually torn by the first experience of sexual intercourse. Hymens can also be torn by athletic activities.

Typical hymen repair surgery involves stitching the remnants of a torn hymen together and inserting a gelatin capsule that contains a blood-mimicking substance. After the hymen has been surgically repaired, a woman will bleed the fake blood the next time she has sexual intercourse. The surgery, which costs from \$2,500 to \$4,500, is performed on an outpatient basis. Healing can take from a few days to a few weeks.

The threats to the doctors shadow the greater danger faced by women who undergo the surgery. Many live in fear of violence or honour killing, a practice in which a woman is murdered by her family members for supposedly shaming or tarnishing the family name with "unchaste" behaviour. The practice occurs in traditional communities around the world, including the United States and Europe.

Atheists identified as America's most distrusted minority

AMERICANS' increasing acceptance of religious diversity doesn't extend to those who don't believe in a god, according to a national survey by researchers in the University of Minnesota's department of sociology.

From a telephone sampling of more than 2,000 households, university researchers found that Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in "sharing their vision of American society". Atheists are also the minority group most Americans are least willing to allow their children to marry.

Even though atheists are few in number, not formally organised and relatively hard to publicly identify, they are seen as a threat to the American way of life by a large proportion of the American public.

"Atheists, who account for about three percent of the US population, offer a glaring exception to the rule of increasing social tolerance over the last 30 years," says Penny Edgell, associate sociology professor and the study's lead researcher.

Edgell also argues that today's atheists play the role that Catholics, Jews and communists have played in the past – they offer a symbolic moral boundary to membership in American society. "It seems most Americans believe that diversity is fine, as long as everyone shares a common 'core' of values that make them trustworthy – and in America, that 'core' has historically been religious," says Edgell. Many of the study's respondents associated atheism with an array of moral indiscretions ranging from criminal behaviour to rampant materialism and cultural elitism.

Edgell believes a fear of moral decline and

resulting social disorder is behind the findings. "Americans believe they share more than rules and procedures with their fellow citizens – they share an understanding of right and wrong," she said. "Our findings seem to rest on a view of atheists as self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good."

The researchers also found acceptance or rejection of atheists is related not only to personal religiosity, but also to one's exposure to diversity, education and political orientation – with more educated, East and West Coast Americans more accepting of atheists than their Midwestern counterparts.

The study is co-authored by assistant professor Joseph Gerteis and associate professor Doug Hartmann. It is the first in a series of national studies conducted by the American Mosaic Project, a three-year project funded by the Minneapolis-based David Edelstein Family Foundation that looks at race, religion and cultural diversity in the contemporary United States. The study's findings appeared in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

Quotable quote

This whole Christian theology thing is that God came down to experience life through his son. Well, how's he experiencing life if he doesn't get laid? Give me a break. And why would he not get laid, as he created the apparatus in the first place?

– Tori Amos, singer and songwriter

Blasphemy – a 'crime' long over

In 2002, 25 years after the infamous *Gay News* blasphemy trial, a deliberate and well-publicised public reading of the poem that sparked Mary Whitehouse's private prosecution of the publication took place on the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields church in Trafalgar Square. *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name* by James Kirkup suggested Jesus was gay. Outraged Christians, including the fanatical head of Christian Voice, Stephen Green, tried to drown out the 2002 reading. It failed to lead to any prosecutions.

Had the readers of the poem been prosecuted, the trial would have involved all those who read and published the poem, including several of Britain's leading writers, academics and MPs.

After the event, civil rights activist Peter Tatchell declared: "We have won an important victory for free speech and the right to protest. No one was arrested. The police didn't even take our names and addresses. The blasphemy law is now a dead letter. If the authorities are not prepared to enforce the law, they should abolish it.

"The blasphemy law gives the Christian religion privileged protection against criticism and dissent. No other institution enjoys such sweeping powers to suppress the expression of opinions and ideas", said Tatchell.

The last person in Britain to be sent to prison for blasphemy was John William Gott in 1921. He had three previous convictions for blasphemy when he was prosecuted for publishing two pamphlets entitled *Rib Ticklers*, or *Questions for Parsons and God and Gott*. In these pamphlets Gott satirised the biblical story of Jesus entering Jerusalem (Matthew 21:2-7), comparing Jesus to a circus clown. He was sentenced to nine months' hard labour despite suffering from an incurable illness, and died shortly after he was released. The case became the subject of public outrage.

In February 1925, the Glasgow-based radical Guy Aldred was arrested in Hyde Park and charged with blasphemy and sedition.

In a 1949 speech Lord Denning placed the blasphemy laws in the past, saying that "... it was thought that a denial of Christianity was liable to shake the fabric of society, which was itself founded upon Christian religion. There is no such danger to society now and the offence of blasphemy is a dead letter." Despite Denning and Tatchell's insistence that the English common law of blasphemy is now a "dead letter", it remains stubbornly in force despite the Law Commission's majority recommendation in 1985 to abolish it without replacement, and despite attempts to abolish it over the years by parliamentarians including Lord Willis (1978), Tony Benn (1989), Bob Cryer (1990) and Frank Dobson (2001).

It may be languishing on the back-burner, but some are hopeful of bringing it back to the boil – most notably Stephen Green. Go to Christian Voice's website, and you will find

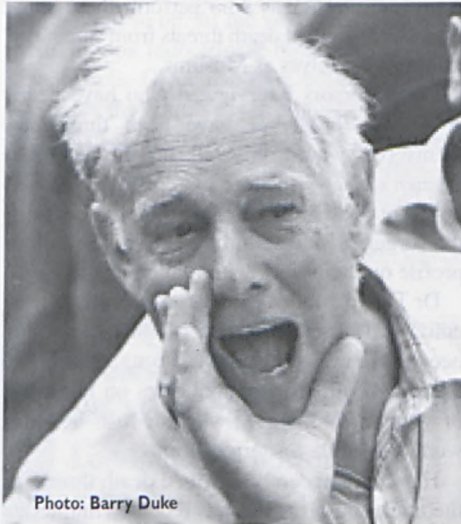


Photo: Barry Duke

One of a number of bellowing buffoons who tried to drown out the reading of *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name*

this declaration. "I and Christian Voice intend to bring charges of blasphemy against those most responsible [for the BBC screening of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*], from the Chairman of Governors of the BBC down to those involved with producing and staging it at the Cambridge Theatre where it was recorded.

"The last time the blasphemy law was used in England and Wales was in 1977, when *Gay News* and its owners were convicted in the case of a poem centring on homosexual fantasies about Jesus on the cross. Lord Scarman, speaking in the House of Lords judgment in the *Gay News* case, endorsed the definition of blasphemy found in *Stephen's Digest of the Criminal Law*, which defines blasphemy as 'any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus Christ or the Bible, or the formularies of the Church of England as by law established'."

A prosecution of the BBC will probably never get beyond Green's fertile world of fantasy, and should be of little concern to defenders of free speech in the UK.

Much more worrying, though, is self-censorship, which much of the media has imposed on itself, mainly in the UK and the US, as a result of pressure from militant Islamists, following the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy, when the Muslim world began demanding that old blasphemy laws throughout Europe should be dusted off and brought into action against

those defaming the prophet Mohammed. And, if no such law existed, it should be immediately enacted.

In Bangladesh, Minister for Industry Matiur Rahman Nizami was quoted in the press as telling the European Union that if Christianity and Jesus Christ were protected by blasphemy laws, then there was no justification for those laws not being used to protect the rights of Muslims.

BARRY DUKE, one of those who defied the law by publicly reading a verse of *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name*, reflects on the 'crime' of blasphemy

And in Lebanon Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the head of the radical Hizbullah movement, on February 3 called on European parliaments to pass laws "prohibiting the media from attacking God and the prophets".

At this point, let us examine laws on blasphemy and incitation to religious hatred in other countries.

Denmark, where the Mohammed drawings were first published, has a law providing for fines and up to four months in jail for anyone who "publicly offends or insults a religion that is recognised in the country".

However, a court case brought against the paper that printed the Danish cartoons by 11 Muslim groups last October was thrown out, with the judges considering that the issue of freedom of expression was more important than the ban on blasphemy.

Norway has a public order law dating from the 1930s that in principle outlaws blasphemy on pain of up to six months in jail. But it is never used.

Germany has an anti-blasphemy law dating from 1871, but it has been little used in recent decades. It was, however, successfully used in 1994 to ban a musical comedy that ridiculed the Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception by portraying crucified pigs.

France outlawed blasphemy at the time of its revolution in the late eighteenth century; the law has never been reinstated.

Neither Spain nor Portugal have anti-blasphemy laws, although both have little-used legislation on religious hatred.

Italy has a law against "outrage to a reli-

a preposterous ardue for abolition



Peter Tatchell on the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields during the public reading of Kirkup's 'blasphemous' poem

gion", which has recently been used against the atheist journalist Oriana Fallaci over her outspoken statements and writings on Islam. In May, 2005, Adel Smith, president of the Union of Italian Muslims, brought a lawsuit against Fallaci charging that "some of the things she said in her book *The Force of Reason* are offensive to Islam." Smith's attorney, Matteo Nicoli, cited a phrase from the book that refers to Islam as "a pool that never purifies". Consequently an Italian judge ordered her to stand trial in June 2006 in Bergamo on charges of "defaming Islam".

The Netherlands has a law proscribing what is called "scornful blasphemy", and providing for up to three months in jail and a fine of around £50. The last major case brought under the law – in 1968 against a writer who wrote a poem about having sex with God – was thrown out of court.

Austrian law prohibits the ridiculing of a religion, on pain of up to six months in jail. But no attempt was made to use it last year when a book of cartoons, *The Life of Jesus*, by Gerhard Haderer, was published. It depicted Jesus as a marijuana-smoking hippie.

Ironically, the Austrian Haderer was put on trial in Greece, and convicted of blasphemy for *The Life of Jesus*. But in April last year, the Athens Court of Appeal quashed the conviction. It also ordered the return of the confiscated books to Oxy Publishing SA, the Greek

publisher of *The Life of Jesus*.

Haderer was tried alongside his Greek publisher, and four booksellers. The Greek courts had initially considered the depiction of Jesus as a hippie as defamation and ridicule.

The book has been published in a number of other countries without controversy or judicial action.

Poland, an overwhelmingly Catholic country, has a legal provision against publicly offending a person's religious feelings, with up to two years in prison. In 2003 artist Dorota Nieznalska was convicted for insulting religious feelings and was sentenced to six months' limited freedom on the condition that she carried out unpaid, supervised community work 20 hours per month. She was also ordered to pay court costs.

The piece that landed her in the dock was an installation titled *Passion*, which was exhibited in the Wyspa gallery in Gdansk from January 14, 2001 to January 20, 2002. The installation comprised a metal cross bearing photographs of male genitalia.

In the United States, the First Amendment guarantees a relatively unlimited right of free speech, although some US states still have blasphemy laws on the books. Chapter 272 (Section 36) of the Massachusetts General Laws states, for example: "Whoever wilfully blasphemes the holy name of God by denying, cursing or contumeliously reproaching God, his creation, government or final judging of the world, or by cursing or contumeliously reproaching Jesus Christ or the Holy Ghost, or by cursing or contumeliously reproaching or exposing to contempt and ridicule, the holy word of God contained in the holy scriptures shall be punished by imprisonment in jail for not more than one year or by a fine of not more than three hundred dollars, and may also be bound to good behaviour."

However, the US Supreme Court in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc v Wilson* (1952) held that the New York State blasphemy law was an uncon-

stitutional prior restraint on freedom of speech. The court stated that "It is not the business of government in our nation to suppress real or imagined attacks upon a particular religious doctrine, whether they appear in publications, speeches or motion pictures".

Among Muslim-majority countries, Pakistan has the harshest anti-blasphemy law. In 1982, President Zia ul-Haq introduced Section 295B to the Pakistan Penal Code punishing "defiling the Holy Koran" with life imprisonment. In 1986, Section 295C was introduced, mandating the death penalty for "use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet".

In 1990 the Federal Sharia Court ruled that the penalty should be a mandatory death sentence, with no right to reprieve or pardon. This is binding, but the government is yet to formally amend the law, which means that the provision for life sentence still formally exists, and is used by the government as a concession to critics of the death penalty. In 2004, the Pakistani parliament approved a law to reduce the scope of the blasphemy laws. The amendment to the law means that police officials will have to investigate accusations of blasphemy to ensure that they are well founded, before presenting criminal charges.

However, the law is used against political adversaries or personal enemies, by Muslim fundamentalists against Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, or for personal revenge. Ahmadi Muslims especially are victim of the blasphemy law. They claim to be Muslims, but under the blasphemy law they are not allowed to use Islamic vocabulary or rituals.

The Pakistani Catholic bishops' Justice and Peace Commission complained in July 2005 that since 1988, some 650 people had been falsely accused and arrested under the blasphemy law. Moreover, over the same period, some 20 people accused of the same offence had been killed. As of July 2005, 80 Christians were in prison accused of blasphemy.

(Continued on page 10)



Since the publication of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, a number of editors around the world have found themselves in the firing line for reproducing them, and in one instance there has been a call for an editor to be executed for the "crime"

According to a CNS news report of March 09, 2006, "authorities in a number of Muslim countries have acted against newspapers for publishing the controversial Mohammed cartoons, but in Yemen a journalist may soon be fighting for his life after prosecutors demanded his execution."

Yemen *Observer* Editor-in-Chief Muhammad al-Asadi was arrested after his English-language weekly paper published the cartoons early in February to illustrate how news reporting about their publication in European papers had sparked a global uproar.

The cartoons were presented in "thumbnail" size, and "obscured with a thick black cross."

Nonetheless, al-Asadi was accused of violating a law prohibiting the publication of anything that harms Islam, and the government suspended the *Observer's* licence. Two independent Arabic-language papers are also facing legal action separately for reproducing the cartoons.

Al-Asadi appeared in court, where prosecutors called for the death penalty and for the paper to be shut down completely and its assets confiscated.

A report on the Yemen *Observer's* website – which continues to publish although the paper edition has been frozen – said prosecution lawyers had recounted a story from the life of Mohammed in which the prophet had praised the killer of a woman who had insulted him.

The lawyers argued that the same punishment should be applied in the case of those who "abuse" the prophet.

They also demanded personal financial compensation for the psychological trauma they claimed they suffered by the actions of the newspaper. The cartoons, they claimed, had impaired their ability to do their jobs and follow their normal daily lives.

The *Observer* said the prosecution lawyers,



Yemen *Observer* Editor-in-Chief Muhammad al-Asadi (left) and South African editor Ferial Haffajee. Prosecutors want the death sentence for al-Asadi, and Haffajee has received death threats.

of which there were more than a dozen, were being funded by Sheikh Abdel Majid Zindani, a religious leader and senior Islamist opposition party member.

Lawyers prosecuting al-Asadi demanded personal financial compensation for the psychological trauma they claimed they suffered by the actions of the newspaper. The cartoons, they claimed, had impaired their ability to do their jobs and follow their normal daily lives.

Zindani's name appears on a US list of suspected financiers of terrorism, and Yemeni media reported two weeks ago that Washington was urging the government to freeze his assets and prevent him from travelling abroad, in line with UN resolutions.

A US Treasury statement issued in 2004 called Zindani a loyalist of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and said the US government had credible evidence that he "supports designated terrorists and terrorist organisations".

According to the State Department's annual report on global human rights, released earlier this year, Yemen's government does not respect freedom of the press despite a constitutional provision providing for it "within the

limits of the law".

The media freedom lobby group Reporters Without Borders has recorded arrests of journalists in Yemen, Syria, Algeria and India for reprinting the cartoons caricaturing Mohammed, and the temporary or permanent closure of at least 14 publications in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Malaysia and Indonesia for the same reason.

"Whatever one thinks of the cartoons or whether they should be published, it is absolutely unjustified to jail or prosecute journalists, threaten them with death or shut down newspapers for this reason," the group said.

Since the drawings appeared in Denmark's *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper last September, they have been republished in more than 60 newspapers.

Earlier this year, the managing editor of *France Soir*, Jacques Lefranc, was fired by the newspaper's Franco-Egyptian owner after the French paper published all of the original cartoons.

The editor of *Magazinet*, a small Norwegian Christian newspaper that published the cartoons on 10 January, received death threats and has been under police protection, and in South Africa, the editor of the *Mail and Guardian*, Ferial Haffajee, said she received abusive letters and text messages after reprinting one of the drawings.

Some newspapers have reaped benefits from the row. The satirical French weekly, *Charlie Hebdo*, republished the cartoons, along with cartoons caricaturing Christianity and Judaism, leading some staff to be placed under police protection.

However, journalists at the paper told the Reuters news agency that the weekly had boosted its usual print run of 100,000 up to 320,000. *France Soir* increased its sales by 40 percent when it published the cartoons, and circulation director Philippe Soing said that the paper's image could benefit. "It shows we're capable of running scoops – and leading a battle for freedom of the press," he told the Associated Press news agency.

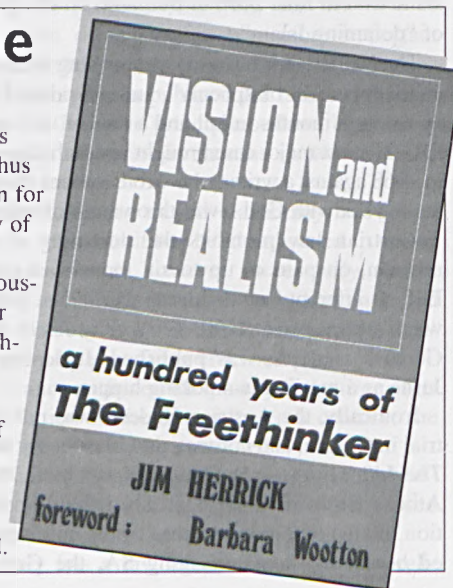
History of the *Freethinker* still available

THE centenary of the *Freethinker* was marked with the publication in 1982 of *Vision and Realism*, by former *Freethinker* editor Jim Herrick. In a foreword to this 124 page, paperback publication, Baroness Barbara Wootton, who died in 1988, alludes to the early *Freethinker's* "highly coloured" language. "Thus the Bible was described by one freethinker as 'that revoltingly odious Jew production' which 'has been for ages the idol of all sorts of blockheads, the glory of knaves, and the disgust of wise men. It is a history of lust, sodomies, wholesale slaughtering, and horrible depravity.'"

She points out that the *Freethinker* "has consistently defended free speech in all fields" And it rigorously campaigned against religious education in schools. "Secularists were (and are) divided as to whether religious teaching should be kept out of state schools altogether, or whether there should be broad teaching about comparative religion and morality. However, all were (and are) agreed that the Christian religion should not be 'forced down children's throats' as an unassailable truth."

"Jim Herrick," says Wootton, "has produced a lively and highly readable story, centred on the life of one unorthodox journal. But, incidentally, in his presentation of the setting of that story, he has written an exceptionally fascinating chapter of British social history."

Copies of *Vision and Realism* are available directly from the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD. The price of £7.50 (inclusive of p&p) includes a £3.00 contribution to the *Freethinker* fund.



Is God Addiction a form of Stockholm Syndrome?

IN Stockholm in 1973, bank robbers held employees of the Norrmalmstorg Kreditbanken hostage from August 23 to August 28. The hostages became emotionally attached to their terrorisers, and even defended them after they were freed from their captivity. One of the hostages became so attached to a robber holding her hostage, that she broke her engagement to her former lover and remained bonded to her former captor even after he was imprisoned. And a year later, when Patty Hearst pleaded "Stockholm syndrome" as a defence for joining her kidnapers in a bank robbery, she was initially convicted, but later freed by Jimmy Carter and pardoned by Bill Clinton, indicating that American presidents acknowledged the reality of Stockholm syndrome even if juries would not.

On December 26, 2004, a tsunami swept through the Indian Ocean, killing 220,000 randomly assorted victims who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Letters to newspapers asking, "Where was that fellow God while this was happening?" produced responses that can only be described as manifestations of the Stockholm syndrome. Persons who believe that they are the domesticated livestock of an omnipotent petmaster in the sky, without whose approval natural disasters could not happen, defended their deity's atrocity by arguing that all humans are dirty little sinners and therefore the victims had come.

A year after the tsunami, memorial services were held all over the world by people who remained convinced that their deity had inflicted the tsunami, but rationalised that it must have had a good reason. "When God does it, it's not evil." They sang and chanted praises to the tsunami's alleged perpetrator, with no conscious awareness that they were expressing solidarity with a mass murderer. It did not cross their minds that tsunami survivors praising "God" was no different from Auschwitz survivors praising Hitler.

But long before 2004, god addicts had been demonstrating their ability to rationalise away, not only natural disasters, but even atrocities by their god spelled out in detail in his official biography. When King David's *aide-de-camp*, Khuzah, saw the chest of Yahweh's treaty tipping over, and reached out to steady it, Yahweh zapped him with a thunderbolt for daring to assume that Yahweh needed his assistance (2 Sam. 6:6-7). Given such evidence of Yahweh's homicidal tendencies, it is hardly surprising that addicts are terrified into "loving" the inflictor of capricious atrocities that might at any moment be unleashed against themselves.

What makes the Khuzah precedent exemplary, even though most god addicts are unfamiliar with the incident, is that it is typical of other biblical horror stories with which they

are familiar. Virtually all believers are aware of the tale of Noah's ark. Yahweh allegedly exterminated the entire human race with the exception of eight members of one family. How many of Yahweh's devotees ever ask themselves if there could really have been a time when the entire human race, with eight exceptions, were evildoers who deserved to be executed?

WILLIAM HARWOOD poses the question

Similarly, Yahweh allegedly exterminated the entire population of Sodom and Khomarah, except for his pet, Levit, and Levit's daughters (Gen. 19:24-25). To the theologian who composed the fable, the crime of the Sodomites was their blatant violation of the universally accepted hospitality code, demanding that Levit surrender houseguests under his protection to be abused by a mob. But modern believers do not know that. They imagine that the Sodomites' crime was homosexuality. In fact the homosexual element of the fable was irrelevant, since no homosexual taboo existed anywhere on earth until centuries after the Sodom myth was composed. But to believers who think that the wrong orientation was the alleged capital crime, the fact that homosexual recreation is victimless means that believers must rationalise that it is taboo simply because Yahweh says so. In other words, Yahweh's tantrum is likely to be unleashed against anyone who questions the assumption that right and wrong are whatever the tribal

god says they are. Heads it's a sin and tails it's a virtue. How could an addict dare *not* love a slavemaster capable of murdering anyone guilty of the thought-crime of not loving him and granting unquestioning obedience to his capricious taboos?

Then there is Job. Yahweh inflicted unspeakable atrocities against his most brainwashed mind-slave, for the sole purpose of testing whether Job would remain a devoted butt-kisser no matter what Yahweh did to him. Job was obedient to the end, and Yahweh rewarded him – thereby implying that anyone else who shuts his mind to such crimes against humanity as the Asian tsunami, the New Orleans hurricane, the Pakistani earthquake and the Philippines mudslide will in time be similarly rewarded.

But can hope of eventual compensation, if not on earth then in the sky, explain why god addicts profess undeserved love for a homicidal psychopath? Is it not more reasonable to assume that the motivating factor is fear? Just as the Stockholm hostages feared what their captors might do to them, and neutralised that fear by bonding with the criminals terrorising them, so do persons who fear that their imaginary playmate could at any time turn on them, neutralise that fear by bonding with the terrorist in the sky. The Stockholm syndrome is not limited to hostages of human terrorists. It also brainwashes victims of religion's *Sky Führer*, and that is the true explanation for their inability to put their brains in gear and recognise that their god is the most sadistic, evil, insane serial killer in all fiction.

Scientist receives hate mail for suggesting Jesus may have walked on ice, not water

THE Bible claims that Jesus walked on water, but a professor of oceanography at Florida State University in Tallahassee has developed a controversial theory: that Christ was actually walking on a floating piece of ice. Since publishing his theory, Doron Nof has been receiving sackfuls of hate mail from Christians angry at the suggestion that no miracle was involved.

Reuters reported last month that Professor Nof attributes the water-walking stunt to an unusual combination of water and atmospheric conditions in what is now northern Israel that could have led to ice formation on the Sea of Galilee. Using statistical models to examine the dynamics of the Sea of Galilee (now known as Lake Kinneret) and records of surface temperatures of the Mediterranean Sea, Nof determined there was a period of cooler temperatures in the area between 1,500 and 2,600 years ago. He says this could have included the time in which Jesus lived.

Had the temperature dropped below freezing, it could have created ice to form in the freshwater lake that was then called the Sea of Galilee. And that ice would have been thick enough to support the weight of a man. What's more, it might have been impossible for distant observers – especially in the dark as the Gospel of John reports – to see that it was actually ice surrounded by water and not just water.



“Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse – constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility and candour”

– *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, p65

Christianity has been subjected to several hundred years of scepticism following the Renaissance, and the Bible has received at least 150 years of searching textual and historical analysis. In addition, in the West there has been a major scientific advance in knowledge. As a result principally of these factors, the idea of putting one’s faith in revelation, and Christianity in particular, has lost its grip on the minds of many if not most thinking people in Europe where the number of committed Christians has diminished, especially since 1850. (This change has not however impacted in the USA to the same degree.)

The same history of scepticism and degree of critical examination has not yet apparently been given to the Koran. Historically the Koran is in a different phase of its history: it is undergoing something of a revival, perhaps prompted by a loosening of the pressure it has felt it was under during colonial times. This revival seems hard to comprehend to those of us who have inherited the liberal and rational humanism of the West. I therefore turned to the Koran to see what it offers.

I took the translation which I believe is the nearest to being an authorised translation. It was translated by Dr Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Dr Muhammad Muhsin Khan, both academics, and the text is described as being disseminated by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd ibn Abd al Aziz Al Sud. It appears to be a careful and unexpurgated translation which, at some points, gives a range of possible meanings for the Arabic words. It also contains a commentary.

I refer to “unexpurgated” because there are many selections from the Koran which pick out the more acceptable texts. I think this is a good practice, because my reading of the unexpurgated version is likely to be an embarrassment to any open-minded and educated Muslim! I have not considered the Hadith in this account.

The first point I considered in relation to my 21st-century sceptical reading of the Koran is whether such a critical approach was fair at all, given that the Koran is so plainly deeply rooted in its historical context.

Clearly the examination of any text from the past has to take into account the historical and cultural context in which the document was created so that the assumptions and references apparent in the text can be properly understood. For instance, it is obvious that the Koran emerged from a primitive tribal society located on the edge of two competing civilisations (Byzantine and Persian). The Surahs reflect a world of struggle and contain constant exhortation to the faith, and were presumably given

to the faithful rather like sermons.

The Koran, however, makes claims (eg in 39.33) that it is made up of the words of Allah himself who is the all-knowing, all-wise and omnipotent God, and the creator of humankind and of the earth (39.46, 39.62, 40.67, & 57.4 etc). It claims to be absolutely true, and damnation is handed out for any who disbelieve (eg 2.39). It is not therefore an ordinary text. Its claim to be the word of such a God is present throughout the text (eg in 39.1 & 2, 42.17 and in 39.23: “Allah has sent down his best statement”, 41.41).

If it is the word of an all-knowing god, we are entitled to treat it differently from the way we would interpret an ordinary text. Plainly it is reasonable that we can expect that a divine document is a perfect document. I believe that it is not therefore unreasonable or unfair in reading the text to comment on its coherence as such a perfect and true text. If there are statements that are clearly mistaken, or if the text shows irrationality or is seriously defective in some way, that would undermine the divine claim.

Indeed, underlying my reading was the notion that any revelation worth its salt should be able to withstand a fair and honest reading of the text by an attentive modern reader. Text allegedly dictated by God himself (who I understand by definition is above time) should stand the test of time and be obviously divine and authoritative to any succeeding generation. It should also of course transcend any question of cultural diversity and be authoritative notwithstanding the reader’s background.

My finding, however, is that quite a number of passages inconsistent with these standards fairly jump from the page.

The Koran as ‘proof’

The Koran claims to be the very word of Allah sent down to Mohammed. This contrasts with the Christian Gospels and the Old Testament, for which the claim is that they were merely divinely inspired. This absolute word of God claim may explain the fact that the Koran has amongst its followers such a status that there has been very limited tradition or tolerance of the kind of textual criticism that has been so useful in helping sceptics understand the defects of the Bible. The absence of any great tradition of “biblical” criticism of the Koran is a matter that needs to be put right.

Surah 98 is entitled “The Clear Evidence” and picks up a constant theme that the Koran constitutes some sort of proof of the oneness of God and the correctness of Islam. What Mohammed means, I think, is that his constant repetition of his call to belief, coupled by references to the munificence of God in providing rain, the sun, etc is proof of his message. This claim of proof consisting of assertions is, of course, spurious: it cannot withstand fair-minded objective analysis today. In Mohammed’s day the arrival of rain etc may have seemed like a miraculous gift, but now we have scientific

A sceptical reading

and meteorological explanations that do not depend on any divine management.

The Koran shamelessly claims that it itself constitutes proof of what it proclaims. The first trick of an intellectual fraud is to avoid exposing your basic thesis to critical examination, and to assume the truth of your argument as a precondition before starting to debate. The claim that Allah sent the Koran down to the world via Mohammed is just such a fraudulent claim, as it precludes further or indeed any criticism of the Koran. Any criticism or doubt of the Koran is automatically disbelief and thereby deserving of serious punishment.

But a simple reading of the Koran is very

This is the first of a two-part examination of the Koran by GARY OTTEN

revealing: the impression it gives is somewhat like an earlier version of Joseph Smith’s Book of Mormon, which is also widely recognised to be the work of an impostor.

It is more likely that the author of the Koran was Mohammed himself than that a god dictated it to him. There is (and indeed could be) no independent evidence to support the “divine dictation” claim (eg in 6.92), while it is known that the Koran emanated from Mohammed.

Amusingly there are references actually in the text to the forging of the Koran by Mohammed: in 11.35 the “pagans of Meccah” are recorded as thinking that Mohammed made up the Koran at the time he was doing it. In other passages there are also further references to allegations that Mohammed forged the Koran (10.38, 16.101, 21.5, 34.43 & 38.4). The allegation is mentioned so often that it clearly concerned Mohammed a great deal.

And in four passages I have noted there are suggestions that some people thought Mohammed mad! (15.6, 34.46, 36.36 & 81.22). The obsessive nature of Mohammed’s insistence on blind faith could be diagnosed as a neurosis. Not everyone was taken in at the time!

A question arises about any claim to revelation: which is more likely?

(a) that it was the word of God, or

(b) that it was made up as a deliberate strategy to claim power over the author’s community, or

(c) that it was the product of hallucinatory experiences.

It is common for religious folk to believe that all religions other than their own are incorrect. Muslims are no different. When confronted with

ding of the Koran

Judaism and Christianity, however, Islam accepts these faiths as partial revelations, rather as Christianity accepts Judaism. The only difference between a Muslim and an atheist is that an atheist believes all religions are the product of credulity, mistake and/or fraud.

The Parsimony or "Occam's razor" principle would suggest that options (b) or (c) are more likely than option (a) and that option (b) is the most likely in the absence of other evidence of Mohammed's insanity.

Surah 2.29 says that the proofs of Allah include his creation of the heavens and the earth. I have to reject this claim, because quite apart from the rejection by most Western philosophers of the argument for the existence of God that he was the first cause of creation, the claim is circuitous: Allah is purporting to prove he is God by his own claim that he created the universe. Such a claim is open to any god – and has been made by others. Further he is exempting himself from this creation. If he is eternal, then why cannot the universe be eternal?

Independent evidence is necessary for such a claim to become credible.

The Obsessive Call to Belief

For a document with an allegedly divine origin, the Koran is remarkably repetitive and disorganised. This may be because each Surah was delivered like a sermon, in which important themes would re-emerge. But the dominant theme I noted is one of call to belief in Mohammed's message of Islamic monotheism.

The Koran reads like a polemic addressed to the doubters among whom Mohammed lived. It is full of verses which purport to be proofs of Allah's claim to be the God to follow, but read now as highly relevant only to the historical circumstances of the time.

There are the expected claims that the Koran is true (eg 35.31), but very striking are the often repeated passages devoted to cajoling the immediate audience to surrender themselves fully to Islam and not even think of deviating from it.

The cajoling includes attempts to persuade but also abuse, dire warnings and threats. I have given the references below for a large number but the reality is that the whole text is permeated with such references (see for example 6.39, 6.49, 7.40, 9.68, 13.18, 16.01, 17.105, 18.02, 18.29, 22.57, 27.90, 35.36, 40.4, 40.7, 40.60, 40.70-76, 41.4, 41.41, 46.20, 48.13, 57.19, 76.4, 78.21-27). I set out just three examples to give the flavour of these passages:

"But those who reject our ayat (ie proofs, evidence, verses, lessons, signs, revelations etc), the torment will touch them for their disbelief (and for their belying the Message of Mohammed)" Surah 6:49

"But those who disbelieve (in the oneness of Allah) for them will be the fire of Hell. Neither will it have a complete killing effect on them so

that they die, nor shall its torment be lightened for them. Thus do we requite every disbeliever" Surah 35:36

"Verily we have prepared for disbelievers iron chairs, iron collars and a blazing fire" Surah 76:4

Surah 36.59 (typically) condemns equally criminals, sinners with polytheists and disbelievers in Islamic monotheism. I believe that the repetitiveness of this theme justifies the description "obsessive". No doubt the Surahs were issued originally as a means of propaganda to those Mohammed wanted to influence.

One passage (39.7) seems inconsistently moderate in comparison (Allah "does not like disbelief"). Other passages promise paradise to the believers (eg. 35.33) or rain to those who accept Islam (72.16).

On the other hand, 72.15 states that those who deviate from the right path (apostates?) shall be firewood in hell.

At the heart of Islam is the idea of submission. This idea reflects the obsession with stamping out disbelief. Believers submit themselves to a level of mind-control reminiscent of some extremist sects which have been reported in recent decades (Jonestown, Scientology, Moonies etc), and some totalitarian regimes (Nazism, Communism).

The Koran was, of course, delivered over a period of many years in the course of a number of political, religious and military struggles waged by Mohammed and his followers against the pre-existing pagans, polytheists, Christians and Jews who inhabited Meccah, Medina and the surrounding areas at the time. The context is clear from many of the verses which discuss these events and struggles. Surah 6.135 for example gives the flavour of the "religious competition" of the time.

One Surah (9.97) shows Mohammed singling out the Bedouins for their disbelief: *"The Bedouins are the worst in disbelief and hypocrisy..."* This is clearly Mohammed speaking in a single historical context, not God speaking a universal truth!

Another Surah (30) refers to the "Romans" (presumably the Byzantines) and the struggles going on between the Byzantine and Persian Empires, which weakened both and allowed Islam to expand militarily. But the theme is quickly lost in that Surah to the usual exhortations to belief.

The style of the Koran seems to the modern reader to be repetitive, rambling and preaching, even ranting. At times it resembles the fire and brimstone of fundamentalist Christians such as the "Wee Frees" (eg parts of 52). It has a constant repetitive theme: how good Islam is and how bad other forms of belief are. It lacks the sort of rational clarity found in other ancient writers, such as Herodotus, Demosthenes, Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Plato, and Aristotle.

Monotheism v polytheism

The text is rife with exhortations (eg 36.45,

36.61) to abandon polytheism and adopt Islamic monotheism, exhortations obviously appropriate for the context in which Islam was created.

Interestingly various passages (such as 6.136 & 137, 10.35, 22.73, 34.22 & 36.74) refer to the reality of other gods in a way that seems surprising given the monotheistic claims central to the Koran. 36.60 refers to a commandment not to worship Satan and says "Verily he is a plain enemy to you". I find this fascinating, as there is no suggestion that Satan doesn't exist, simply that Satan is the wrong object of worship.

There are three possible explanations for this that I can see:

(i) a competitive environment between religions on offer,

(ii) some people were trying to combine belief in Allah with traditional forms of polytheism,

(iii) originally Allah was one of a pantheon of gods, and Mohammed's reform was to establish Allah as the only god.

What is surprising about this is the apparent admission by a monotheistic religion, which proclaims its monotheism on nearly every page, that other gods actually exist. Their existence seems to be something the Koran records as more real than delusional. Mohammed was not debunking all belief in gods, only ones other than Allah.

Koranic impatience?

Several times Mohammed says to his recalcitrant followers words like "What is the matter with you?" (eg 57.10). Why does an all-powerful and all knowing God have to resort to this style?

The Koran in Arabic

The discussion about Mohammed's use of the Arabic language in Surah 41 and 42 is interesting: it suggests that Islam was meant to be a home version of the prevailing Jewish and Christian monotheisms (or trinitarian theism in the case of Christianity).

For Mohammed to place his religious reform as a continuity of older religions is clearly a good stratagem for someone trying to introduce a new religion. He is able to appeal to all the important local religious tendencies by offering a nationalised and improved version of their beliefs, which they can feel also retains continuity with the past. Verses like 46.12 and 13 and 10.37 show clearly that Mohammed saw the Koran as confirming the Torah, and as a development of Judaism and Christianity; other passages refer to the Old Testament prophets and Jesus as earlier prophets in the same line as himself.

Surahs 42.7 and 44.58 suggest that Mohammed did not envisage his religion extending beyond the Arabic speaking world. Is this the all knowing (and all foreseeing) Allah talking?

Part 2 of Gary Otten's examination of the Koran will appear in the June issue.

Faith and science

DANIEL O'Hara (*Points Of View*, April) correctly notes that some eminent scientists have sincere religious faith. However, faith-scientist compatibility is not the same as faith-science compatibility, because even eminent scientists can cease thinking in a scientific way when they turn their minds to religious matters. Francis Collins (the first scientist that Daniel O'Hara mentions) is a case in point, having said, "I would not expect religion to be the right tool for sequencing the human genome and by the same token would not expect science to be the means to approaching the Supernatural."

This raises an interesting question. Is it even possible to apply scientific thinking to questions of the supernatural? Scientific thinking adheres to what is known as methodological naturalism; only natural mechanisms are invoked to explain things. Invoking a supernatural cause may or may not be the correct thing to do – but it's not scientific, and that's the point at issue here. It's not that scientific thinking rejects supernatural mechanisms *a priori* – it's simply that it can't afford the luxury of invoking them.

Science can ask and answer questions relating to the supernatural, provided supernatural terms are avoided. "Does God answer prayer?" is not a question that can be answered scientifically. "Does prayer work?" on the other hand, is. Recent findings imply that prayer does not work (*American Heart Journal*, April 2006 p. 934-942).

Faith can be defined as belief in the absence of evidence or even in the face of it. Scientific thinkers seek to minimise a reliance on faith by supporting their beliefs with evidence. Crucially, scientific ideas are also what is known as "falsifiable": they make statements about what we should not expect to find. Scientific ideas can therefore be rejected if their predictions run contrary to the evidence. A principle known as Occam's Razor – ("entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity") is applied in scientific thought, with the result that unnecessarily complex ideas are eliminated. In stark contrast to science, theology typically regards faith as a virtue (the "Doubting Thomas" story, for instance), it can view complexity as a good thing (witness Daniel O'Hara's reference to "a degree of theological sophistication that puts Dawkins to shame"), and it employs ideas that are difficult or impossible to falsify ("The Lord moves in mysterious ways"). Putting these aspects of scientific thought together, where does it leave us? The only kind of god one can think about scientifically can't be invoked as an explanation of real-world phenomena.

Since such a god can add nothing to our understanding of the world, it deserves to be eliminated from our thinking, if one is engaging in scientific thought. And this, presumably, is why a survey of religious belief found that among the top natural scientists, disbelief

is greater than ever – almost total (*Nature*, Vol. 394 p. 313).

DR ROBERT STOVOLD
Brighton

DANIEL O'Hara raises the popular question about the alleged compatibility of science and religion, and criticises Richard Dawkin's views on the matter. I believe one has to look into the subject more analytically. Of course there is no incompatibility between simple basic science and one's religious beliefs. Belief in God, or the saying of prayers, is irrelevant when boiling up some copper sulphate in a test-tube or pointing a telescope at the moon. What we are actually talking about is the scientific frontier where physics becomes metaphysics, and new hypotheses and speculations have to be formulated.

The cutting questions are how did the universe come into existence, is it eternal, did God create it? Did life arise via naturalistic abiogenesis or did God do it? Is evolution true as science understands it, ie naturalistic and uncreated and unguided by any god?

Theists surely cannot accept complete naturalism in these above cases; in order to be theists they are obliged to introduce God – as in the tortured effort to assert that God created evolution. By analysing the waste and cruelty of evolutionary processes anyone not blinded by religion can see that it is incompatible with a benevolent God (unless one plays the Christian game of re-defining words like "benevolence" so that they come to mean the opposite). Evolution is a spontaneous and unguided process, and the attempt to introduce God, as in "Theistic Evolution" is to assert that there is a God who has created the uncreatable and guides the unguidable.

I am sure that many Christians do make good scientists, but eventually there comes a point where they have to choose where their loyalties lie. Some theists deliberately take up science so as to try to destroy it from within, and substitute "Creation Science" or Intelligent Design, because being theists they just have to try and prove a Designer. Others take up science in order to understand God's creation – where the existence of God is already presupposed as an unalterable dogma.

Some appear confused. Kenneth Miller does a great job combating ID, but in the end he thinks that there is room for an alleged God and his Divine Freewill on account of Quantum Mechanics and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle – not very convincing to my mind. Alistair McGrath, who very kindly once immortalised me by a mention of my name in his book optimistically entitled *The Twilight of Atheism*, appears in the last chapter to almost end up agreeing with atheists. Stephen Jay Gould attempted unsuccessfully to marry science and religion together while keeping them apart, in his concept of non-overlapping *magisteria*. Theists seek God by definition; scientific facts are of secondary

importance to them. Non-theistic scientists seek factual truth first and foremost. That is the difference between them.

DR REGINALD LE SUEUR
Jersey

DANIEL O'Hara is quite right that some scientists are religious. Those that are vary, as other people, from vague belief in some Higher Power to very specific doctrines such as Roman Catholicism. I agree that there is nothing *necessarily* obscurantist about them, nor any lack of scientific integrity. However, evidence shows that, at least in Western societies (1) the better educated people are, the less likely they are to be religious, or to hold extreme views if they are religious; (2) scientists as a whole are less religious than the general population, and the more eminent they are, the less likely they are to be religious; (3) among scientists, physical scientists are most, and social scientists least, likely to be religious.

Psychologists are least religious of all. This may partly be because they are accustomed to looking at evidence on behaviour, and find that many specific doctrines (for example on the origin of morals, sin, corporal punishment, life after death) are not supported by objective investigation.

A physicist who mentioned his belief in six-day creationism in *The Times* kindly replied to my request for elucidation. He explained that, as a scientist, he relied on evidence. The evidence of the Bible shows that Jesus Christ was the son of God. As such he would not lie, and he said that the Genesis account is true. End of story. I think there is a fundamental difficulty about reconciling science and religion. Religions accept at least some ideas based on faith or revelation, not evidence, indeed in preference to evidence, and supernatural explanations for some phenomena. Science does not.

A scientist who is religious may work in a field in which the two do not clash. Or he may put them in two separate mental compartments. Scientists are capable of double-think. Or again he may feel he has successfully integrated them, perhaps using science to carry out God's intentions, rather as did Michael Faraday, a lifelong adherent of the obscure Sandemanian sect. But it seems to me that, when push comes to shove, so to say, a basic incompatibility remains.

JOHN RADFORD
London

I WAS somewhat surprised that Dan O'Hara did not list Archbishop Ussher among those of sincere faith and "a degree of theological sophistication that puts Richard Dawkins to shame".

Dan O'Hara is a former Anglican divine (not the first) who was active in the secularist/humanist movement and reverted. Obviously he is not in the same category as



another former priest, the preposterous F H Amplett Micklewright, ex-Anglican, ex-Unitarian, ex-rationalist pamphleteer and consistent Catholic-hater who converted to pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

I understand that earlier this year Dan O'Hara announced his decision to "part company with humanism." There is nothing unusual about humanists locking horns over some issue of policy. But it is the tone, rather than the content, of Dan O'Hara's letter that is significant. It will certainly be approved by fundamentalists and creationists to whom "Richard Dawkins and his kind", as Dan O'Hara sneeringly puts it, are hate figures.

Is this an inadvertent lapse on Dan O'Hara's part? Or does it signify a step back to the fold? Time will tell.

BILL MCILROY
Hove

Shakespeare – and the National Anthem

I FOUND the piece on the Bard's atheism (April) interesting and recall that a former president of the NSS – David Tribe – also wrote on this matter; the title and year escape me. No doubt others have better memories.

Returning to the *Freethinker* after 40 years (I thought religion a diminishing phenomenon in an increasingly secular age and moved on), one feature does bemuse me, though not being privy to the debates ensuing over the decades this may well have become a tedious topic. However, the first copy I received (February) contained letters (tongue-in-cheek?) calling for a new national anthem to replace the histrionic nonsense of God Save Lizzie Windsor, with Terry Liddle suggesting various alternatives while at the same time claiming the nation-state to be redundant; this continued in the March issue, and recently a Scot got all incensed about something.

It is strange that some describing themselves as "free" thinkers retain a need for the religion of state, ie nationalism. If there were a concept that ought to be decomposing in the dustbin of history it is this mythical illusion. It is, I suggest, every bit as damaging as its eyeballs-in-the-sky bedfellow, which at least proclaims an (albeit imperialistic) internationalist perspective.

I am aware that those who contribute to these pages and argue the rationalist case try to keep several balls in the air at once in order to maintain solidarity, but this is the 21st century and we are all grown up. If there is felt a need to have any sort of anthem let it be an updated *Internationale*.

ROY EMERY
Radstock

JACK Hastie (*Freethinker*, April) has misunderstood me. In advocating Edward Carpenter's *England Arise* (the words and music can be obtained from the Workers' Music Association) I was thinking that before it stood any chance of being adopted as an

anthem the monarchy and the established church would have been abolished. Scotland and Wales would be independent of England although possibly linked in some sort of federal Republican structure.

Ireland would be united in a 32-county Republic. It already has its own anthem in Behan's *Amhreon na bhFiann*. Wales and Scotland also have their own anthems. I've never sung *God Save The Queen* but I've sung *Land Of My Fathers* in Aberystwyth and *Flower Of Scotland* in Aberdeen. I have also sung *Amhreon na bhFiann* in numerous places and *England Arise* while it was being played on a rather tuneless piano in a Socialist hall in Newham.

With its hope of the people arising to a bright new dawn after the long dark night of toil and sorrow, which priests and kings have always tried to prolong, I still think it is a grand song which people of any nationality can sing.

Maybe what we really need is a world anthem without any references to gods or monarchs. Any ideas?

TERRY LIDDLE
London

IT IS clear that the people of Scotland are never going to agree on which of our present "National Anthems" is definitive.

The Scottish Executive should spare no expense and immediately commission a new one from a reputable Catalan composer.

JOHN HEIN
Edinburgh

Thanks to rationalist academics

The search for universal truths is fraught with prejudice; when publicly speaking out against the irrationality of religion, many atheists jeopardise their jobs, status and, in England, the education of their children. For these reasons I believe academics who contribute to the *Freethinker* merit an especial thank you, because by courageously lending their name to its pages they not only increase its intellectual impact but help to educate amateur subscribers like myself.

My thanks then, to Professor Massimo Pigliucci. His in-depth article on creationism and intelligent design (*Freethinker*, January) was symphonic to my conscious cognitive senses – or should I say mind? One jarring note, though, in the second to last paragraph: if consciousness is a "natural epiphenomenon of the brain" as Prof Pigliucci describes, then as a by-product of brain activity consciousness plays only a complementary slave role and is not proactive, which doesn't explain the exponential growth, since the first recorded writings, of consciously-sought empirical knowledge, the only progressive driver of human cultures. And again, if consciousness is but a by-product of brain activity, why aren't all animals conscious proportionate to the complexity of their brain activity

relative to humans? For example, the complexity – or the number of neural pathways – of the brain activity of chimpanzees cannot be far short of that of sentient humans, but in the former there is never natural self-reflective consciousness.

The great divide between adult humans and all other animals must have been caused by our acquisition of self-referencing metaphorical language, which, because it is the medium by which consciousness is processed, was likely its generator.

Fishing for another article from Prof Pigliucci, I'd like to quote from D Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (p 405): "So if anyone claims to uphold a variety of epiphenomenalism, try to be polite, but ask: What are you talking about?"

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Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, May 2, 7.30pm. Barry Duke: *125th Anniversary of the Freethinker*.

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

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information: 01494 771851.

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. 36 Oakdene Close, Pudsey, Leeds 28. Tuesday, May 9, 7.30pm, Heart of the Beholder, DVD of persecution of a family by Christians in the USA.

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

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

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. Friends Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, May 25, 8pm. Steve Freeman: A Democratic Secular Republic.

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.

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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. Public meeting.

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

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

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

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

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

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

Humani - the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267-7264. E-mail: brianmclinton@btinternet.com website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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