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Leviticus under renewed scrutiny



"Shrimp, crab, lobster, clams, mussels, all these are an abomination before the Lord, just as gays are an abomination. Why stop at protesting gay marriage? Bring all of God's law unto the heathens and the sodomites," urges a new American movement, God Hates Shrimp. Their clever campaign has rattled both Jewish and Christian fundamentalists – and has prompted the *Freethinker* to take a fresh look at Leviticus – see page 12

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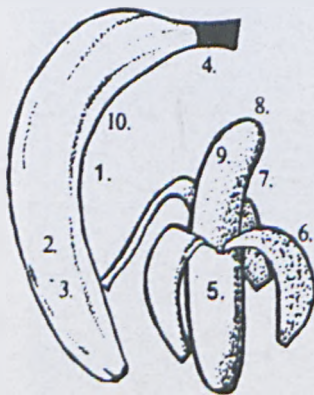
I LIKE bananas, and I know very few people who don't. But, according to an American leaflet doing the rounds, I – as an atheist – should regard the banana as a “nightmare”.

The banana, according to the “logic” of the fundies who have adapted this pathetic little booklet, called *The Atheist Test*, from a work entitled *God Doesn't Believe in Atheists* by Ray Comfort, exists as proof of “intelligent design”.

A copy of *The Atheist Test* fell into the hands of *Freethinker* reader Edwin Salter, who passed it on to me, saying that it was being circulated in Kings Lynn by local evangelists.

So, why is the banana to be feared by atheists? Here are the ten reasons offered:

1. Is shaped for human hand
2. Has non-slip surface
3. Has outward indicators of inward content:
 - Green - too early
 - Yellow - just right
 - Black - too late
4. Has a tab for removal of wrapper
5. Is perforated on wrapper
6. Bio-degradable wrapper
7. Is shaped for human mouth
8. Has a point at top for ease of entry
9. Is pleasing to taste buds
10. Is curved towards the face to make eating process easy.



These vacuous points made, *The Atheist Test* then triumphantly declares: “To say that the banana happened by accident is even more unintelligent than to say that no one designed the Coca Cola can” Pardon me, but what evolutionist has ever claimed that bananas are the result of an “accident”?

And this is how *The Atheist Test* twists evolutionary argument to explain the creation of Coke. “Billions of years ago, a big bang produced a large rock. As the rock cooled, sweet brown liquid formed on its surface. As time passed, aluminum formed itself into a can, a lid, and a tab. Millions of years later, red and white paint fell from the sky, and formed itself into the words “Coca Cola 12 fluid ounces.”

“Of course, my theory is an insult to your intellect, because you know that if the Coca Cola can is made, there must be a maker. If it is designed, there must be a designer. The alternative, that it happened by chance or accident, is to move into an intellectual free zone.”

So lame, and patently dishonest, is this

attempt to discredit evolutionary theory that I will not dignify it with any counter-argument, save to ask its purveyors just one question: “How intelligent was the being who designed the coconut or the prickly pear?”

**Freethinker editor
BARRY DUKE goes
bananas over
attempts by fundies
to discredit evolution**



The silly season has descended upon us with a vengeance. How else can one explain an article in the June 19 issue of *Newsweek*, which examines the “faith” of comic-book superheroes.

Under the title “Is the Man of Steel a man of faith?” *Newsweek* writers Steven Waldman and Michael Kress point out that “the upcoming *Superman* movie has sent fans picking over primary sources”.

“Jews,” they point out, “have often claimed the archetypal superhero as their own. Superman sprang from the imaginations of two Jewish cartoonists, and scholars have compared him to the golem myth – the supernatural creature who vanquishes the Jews’ enemies (early on, Superman battled the Nazis directly).

“Most fans believe the man from Krypton is a Methodist, an opinion divined from Clark Kent’s Midwestern upbringing. But there’s another possibility. In the original 1978 movie, and the new one, the superhero’s father tells him: ‘They can be a great people ... They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all – their capacity for good – I’ve sent them you, my only son.’

“Yes, Superman is a Christ figure. ‘A heavenly father sends his only son to save the Earth; in his mission or ministry, he will fight for truth and justice; he will die and be resurrected; he will ascend into heaven, and now is the time of his second coming,’ says Stephen Skelton, author of a new book *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*.”

According to *Newsweek*, Preston Hunter, founder of **Adherents.com**, has analysed dozens of comic-book characters. He says Batman may not be the churchgoing type, but glimpses of the crosses on his parents’ grave-stones may mean he’s a lapsed Roman Catholic or disaffected Episcopalian. Hunter’s site says *X-Men*’s Rogue is Southern Baptist, Cypher from *New Mutants* is a Mormon and Elektra from *Daredevil* is Greek Orthodox. Captain America is a churchgoer, and Spiderman sometimes addresses God in spontaneous prayer.

Newsweek also provides a link to a religious website, **Beliefnet.com**, which has a list of superheroes, with a lengthy analysis of each of their beliefs (gosh, the trivia some people immerse themselves in!).

Unable to resist the temptation to find out whether there were any superhero atheists, I visited Beliefnet – but, as one would expect, there were none to be found.

Peaved though I was, I did find the exercise amusing, if nothing else. I mean, how can you not be amused by the revelation that Ben Grimm, known as The Thing – a founding member of the *Fantastic Four*, the foundational comic-book series of the Marvel Universe – was a closet Jew for almost 40 years, before “coming out” in 2002.

According to Beliefnet “the character of Ben Grimm was created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby, and appeared in the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* in 1961. Lee and Kirby, both Jewish, imagined that The Thing was Jewish from the beginning. The character’s name, Benjamin Jacob Grimm, is certainly a Jewish one. But during the 1960s (and for a long time afterward), there was a strong taboo in comics and many other popular entertainment mediums against referring to real-world religious affiliations of major characters. It was not until four decades later that The Thing’s Jewish identity was revealed. The revelation occurred in *Fantastic Four* (Vol. 3) #56, published in August 2002.

“Ben Grimm has apparently never been a synagogue-goer as an adult, but he still remembers and sometimes says Jewish prayers, and he does think of himself as Jewish.



The Thing: Funny, he doesn't look Jewish

“Another interesting recent aspect of The Thing’s character is that he literally died and was subsequently resurrected by God himself. Many major-comic book characters have died or apparently died, only to be brought back to life later by various means (technological, magical, mystical, alien, etc., or simply by revealing that the character had not actually died after all). But as far as we know, this is the first time that God (*the* God, the Supreme Being – not some powerful demigod or mythological pantheon member) has personally brought a character back to life in a mainstream comic book. In the history of the *Fantastic Four*, which began as and has always remained a series rooted in science-fiction (with emphasis on science), this is apparently the first time that God has been explicitly depicted in any way.”

What with “nightmare” bananas and resurrected Jewish superheroes, to describe June as a tad bizarre would be the understatement of the year.

Students 'climbed fences' to escape 'too Catholic' school

STUDENTS at Bexley's first sixth-form college are in revolt because they claim their Roman Catholic college is "too Catholic", according to a report in the local paper, the *News Shopper*.

Last month, almost a third of the students at St Luke's College, Chislehurst Road, Sidcup, protested to headteacher Maria Williams, likening practices at the college to "fanatical religious cults".

The 16 to 18-year-olds claimed they were forced to attend "evangelical talks" expressing puritanical views on subjects such as chastity and homosexuality.

They said they were made to walk around the school field carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary and singing hymns, and have been hauled into the principal's office for holding hands off college premises and told they were a "disgrace".

Girls have also been banned from wearing skirts shorter than knee-length and boys from wearing three-quarter length trousers because they are deemed "disrespectful".

The most recent mandatory talk by pro-life campaigner Barbara McGuigan, founder of pressure group Voice of Virtue International, prompted more than 100 of the 383 students at the college to sign a protest petition to Mrs Williams. They also claimed that many parents complained.

One student told *News Shopper*: "We were dictated right-wing views typically associated with extreme religious groups."

The college opened last year and replaced the sixth forms at Bexley's two Roman Catholic secondary schools, St Catherine's and St Columba's, both in Bexleyheath.

Another student said: "Although we accepted that, by going to a Catholic college, we would be signing up to the Catholic ethos, we had no idea we were also joining an institution

which embraced many values present within fanatical religious cults.

Accusing the headteacher of "losing a grip on reality", the student referred to the religious procession and added: "We would certainly not have been forced to do such an extreme ritual in any of our previous schools."

Mrs Williams told *News Shopper* that the college invited a range of speakers "to reflect the rich Catholic tradition and to encourage a healthy debate".

She added: "Although some students were concerned at the tone of Barbara McGuigan's talk, others found it interesting.

"We are still listening to students' comments on the talk and will bear them in mind when booking future speakers."

She said attendance at the procession had been voluntary and the dress code was similar to those of other sixth-form colleges.

The student rebellion took a new turn a week later when a number of pupils were excluded for refusing to attend mass.

It is claimed that up to 60 students, including non-Catholics, were excluded for the day from the college after they refused to attend the service before half-term.

Principal Williams acknowledged that some pupils had been excluded, but said only 17 were involved.

The local newspaper reported students saying that staff "herded them like children" into the college refectory for mass on 25 May. Adults were posted at all the exits to prevent them leaving, and took the names of those who refused to stay. A register was called during the mass to find out who was missing. Some students even resorted to climbing over fences to get out of the college grounds.

The exclusions have angered parents who are also worried that the rigidly Catholic regime at St Luke's is interfering with their children's studies. Students claim lessons are cut to enable religious services to take place and they have been tricked into taking part in religious ceremonies.

Mrs Williams says she has listened to the students' complaints. She said attendance at the mass was one of two compulsory acts of worship the college has to hold every term, which all students "signed up" to attend, although this is hotly denied by students and parents. Mrs Williams said the students were excluded for failing to follow staff instructions, were "openly defiant", and had to be dealt with.

Asked about the religious processions, she said: "Carnivals and processions are making a comeback. I don't think we can be described as more religious than other Catholic schools."

Forcing pupils to worship is a 'human rights abuse' says NSS

THE National Secular Society has reacted to a call by churches for more collective worship in schools by pointing out that the current law breaches human rights law.

The law forces pupils – even older pupil regarded as adults in human rights law – to submit to worship. The Society is also calling for the repeal of the law enforcing this requirement.

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS Executive Director, said "it is an abuse of pupils' human rights to force them to worship, especially when they are over 16. As the law now stands, even pupils who are adults cannot withdraw themselves from collective worship. This contravenes the Human Rights Act."

Dismissing the churches' call for more collective worship as "self-interested", Mr Porteous Wood observed: "There is a word for enforced repetitive daily activity involving a captive and impressionable audience: it is indoctrination. Neither indoctrination nor proselytisation are legitimate functions for any state, far less when they are enforced.

"According to a National Centre for Social Research study report, "two thirds [of 12-19 year olds] did not regard themselves as belonging to any religion". In most schools, collective worship is consequently a daily act of hypocrisy. We are therefore calling on Education Secretary Alan Johnson to abolish compulsory collective worship in maintained schools. Schools should be for teaching, not preaching. There is plenty of space in churches for those that wish to pursue their faith outside school hours.

"The churches are making these demands because indoctrinating this captive audience is their only hope of survival. Religious belief, church membership and attendance, have been in decline for three quarters of a century. They are set to halve again in the next 35 years.

"Ethical issues must form a key part of assemblies, but it is far more effective to teach them through references to pupils' common experience than to so-called holy texts written in a different era. Few pupils have any knowledge of or interest in these texts, far less regarding them as any source of authority."

"The churches think enforced worship provides experience of meditation, reflection and prayer as spiritual resources. A much better way to enable pupils to think better for themselves would be for schools to teach far more philosophy.

Muslims get the hump over yet another cartoon

ROY Peterson, award-winning editorial cartoonist for Canada's Southam News Service, has just been hit by a petition signed by more than 300 angry Canadian Muslims over his portrayal of terrorist Osama bin Laden pointing a video-camera at himself and saying: "Yo, Allah! Smile, we're on candid camera." A voice from above replies: "...we?"

Muslims complained that the Peterson cartoon failed to be "unquestionably deferential" to the divine and "insults Islam and injures the feelings of Muslims," dragging God down to the foible-ridden level of humans. Peterson, however, says he aimed his cartoon solely at bin Laden, whom he considers a "zealot."



George W Bush should embrace Islam, s

A REPUTED leader of an al-Qaeda-linked terror group blamed for deadly bombings across Indonesia last month accused President Bush and Australia's prime minister of waging wars against Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to an Associated Press report, militant cleric Abu Bakar Bashir also called on Bush and Prime Minister John Howard to convert to Islam, saying it was "the only way to save their souls".

He added that families still grieving after the 2002 Bali blasts that killed many foreigners should also become Muslim to find "salvation and peace".

Bashir, 68, recently released from prison after completing a 26-month sentence for conspiracy in the Bali bombings that killed 202 people. He was speaking at a hard-line Islamic boarding school that has spawned some of South-East Asia's deadliest terrorists.

The firebrand cleric declined to directly condemn young men who carry out bombings in Indonesia in the name of Islam, saying he still considered them "holy warriors", because they believed they were defending the oppressed.

But he also said they were misguided and wrong to use bombs in a country at peace. "Why use bombs in a non-conflict zone? Preaching is enough," he said.

Jemaah Islamiyah is accused of church bombings across the world's most populous Muslim nation in 2000, the 2002 attack on the resort island of Bali, attacks in the capital Jakarta in 2003 and 2004, and a triple suicide bombing on Bali last October.

The attacks killed more than 260 people, many of them foreigners, and have thrust Indonesia onto the front line of the global war on terror.

The United States and Australia have



Bush as a Muslim, as visualised by the website BushforDummies.com

expressed disappointment at Bashir's release, but Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono maintained it did not mean his government was soft on Islamic militants.

"Abu Bakar Bashir was put on trial. He was punished," Yudhoyono said in Jakarta, adding that Indonesia has arrested hundreds of suspected terrorists and sentenced three linked to the 2002 Bali bombings to death.

'As long as there is no intention to fight us, and Islam continues to grow, there can be peace. This is the doctrine of Islam. Islam cannot be ruled by others. Allah's law must stand above human law. There is no [example] of Islam and infidels, the right and the wrong, living together in peace'

— Bashir, in a recent interview with journalist Scott Atran

Bashir, who has never been linked to the preparation or commission of terrorist attacks, was asked about families still suffering from the Bali blasts.

He said the attacks "were God's will" and that survivors should "convert to Islam" if they wanted to ease their suffering.

He had the same message for Bush and Howard.

Bashir called Bush an "infidel", and said he was happy the American people were starting to realise their president had made a mistake when he decided to wage war on Muslims. He

did not elaborate, but was apparently referring to sliding opinion polls.

"I feel sorry for the American people, but it seems now they realise he was wrong," Bashir told reporters who were invited to speak to him on the porch of his modest home inside the al-Mukmin boarding school complex, which he founded in 1972.

Bashir also told Australia, which urged Indonesian authorities to keep a close eye on his activities, not to intervene in his nation's affairs.

"I don't interfere in Australian affairs, and you should not intervene in ours," he said.

Howard sent a strongly-worded letter to the Indonesian president last month expressing his



Militant cleric Abu Bakar Bashir

Judge bans proselytising food parcels

A FEDERAL judge has ordered the organisers of a feed-the-hungry event sponsored by the city of Baltimore to make sure participants understand that they cannot include a religious message with the bags of food they distribute.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State wanted U.S. District Judge Richard D Bennett to issue a restraining order against the United Baptist Missionary Convention of Maryland, but instead the judge last month ordered organisers of the event to read a statement to all participants before the distribution to make clear that the effort was not used to proselytise.

At one point the UBMC had planned to include Bibles and "salvation tracts" in the bags of food distributed to more than 1,000 people at 18 area missions and shelters.

An attorney for Americans United expressed some satisfaction at Bennett's ruling.

"Obviously, we're disappointed that the judge didn't grant the temporary restraining order," Heather Weaver said. "But the main

purpose of bringing this lawsuit was to stop the city funding an event where Bibles and salvation tracts would be distributed, and the judge has ensured that that did not occur."

Ethics lessons could oust religious leaders from Berlin schools

RELIGIOUS leaders in Berlin are opposing plans to introduce a mandatory ethics course in the city's schools. In the past, religion courses have been a mainstay of the curriculum in German schools.

Berlin officials are worried that these courses aren't doing an adequate job of laying a moral foundation for the city's youth.

Under current law, Berlin schools open their doors to religious instructors sent from local churches, synagogues or mosques. But the ethics classes will be given by teaching staff, robbing the religious organisations of their long-held right to represent their beliefs themselves.

says militant Muslim cleric

unhappiness over Bashir's release and urging the government to monitor the cleric's activities because of his links to the Bali bombings, which killed 88 Australians.

Speaking to reporters later, Howard said Bashir's release could affect relations between Australia and Indonesia.

"It's an important issue currently in the relationship, and the Indonesians must understand how deeply offended Australians are," said Howard, who is due to meet Yudhoyono later this month in Indonesia.

Bashir's freedom has raised concerns that he will energise Indonesia's small Islamic radical fringe by making impassioned speeches at rallies and mosques, but few believe the cleric will play a direct role in terrorism.

Government funding for MCB

LETTERS between the Home Office and the Muslim Council of Britain, which have been obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, reveal that the Government has given the Islamic group £150,000 to fund five programmes – the MCB leadership development programme; MCB leadership mentoring programme; MCB direct, a web portal for information on Islam and Muslims; the British citizenship programme; and the British Muslim equality programme." The MCB had originally asked for £500,000.

According to the website of the FOIA Centre, the Home Office set out a series of terms and conditions for the grant, including: "MCB will contribute to policy development work by attending meetings, submitting ideas, debating issues, etc, which may need to be on a strictly confidential basis. MCB will be prepared to work in partnership with the Cohesion and Faith Unit on the development and implementation of policy initiatives. MCB will act as a source of expertise and experience to Government on issues relevant to the work of the organisation."

The NSS *Newline* points out that "of course, the MCB isn't the only 'faith-based' group receiving largesse from the government, and says, "how much of this money is being used for proselytising and propaganda is not clear." "However," *Newline* points out, "an increasing number of Muslims are objecting to the emphasis being put on the MCB by the Government. More voices are being raised about its unrepresentative nature and its over-religious emphasis.

"Indeed, a group of liberal Muslims in Britain have banded together to form a new group called Muslims for Secular Democracy. The group consists of journalists, writers, filmmakers and activists, and the aim is to influ-

ence the media to move beyond 'easy and simplistic portrayal of Muslims' and build on issues relevant to British Muslims today.

Before the Bali blasts, Bashir was chiefly known for his campaign to make his secular nation an Islamic state – something he said he would continue to do – and his vitriolic criticism of the West.

Sidney Jones, a leading international expert on Jemaah Islamiyah, said she did not think Bashir's freedom increased the threat of bombings in Indonesia.

But, she said, "there is no question that his stature has grown in prison and that he's now seen as a symbol of defying the West and the United States in particular.

"For that reason, he will be a very popular speaker among young Muslim crowds in many parts of Indonesia, including people who have no interest in violence whatsoever."

"The lobbying group is headed by the journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and supported by others such as Ghayasuddin Siddique of the Muslim Parliament, playwright Nasreen Rehman, *Sharq* magazine editor Reem Maghrebi and scientist Ehsan Masud.

"The organisation says it supports a clear separation between religion and the state and wants to make 'democratic engagement' its primary concern.

"The group says that British Muslims are at present 'rendered invisible because of the overriding force of stereotypical perceptions and representations' as a 'problematic underclass'."

"Explanations tend to dwell on Islam, the religion, rather than the convergence of certain geo-political and socio-economic factors. All Muslims are expected to assume responsibility, to apologise and feel guilty for the actions of violent militants and their supporters. From left to right Muslims are perceived as 'aliens' who can never really belong in this state or the EU. This sustained negative depiction of Muslims creates discomfort and mistrust amongst non-Muslims, frustration and anger amongst Muslims."

The organisation says that while there are some issues within Muslim families such as rising criminality and alienation, the majority are "not dysfunctional people with burning resentments". Such negative images are perpetuated by "unelected, self-styled Muslim spokesmen who maintain power by overstating the 'threat' of Muslim disaffection", they say. "The media and the State only consult these middlemen, who claim to represent all Muslims and together they reinforce stereotypes and myths."

Muslim in court over 'dirty dog' objection

A MUSLIM minicab driver refused to transport a blind woman and her guide dog because of religious objections. In Islam, dogs are regarded as being "unclean", just as pigs are. But Basir Miah's refusal led to his conviction under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Bernie Reddington, 37, was furious when Miah refused to take her and her dog Orla to Liverpool Street Station in London. Mrs Reddington, from Norwich, along with her son Christopher, 13, who is also blind, had been attending Great Ormond Street children's hospital last November.

But, when Basir Miah arrived to collect Mrs Reddington, he saw her guide dog, and said: "No dogs". After ignoring Mrs Reddington's insistence that his refusal to take the dog was illegal, Miah drove off.

Last month, at London's Horseferry Road Magistrates' Court, he admitted refusing to carry out a booking made by a disabled person on the grounds that the disabled person was accompanied by her dog. He was fined £150 and agreed to pay £250 compensation.

Mrs Reddington said: "I'm really pleased about the result. The experience made me feel sub-human and awful. I was humiliated. If this can stop something like that happening to anyone else, then it will be worthwhile. I really hope this sends out a message to all taxi drivers to think again before they decide to break the law. I hope this benefits other blind and partially sighted people who have guide dogs."

Jane Vernon, Royal National Institute of the Blind legal officer, said: "We are delighted and welcome this result. As far as we know, this is the first time a mini-cab driver has been convicted. I hope that this conviction sends out a message to drivers that they will not get away with this form of discrimination."

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society, said: "The clash between religious rights and the human rights of other people will become increasingly an issue as the government tries to include all forms of discrimination under the same umbrella.

"Now we see that it is not only gay people who are coming into conflict with the demands of religious people insisting on special privileges. Fortunately, in this instance, disability seems to trump religion, but it is not so clear cut in other areas of discrimination.

In the regulations on discrimination in the provision of goods and services, religious groups are demanding exemptions that would permit them to continue discriminating against homosexuals. The NSS has opposed this in its submission on the topic."

ON May 25 I took part in the Oxford University Union Debate, for which the motion was that "Free Speech should be moderated by respect for Religion". Needless to say, I spoke for the opposition.

The chief speaker on my side was Flemming Rose, the Danish editor who published the controversial Mohammed cartoons. As there is a seven-figure bounty on his head, the security arrangements for the debate were heavy, everyone being searched on the way in.

In the days when, as president of the NSS, I used to take part in a lot of university debates, in the 1970s to '90s, I was almost invariably on the losing side when it came to the vote, but this time we won by a good margin – 129 to 59.

Had the word "religion" in the motion been replaced by any other abstract noun, we would have won by 188 to nil. Suppose the word was "science". The motion would then have read "Free Speech should be moderated by respect for Science", and no reasonable person would vote for that – least of all a genuine scientist.

So why is religion given its unique privileged status? After thousands of years, it has become the norm, so no one ever thinks it needs justifying.

Should we respect religious *faith*? Certainly not. Well, should we respect religious *people*? Yes, as long as they are not antisocial and don't aim to impose their religious views on others.

But even if we respect them as good-living people, we cannot respect their beliefs. Faith, which means firm belief in the absence of evidence, betrays human intelligence, undermines science-based knowledge, and compromises ordinary morality. If there were objective evidence for its doctrines, it would no longer be faith: it would be knowledge.

Scepticism is of paramount importance, because it is the gateway to knowledge; but unless the sceptical ideas are freely argued over, they cannot be assessed, nor can the ensuing knowledge spread through society.

And free speech must include the right to laugh at absurd ideas. Indeed, ridicule, including satirical cartoons, which have recently provoked terrorism, has always been an important element of the free exchange of ideas on everything, not least religion. Without that free exchange there can be no advance in knowledge and no social progress.

Muslims, we are told, are sensitive, and are really hurt when their religion is joked about. Don't they credit their supposed creator god with any sense of humour? Didn't he actually invent laughter? And is he too weak to withstand a joke without some humourless cleric rushing to his defence? Or is their own faith so weak that they fear its contamination? Let them heed the old playground retort: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

Claiming to be ultra-sensitive and really hurt by mere words or pictures is, of course, a way

Should we respect religion?

of gaining privilege. Everyone else has to speak softly so as not to hurt you.

Incidentally, the violence provoked by the Danish cartoons was deliberately stirred up by Islamic extremists publishing exaggerated versions of them in Muslim countries up to four months after the originals were published.

BARBARA SMOKER in a pivotal debate

I have discussed it with several moderate Muslims, and while they roundly condemned the violent reprisals, they generally added "But people ought not to insult religion". Why *not*? No-one would denounce the ridiculing of *political* views, which are open to free debate. In fact, *true* respect for religion would allow it to be opened up in the same way, relying on the truth emerging. But at present it is shielded from honest scrutiny. This suggests that the faithful realise it could not stand up to it.

Though we must take care to avoid a native backlash against the mostly peaceable British Muslim community, succeeding governments have carried the exoneration of Muslim villains too far in the past. For instance, as long ago as 1989, when, even on BBC television, imams were offering bribes for the murder of Salman Rushdie, they were never charged with incitement to murder.

The word "appeasement" is rarely used except in the context of Neville Chamberlain's deal with Hitler in 1938, but what about the present appeasement of Muslims in Britain?

Of course the law must protect *people* – in fact, that is basically what the law is all about – and we have plenty of general laws for the protection of people, without special laws for the protection of *ideas*, of a particular kind.

It is obviously impossible to genuinely respect an ideology that our reason rejects as superstition – let alone dangerous superstition;

THE idea that any kind of free society can be constructed in which people will never be offended or insulted is absurd. So too is the notion that people should have the right to call on the law to defend them against being offended or insulted. A fundamental decision needs to be made: do we want to live in a free society or not? Democracy is not a tea party where people sit around making polite conversation.

– Salman Rushdie

so what the precept to respect religion actually means is that we should *pretend* to respect it, for the sake of political correctness. At the very least, then, as I pointed out in the debate, the motion called for hypocrisy. So the final majority vote was for honesty, not hypocrisy.

But hypocrisy is not the worst of it.

When the ideologies we pretend to respect indoctrinate children, some of whom may even grow up to be suicide bombers because of it, hypocrisy becomes complicity in the mental abuse of children, in the oppression of women, in the obstruction of social reforms, and even in incitement to terrorism.

We are told that Islam itself cannot be blamed for the terrorist attacks on New York, Madrid, and London, followed by widespread carnage in retaliation for the publication of a few innocuous drawings. That is like saying that the horrors of the Inquisition had nothing to do with Christianity.

In the gospels, Jesus consistently identifies righteousness with *believing* in him; and in the ages of faith the statement by Thomas Aquinas that "Unbelief is the greatest of sins" was incontrovertible. Hence the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the Christian burning of witches, heretics, and Jews – the flames being fanned by Christian faith.

This use of torture was not a case of bad people perverting a good religion; the persecution of sceptics follows logically from the Christian correlation of faith with salvation, not to mention the scary notion that God could punish the whole of society for the disbelief of a few.

Mohammed followed on from Jesus, and the Koran contains even more manic denunciations of disbelief than the New Testament. Moreover, Islam has failed to moderate its cruel practices to the extent that mainstream Christianity has done, in the past couple of centuries.

The Taliban, Al-Qa'eda, and the Badr Corps, are certainly extremist, but they are orthodox – deriving logically from the Koran, which denigrates women and tells believers to wage *jihad* against heretics and infidels. Moderate Muslims often try to explain away this tyranny and violence as misinterpretation of the Koran. If that is so, why did Allah, or his Prophet, lapse into such ambiguity?

Religion cannot, in all conscience, be intellectually respected if honesty is to prevail over hypocrisy – and giving it false respect would not just be obsequious and dishonest: it could actually allow superstitions of the Dark Ages to triumph, destroying the whole range of social and individual freedoms courageously won over the past few centuries.

So, for the sake of liberty and equality as well as truth, we must resist the indefensible furtherance of hypocritical respect. Far from our agreeing to moderate free speech in favour of respect for religion, we should moderate respect for religion in favour of free speech.

Muslim fanatics target falafel, ice and goatees

THINGS were far from good in Saddam Hussain's Iraq, but, since the American-led "democratisation" of the country, life has become a great deal harder for those seen by Islamic fundamentalists as posing a threat to Islam.

Among the first to be targeted by zealots were gays and lesbians, but now fanatics are casting their nets wider to root out anything they regard as "unIslamic." Falafel and ice, together with alcohol, pop music and foreign films are being branded "theologically impure" by the country's growing number of zealots.

In a bizarre example of Iraq's creeping "Talibanisation," militants last month visited falafel vendors in Baghdad, telling them to pack up their stalls or be killed. The ultimatum seemed so bizarre that, at first, most laughed it off – until two of them were shot dead. "They told us 'you have 14 days to end this job'" said Abu Zeinab, 32, who was packing up his stall for good yesterday in the suburb of al Dora, a hard-line Sunni neighborhood.

"I said I was just feeding the people, but they said there were no falafels in Mohammed the prophet's time, so we shouldn't have them either. I felt like telling them there were no Kalashnikovs in Mohammed's time either, but I wanted to keep my life."

IN what is thought to be the work of Hindu extremists, two paintings of naked Hindu goddesses by India's grand old man of art have been defaced at an art gallery in London.

The exhibition of work by Maqbool Fida Hussain at Asia House, off Oxford Street in London, was last month cancelled "for security reasons". Ironically, Hussain, 90, who has stirred controversy in India among militant Hindus by depicting naked Hindu deities, came to London for the summer to seek a more tolerant artistic climate.

The exhibition, which was called *M F Hussain: Early Masterpieces 1950s-70s*, and which included 16 of his works, was to have run until August 5. The damage, said to amount to £200,000, was done by three men with black spray paint.

In a letter to the *Guardian*, 39 academics and intellectuals demanded that the exhibition be reinstated. They accused Hindu fanatics of persecuting Hussain.

Awaaz, an organisation committed to resisting religious fanaticism of all kinds, said: "In Hindu traditions there is an extensive history of wide and diverse representations of the sacred deities, including nude, erotic and other depictions.

"Hinduism has never possessed a concept of censorship or blasphemy of the kind that authoritarian groups wish to promote. A key reason the exhibition is being attacked is because M F Hussain is a Muslim. Groups involved have used religious claims to mask a

Why Baghdad's falafel vendors should be blacklisted while their colleagues are allowed to continue selling kebabs or Western-style pizzas and burgers remains a mystery. Some suspect it is because a taste for falafels is one of the few things that unites Jewish and Arab communities in Israel.

It is, however, just one of many Islamic edicts to hit Baghdad in recent weeks, prohibiting everything from the growing of goatee beards to the sale of mayonnaise – because it is purportedly made in Israel.

Even the Arab addiction to cigarettes is being challenged, with insurgents declaring smoking bans in at least one Sunni district.

News of the latest strictures surfaced when the coach of Iraq's tennis team and two players were fatally shot for wearing shorts. The killings, in Sunni-dominated west Baghdad, took place days after militants had distributed leaflets banning the wearing of shorts or T-shirts with English writing on them.

They also forbade women to drive or travel on public transportation with men – a rule that bus drivers have begun to enforce.

Another group of traders to have felt the Islamists' wrath is Baghdad's ice merchants, who sell large chunks of ice for storing food

and chilling drinks.

In a city facing constant power cuts and summer temperatures of up to 122 degrees, the service they provide is little short of essential. Yet in recent weeks, they too have fallen foul of the claim that their product was not a feature of life during Mohammed's time.

Akram al Zidawi, 19, an ice seller from al Dora, thought the threats were too ludicrous to be true – until it was too late.

"Two weeks ago, he came back home saying that he had been threatened by the terrorists," said his brother Gassan, 32. "My mother begged him to quit the job, but he laughed. He thought it was impossible they would kill him. But they came back two days later and shot him dead, along with three other ice sellers nearby."

Meanwhile, barbers have been overwhelmed with young men anxious to shave off their goatees. Last month, Mustapha Jawad, 17, was purportedly killed for wearing one, which Islamists deemed a Jewish facial hairstyle.

"After Mustapha's death, I received 20 to 30 young men every day, all wanting me to shave off their goatees," said barber Sinan al Rubai.

"Maybe one day the mujahedeen will insist on shaving all the head – then I will be rich."

Paintings of nude goddesses defaced

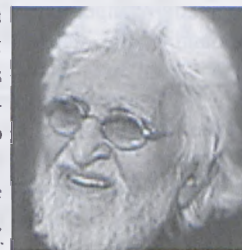
political agenda that owes to the Hindu Right an agenda which has caused considerable violence and misery in India since the 1980s."

Terry Sanderson, Vice-President of the National Secular Society, said: "This is a worrying development. As extremists of all religions compete with one another to claim persecution, the result is incitement to violence. The government appears unconcerned at these increasing attacks on free expression.

Why don't the authorities provide protection

for this exhibition and demonstrate that religious fanatics simply cannot intimidate the rest of us into silence?"

According to the *Index on Censorship*, Hussain's depiction of the Hindu goddesses Saraswati, Draupadi and Sita in the nude was investigated by Indian police in 1998 at the behest of the Indian government, who accused the artist of insulting the Hindu religion. No charges were brought, but Hussain had his home in Bombay attacked by Hindu militants.



M F Hussain

Judge outlaws prison group's Bible programme

AN Ohio judge has ruled that a Bible-based prison programme violates the First Amendment's freedom of religion clause by using state funds to promote Christianity to inmates.

Prison Fellowship Ministries, which was sued in 2003 by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, was ordered last month to cease its programme at the Newton Correctional Facility and repay the state \$1.53 million. "This calls into question the funding for so many programmes," said Barry Lynn, executive director of the Washington-based group which filed the suit. "Anyone who doesn't stop it is putting a giant 'sue me' sign on top of their building."

Lynn's group accused Prison Fellowship Ministries of giving preferential treatment to inmates signing up to the programme. They were given special visitation rights, movie-watching privileges, access to computers and access to classes needed for early parole. US District Judge Robert Pratt said the perks constituted unfair treatment to those not in the religious programme. Despite any claims of rehabilitating inmates, the programme "impermissibly endorses religion," Pratt said.

The InnerChange Freedom Initiative was implemented in Newton in 1999. State prison officials have said they hired the religious group to improve inmate behavior and reduce recidivism – not promote Christianity. Ministry president Mark Earley said that the group plans to appeal the ruling and believes its programme is constitutional.

CHRISTIANS often report "Long dark nights of the Soul" during which they doubt their deepest convictions. Do I, as an atheist, ever experience anything similar? Do I ever doubt my unbelief?

Let's take this in stages. First of all – do I ever doubt my disbelief in the mythologies and theologies of the great revealed religions, as recounted in their sacred books? Let's take the mythologies first. Do I, for example, ever doubt my scepticism about the assertions that Christ was born miraculously, performed miracles during his life and rose from the dead? The answer is emphatically "No", because the historical evidence on which these assertions are based simply doesn't stack up.

If I had chosen any of the founding figures of the other great religions – Moses, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed – the answer would have been the same – the evidence for the miraculous never stacks up. There's a kind of secondary mythology that has grown up around Christianity, and no doubt other revealed religions, which asserts that, through the power of prayer, Christ performs miracles in the contemporary world.

Here again, despite the evidence from shrines like Lourdes, and the best efforts of the Catholic procedures for canonisation, I find the evidence totally unconvincing.

Of course there are "miracles" of another kind, a "healing of the heart" as one psychologically-changed Lourdes pilgrim put it. Tales abound of the alcoholic or drug addict who met Christ in a Salvation Army hostel and whose life was transformed; or, for that matter, of the suicide bomber who blew himself up on a fast track to Paradise. Dramatic as these phenomena can be, they are only evidence of the *idea* of the divine, irrespective of whether that idea is objectively true.

Theology is even less well supported by reason. Even if the historical evidence that Christ had been born miraculously, and had risen from the dead, was convincing, we could not deduce that he was the second person of a divine trinity, or that, by his death, he had somehow redeemed *homo sapiens* from the effects of sin, because inferences of this kind can never validly be made from any kind of

historical evidence whatsoever. Similarly, no historical evidence could support the view that the Koran or the Book of Mormon is an exact copy of a book preserved in paradise. And if the theology is denied, all the multitudinous sexual, dietary and financial prohibitions and all the ritual prescriptions and duties cease to make sense.

So much for the revealed religions.

What then about the propositions of Natural Theology? It used to be held that it was possible to prove the existence of a Supreme Being by reason alone and without recourse to revelation. So let's take a look at the Argument From Design. Classically the proposition was "that the Universe was created by a Supreme Being whose chief interest was the sustenance and ultimately salvation of mankind." And at one time this assertion did not seem at all implausible. After all, the planet Earth is exactly the right distance from the Sun to receive optimum amounts of heat and light. And it's just the right size to retain the kind of atmosphere which will support carbon-based life. So God must have planned it that way.

Not any more.

In the light of what we now know about the age and vastness of the Universe, of the probability of intelligent life elsewhere within it, and of the certainty of repeated, massive extinctions of species here on Earth – of which the dinosaurs are only the most spectacular victims – I regard that proposition as so improbable as to be unworthy of further consideration.

Recently some neo-creationists have tried to revive the Argument From Design, by claiming to have discovered certain biological structures of "irreducible complexity" so that, as they could not have evolved from anything simpler, they must have been designed. It is an argument which has been rubbished by every competent scientific authority.

Then, of course, there are the so-called *a priori* philosophical proofs of the existence of a Supreme Being. These amount to no more than juggling with words, and it is, after all, more than 200 years since the German philosopher Immanuel Kant demonstrated that this kind of argument, by its very nature, can never succeed.

But what if I were to have a religious experience?

For some, neo-pagans for example, all experience is religious. They see divinity in every bush, and an epiphany at each solstice. While I envy such people their imagination I regret that I can see only bushes – and a sunrise.

But what if I had a traumatic religious experience? A near-death experience? A mystical experience? A Road-to-Damascus experience? At the moment, not having been granted such a blessing, I assume that I would rationalise it away in terms of what I understand about the psychology of religion and the neurophysiology of the brain during abnormal states of consciousness.

The Doubts c

But I might not!

According to the literature, such experiences carry an overwhelming sense of conviction. Even the atheist philosopher A J Ayer is reported to have once said, "I've just seen a divine being. I'll have to change everything I've written." If Ayer did say this, he subsequently rationalised himself out of it, but I might not. And if I didn't – if I really did reject my previous unbelief – I would almost certainly feel compelled to share my revelation with others – think of Saint Paul or the Prophet Mohammed.

I would probably start with my wife who, as an elder in the Church of Scotland, might be expected to be pleased with my conversion. However, I have discussed the possibility with her and it seems she would be sceptical about such a sudden illumination.

JACK HASTIE contemplates the possibility of becoming an atheist ghost.

I might then phone my brother, a professor of plasma physics with whom I have shared a lifetime of atheism. I can imagine how he would respond. He would heap scorn and contempt on my conversion, deploy sophisticated arguments to demonstrate that it was invalid – and possibly e-mail me a 5,000- word paper on the subject by the end of the week.

If I was still undismayed, my son would be the next recipient of my enlightenment. He, too, would treat it with contempt and, as a comparatively young man of 34, might well point out that, as I have just turned 70, this was simply a case of Old Man's Syndrome, the spiritual equivalent of having a dodgy prostate.

We are in uncharted territory here, but I do not think any doubts I might entertain about my atheism could long survive the ridicule of those to whom I would communicate them.

Does this then mean that my atheism is invulnerable, unassailable by any evidence or argument? I would certainly hope not, because if it is, it becomes in no way different from the dogmas of the religious faithful.

So let us consider two further propositions: that spirits exist and can communicate with members of *homo sapiens*; and that there is a spiritual dimension to *homo sapiens* and that that dimension can, in certain circumstances, survive bodily death. If hard evidence could be produced in support of either proposition I would be bound to take it seriously.

It is to the discipline of parapsychology that I now turn in search of such evidence. Here we are in a different world from the world of religion. Gone are the slavish appeals to authority and the tortured logic of those who must defend absurdities. But, despite deploying some sophisticated experimental tech-

Why Atheism? Price omitted

LAST month we drew readers' attention to the release of a DVD called *Why Atheism – six films about people who don't believe in God* which the National Secular Society is selling.

Unfortunately, the price of the DVD was omitted from the review. It is £16.99 plus 50p postage and is available either on-line from the NSS shop at www.secularism.org.uk or by post from NSS DVD Offer, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Please make cheques payable to the NSS. The DVD is proving extremely popular, and includes an extended interview with Philip Pullman.

of an Atheist

niques and refined statistical procedures, the discipline has yet to define a theoretical framework which can explain what the data mean. Hence, in possession of indisputable empirical evidence such as the traditional religions spectacularly lack, parapsychology leaves us without a clue about what is really going on.

I want to look firstly at physical evidence: things that go bump in the night; the poltergeist. Poltergeist phenomena are often focused around emotionally disturbed adolescents and, for that reason, have often been associated with deception and trickery. But I take it to be sufficiently well-established that noises, stone-throwing, the movement of heavy furniture, fire raising – and in extreme cases, levitation of the focus – do occur without there being any detectable mechanical cause, and that such facts are beyond dispute. The term psychokinesis (PK) has been coined to describe these effects.

Now that witchcraft and diabolic possession are no longer seriously entertained there are two hypotheses in the field to explain psychokinesis. The spiritualist hypothesis is that the phenomena are produced by spirits, whether those of the deceased or spirits which have never been incarnate in any body. The alternative is that the forces involved are generated, at unconscious level, within living brains. It is difficult to discriminate observationally or experimentally between those two hypotheses, but the following case is interesting, if not absolutely conclusive.

In 1991 a middle-aged couple living in Hertfordshire began to be afflicted by a comparatively mild poltergeist. The phenomena lasted for five years and were extensively studied. At the end of that time the wife, who appeared to be the focus of the activity, contracted terminal cancer. The psychokinetic effects continued up to the time of her death and then ceased abruptly.

The second kind of evidence from parapsychology is mental. Nothing physical happens, but a medium conveys verifiable information to which she could not possibly have had access by normal exercise of the senses. Again terms – extra-sensory perception (ESP) and telepathy – have been coined to describe this. And again I regard it as beyond reasonable doubt that such effects occur. As with PK, two hypotheses contend to explain the facts. The spiritualist hypothesis assumes that the medium derives her information from spirits, as she invariably claims to do. The other that she trawls telepathically for information stored in the memories of living brains and retrieves it without the owners of these brains being aware of what is happening.

As a variant of this type of phenomenon, occasionally someone claims to remember details, some of which can be verified, of a

past life: and this has been held to support the hypothesis of reincarnation. But, as with mediumistic communications, the alternative of unconscious telepathy from the living is also a possibility.

As with the physical phenomena, it is difficult to discriminate experimentally between the two explanations, since the information a medium conveys to those who sit with her is generally known to them anyway, and theoretically could have been known to *somebody* living. This is also true of cases of supposed reincarnation. However, between 1902 and 1915 a series of communications, collectively known as the Cross Correspondences, was received ostensibly from recently deceased members of the Society for Psychical Research, by several mediums. These communications had as their object the elimination of telepathy from living brains as an explanation, and hence conclusive proof of the survival of the human soul. Moreover, if the object is deemed to have been achieved, the entire operation must have been designed by the surviving spirit of Frederick Myers, a leading member of the SPR, who had died in 1901.

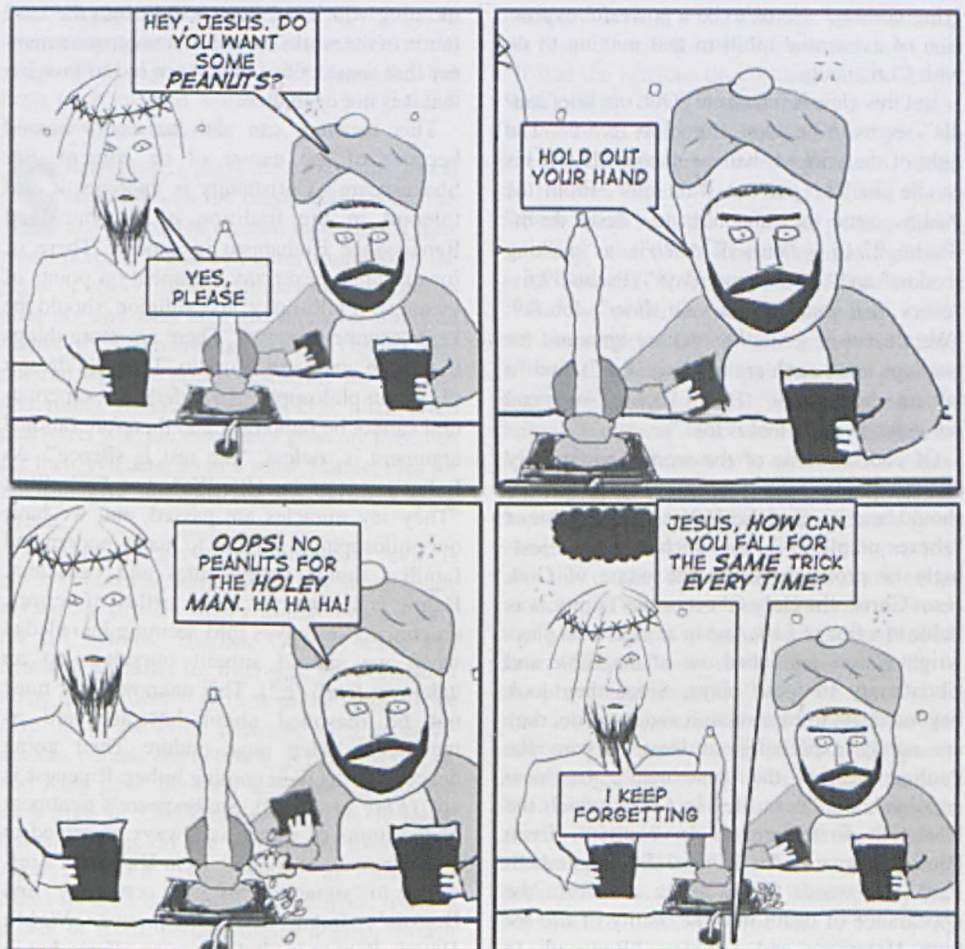
It is notoriously difficult to summarise the Cross Correspondences, and the results of the exercise are still disputed today, even among members of the SPR. For one thing, it has been plausibly suggested that the entire corpus of evidence could have been orchestrated by the unconscious mind of one of the living investigators involved, Mrs A W Verrall.

But, whether or not that is the explanation, it has to be said that the entire dialogue between Myers and other apparently deceased entities, and the living was conducted in an empirical and secular atmosphere. Of course it had to be so. Myers had to convey information which could be verified by those on earth and in the body. If he had told his earthly colleagues that, for instance, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone and not from the Father and the Son, he would hardly have demonstrated evidence of his survival.

But, even allowing for that, Myers never betrays any hint of a *religious* experience; here is no rapture of the mystics; no Moses before the burning bush; no Bernadette in her grotto at Lourdes; no Buddha enlightened under his boh tree; in short no idea of the Holy. The spirit of Myers, if that is what was communicating, was as concerned with practical matters as was his living contemporary Einstein, who was pursuing his own hard questions at the same time.

For the sake of argument I'm going to assume that Myers *has* proved his point and that it was his surviving spirit which was communicating. So where does that leave me as I stride forward into my seventies? If, to my astonishment, I do find myself still surviving after my bodily death – I guess I'll be an atheist ghost.

Jesus and Mo



The question of Shakespeare's religion, or lack of it, is a subject of endless speculation. Was he a Catholic, as Clare Asquith suggests in her recent book *Shadowplay?* Was he a conforming Anglican, as A L Rowse steadfastly affirms in his biographies? Or was he even an atheist, as Gary Sloan suggests in the April *Freethinker*?

The answer, surely, is that the dramatist was a liberal Christian. Firstly, his works make an extensive use of the Bible and there is hardly a book in the Old or New Testament which is not represented by some chance word or phrase in one or other of the plays. Peter Milward cites numerous examples in Shakespeare's *Religious Background* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973). Thus Adriana's speech on the ideal relationship between husband and wife in *The Comedy of Errors* (2:1) makes reference to Psalm 8, and her speech beginning "How comes it now, my husband" (2:2) alludes to Ephesians 5. This passage is also used by Katherina in her speech on the duty of wives to their husbands in *The Taming of the Shrew* (5:2). Again, Portia's whole speech on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* is a tissue of texts from the Old and New Testaments. The same applies to Isabella's similar speech in *Measure for Measure*, a play whose very title echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:2). It has often been claimed that, nevertheless, the great pessimistic speeches of Hamlet, Macbeth and Lear are in no way biblical. Macbeth's "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech about life being a "tale told by an idiot... signifying nothing" seems to be a powerful expression of existential nihilism and nothing to do with Christianity.

But this view is mistaken. "Out, out brief candle" seems to be taken from Job 18:5-6: "The light of the wicked shall be quenched...and his candle shall be put out with him". From the Psalms come the references to "dusty death" (Psalm 22:15 - "dust of death"), a "walking shadow" and "all our yesterdays" (Psalm 39:6 - "every man walketh in a vain show"; Job 8:9: "We are but of yesterday and are ignorant: for our days upon earth are but a shadow"), and "a tale told by an idiot" (Psalm 90:9 - "we spend our years as a tale that is told").

Of course, some of the works, particularly the last plays, have a pagan setting, but we should bear in mind the 1606 act in restraint of "abuses of players", by which any actor jestingly or profanely using the name of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost or the Trinity, was liable to a fine of £10. And in any case the playwright makes continued use of the Bible and Christianity in these plays. Since they look beyond death to resurrection and new life, they are surely expressing, at least in part, the Pauline ideal of the "new man", the "new creation", the "new life" in Christ which the Christian first receives in baptism. Even Paulina's name in *The Winter's Tale* suggests St Paul. Her words to the statue transform the appearance of death into the reality of life for both Hermione and Leontes: "Bequeath to

death your numbness, for from him Dear life redeems you". In *The Tempest* Christian symbolism is super-imposed on pagan myth. Many Renaissance humanists including Shakespeare tried to reconcile ancient Greek and Roman religions with Christianity. Prospero is both Orpheus, who was the greatest musician and poet of Greek myth, and the Christian God; Ferdinand, who "dies" during the masque and then ascends to heaven, is a Christ figure; Miranda is the "bride" of Christ; and Caliban is the devil.

Ariel is not only the Greek Hermes, the messenger of the gods, but also plays the part assigned in the Old Testament to the Angel of the Lord and in the New Testament to the Spirit. In the Gospel story it is the Spirit which descends upon Christ when he has risen from the baptismal water and which leads him up to wander in the wilderness. Similarly, it is Ariel in the play who brings the travellers out of the sea to wander in the maze of the "desolate isle".

The dramatist has consciously woven together pagan and Christian mythology because, as Colin Still argues in *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, they share a "timeless theme", namely man's spiritual pilgrimage in which through redemption and rebirth he can reverse the Fall. It is the story of the upward struggle of the human spirit, individual or collective, out of the darkness of sin and error, into the light of wisdom and truth. So, despite their secular appearance, the Shakespeare plays often conceal a deep undercurrent of religious meaning, a meaning which has been woven into the very fabric of the works in such an unobtrusive manner that some critics have been led to imagine that it is not even there.

This meaning can also be easily missed because of the nature of its content. For Shakespeare's Christianity is undogmatic and tolerant in the tradition of Erasmus and Renaissance Humanism in general. There is, for example, never any argument on points of theology. Philosophy and religion should be kept separate because: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (*Hamlet*). The supernatural cannot be fathomed, and therefore rational argument is useless: "the rest is silence". As Lafeu suggests in *All's Well that Ends Well*: "They say miracles are passed; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear" (2:3). This unknown fear must not be reasoned about but accepted as inevitable: "Men must endure Their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all" (*King Lear*, 5:2). Shakespeare's treatment of the limits of reason is always presented in this supernatural context, as in Hippolyta's reference to "something of great constancy" and Bottom's dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Reason is vital in human affairs, but in

Shakespeare?

matters of religion it is not enough. Shakespeare shared all the characteristics of a Renaissance humanist. He was a man of the highest culture and a large familiarity with the classics, which are of central importance in the plays and in the structure of his imagination.

The works are saturated with his favourite classical authors, especially Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Plautus, Cicero, Terence and Plutarch. Indeed, he has the ancient mythology and history at his finger tips.

BRIAN McCLINTON, Editor of *Humani* (Humanist Association of Northern Ireland journal) argues that, although a Christian, Shakespeare was a humanist in the Renaissance tradition.

He also shared the Renaissance desire to seek the truth about human nature. The ancient adage *nosce teipsum* - know thyself - was a key principle of humanist thought and Hamlet's speech about holding the mirror up to nature implies that poetry and drama can help us to acquire that wisdom. By doing so, we can better guard against the barbarism lurking below the surface which the baser side of human nature creates, and instead promote the more civilised values. As Robin Headlam Wells writes, Shakespeare's plays show their humanist origins in the themes they dramatise: "Repeatedly, they come back to those matters that concern Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*: 'the properties of government', 'our city's institutions', 'the terms for common justice', 'the nature of our people'" (*Shakespeare's Humanism*, p27).

At first glance, his humanism seems close to the disillusioned brand of Montaigne, who stressed the limitations of reason and understanding in human affairs, in contrast to the optimism of Bacon, Erasmus and most other Renaissance writers, who believed that cultivating reason would lead to a better understanding of how to act and thus to great benefits for society as a whole. Shakespeare's apparent scepticism about such matters is exemplified in Hamlet's famous speech: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (Act II, Scene II). This appears to be a counterblast to Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Yet it is hardly the full picture.

Hamlet in the early part of the play is a confused and disillusioned idealist. But he matures as he grows older. Ultimately the play chal-

e's Humanism

lenges Hamlet's early cynicism. Similarly, the author himself shows progression from the tragedies to the late romances, where the message is quintessentially humanist. Prospero in *The Tempest* is a metaphor for the civilising power of the artist and educator whose "liberal arts" tame the tempests in the human spirit. He exhibits the ennobling qualities of compassion, generosity, friendship, wisdom, and so on. He does not seek to retaliate against those who wronged him; he seeks only to bring them out of the darkness of hatred and revenge.

Bernard D Grebanier writes: "Shakespeare is perhaps the perfect expression of Renaissance humanism. His profound sympathy for humanity enabled him to pierce to the very core of his characters; his unexcelled gifts as a poet made his men and women unforgettable creatures of flesh and blood. This may be said as much of the best of his earliest plays as of *The Tempest*, where Prospero is himself a kind of incarnation of the best of what the Renaissance had extended to mankind" (Bernard D Grebanier, et al. *English Literature and Its Backgrounds*. New York: Holt, 1950 (p 242). It is also important to stress that, like many Renaissance humanists, Shakespeare had a sceptical outlook, and delighted more in presenting issues than in espousing systems, and held critical awareness, as opposed to doctrinal rectitude, to be the highest possible good. It is precisely what Keats called "negative sensibility", in which the author is content and proud to be in a state of doubt.

An increasing number of writers are becoming aware of the deliberately dialectical and provisional nature of his works and the fact that they dramatise the unresolvable tensions that are the fundamental conditions of life. Similarly, his unparalleled realism may be seen as the ultimate embodiment, in poetic terms, of the intense concern for specificity endorsed by humanists from the 14th century on.

Shakespearean drama is a treasury of the disputes that frustrated and delighted humanism, including (among many others) action versus contemplation, theory versus practice, art versus nature, *res* versus *verbum*, monarchy versus republic, human dignity versus human depravity, and individualism versus communality. In treating of these polarities, he generally proceeds in the manner of Castiglione and Montaigne, presenting structures of balanced contraries rather than syllogistic endorsements of one side or another. In so doing, he achieves a higher realism, transcending the mere imitation of experience and creating, in all its conflict and fertility, a mirror of mind itself.

Since the achievement of such psychological and cultural self-awareness was the primary goal of humanistic inquiry, and since humanists agreed that poetry was an uncommonly effective medium for this achievement, Shakespeare

must be acknowledged as a pre-eminent humanist. Shakespeare, however, eschews moralising. Preaching constrains the mind, a thought echoed by Lucio in *Measure for Measure*: "And yet, to say the truth, I had as lief have the foppery of freedom as the morality of imprisonment". The absence of an obvious ethical viewpoint has led some critics to assume that Shakespeare has none. Dr Johnson lamented that "he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose". Yet Johnson forgets the Renaissance habit of instructing by pleasing. Consider Hamlet's "mirror up to nature" speech. Here the playwright seems to be telling us what he is trying to do in his plays, and Johnson concludes that Shakespeare is indeed a great poet of human nature in the sense of laying it bare in all its great variety.

But Levin comments: "The Elizabethan conception of art as the glass of nature was ethical rather than realistic, for it assumed that, by contemplating situations which reflected their own, men and women could mend their ways and act with greater resolution thereafter" (H Levin: *The Question of Hamlet*, 1959, p157). In other words, by exposing the weaknesses, cynicism and evil in the world and the destructive consequences which they inevitably produce, the playwright is educating his readers to avoid the same mistakes. And he is doing it through "the foppery of freedom" rather than the "morality of imprisonment". In fact, Shakespeare states this purpose clearly in Jaques' speech in *As You Like It*: "Invest me in my motley; give me leave To speak my mind, and I will through and through Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world, If they will patiently receive my medicine".

Shakespeare's plays are profoundly moral and deal with the deepest ethical themes and issues. The clearest indication of their moral purpose is that evil never triumphs in the plays. It always suffers ultimate defeat. Othello does not end with Iago gloating over the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona. Hamlet does not end with the prince destroying his enemies and ruling Denmark happily ever after. Even characters who are essentially good are punished for their evil acts; so in a sense Hamlet dies for the killing of Polonius and Romeo for slaying Tybalt.

Despite its pervading presence, evil is always shown as being avoidable. Shakespeare invariably stresses man's moral responsibility for his actions. Hamlet, Othello, Lear and Macbeth all suffer for their sins, not because of some divine decree written in the stars. To be sure, there are often portents, such as earthquakes, comets and eclipses, as in Julius Caesar and King Lear, but they are usually presented as a sign of God's anger to come if fallen human beings do not repent and avoid evil. Again, when we seek to discover Shakespeare's basic ethical principles, we find a lack of fixed, predetermined dogma, though

with some exceptions. "Unbitted lusts" and passions, combined with egotism, overcoming reason is a constant theme. The title of *The Tempest* alone symbolises the storms of the emotions. Prospero seeks revenge for his banishment, but the movement of the play is towards the recovery of his humanity. In forgiveness he finds not only a way towards justice but also a road back into human society itself. And by submitting his capacity to reason, Prospero epitomises Renaissance Humanist thought: "Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury do I take part: the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance". In *The Tempest* we see Shakespeare's supreme humanism at work, expressing not only a feeling for human fallibility but also an ability to see man as a potential god-like creature with powers of moral judgment finally equal to the emotional struggles these powers engender.

In Shakespeare we find also a preoccupation with "balance" between self and others. It is noticeable that all his villains are individualists, motivated primarily by egotism. Richard of Gloucester sums it up: "I am myself alone". Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* avers: "Simply the thing I am shall make me live". And Iago says: "In following him, I follow but myself". The selfish ambitions of such people, or their lust or envy, lead to chaos and disaster. Moreover, by asserting themselves at the expense of others, they become isolated not only from other people but also from themselves. So, after the death of Duncan, Macbeth confesses that: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself". The evil acts snowball, and the result is described by Albany in King Lear: "If that the heavens do not their visible spirits Send quickly down to tame these vile offences, It will come Humanity must perforce prey on itself. Like monsters of the deep" (Act 4, Scene 2). Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and so on, are all faced with the choice of putting themselves or others first. Their tragedies therefore arise ultimately from their own selfishness.

On the positive side, Shakespeare extols the humanist virtue of "philanthropia". Thus when Lady Macbeth suggests to her husband that his nature is "too full o' the milk of human kindness", she wants him to become less human and more of a monster. An essential feature of kindness is the capacity for fellow-feeling, and clearly Shakespeare's good characters have this quality in common. It is also this quality that shines through the entire works and causes commentators to refer to the playwright's great compassion. Indeed, love of humanity is the overriding theme of the plays (the tragedies illustrate the loss of this love). Repentance and forgiveness are continually stressed and Portia's great speech about the quality of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* expresses sentiments which surely lie deeply in the heart of the author: "It is an attribute to God himself; And earthly power doth then show likest God's When mercy seasons justice" (Act 4, Scene 1).

First of all, a warning to all my friends and acquaintances who are all too familiar with my views on religion. If any of you are reading this, please pour yourself a large, strong drink of your choice and sit down in your most comfortable chair. Sitting comfortably? Good. I can now begin. I have decided to read the Bible. The reason for this apparent temporary insanity is not some overnight religious conversion, but a genuine interest in researching the detailed contents of this apparently widely-read book.

After all, we are told that it has topped the best-seller list for hundreds of years, with many people believing that every word between its well-thumbed covers is literally true. We are frequently told that we should all be happier if we used its contents as a guide to a well-balanced life, resulting in a feeling of total well being. Yet as far as I am aware, this world-beating text has never been properly reviewed. Its contents seem to have been ignored by all the review sections of the broad sheets and the tabloids. Even *The Times Literary Supplement* has chosen to sideline this venerable publication.

I have therefore decided in my own small way to correct this oversight. I confess that I am not a professional book reviewer; my last attempt at such a venture was while I studying for my GCE English Literature "O" level, which I passed, but not with particular distinction. I was, however, once awarded my school's Special English prize, for which I had to review four novels of my own choice. This prize was not in the Pulitzer category and I have to confess that the competition was not strong. There was one other entrant, a fellow student called Richard Porter, as I recall. The only novel that I chose to review that I can now remember was Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and I would like to set the record straight by confessing that my review was based entirely on a children's abridged edition of the book and more importantly having just seen the film starring Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab.

In fact, if I am being totally honest, I never actually finished reading even this shortened version of the novel and my review was largely based on Mr Peck's performance in the film. I must apologise at this point to Richard Porter who may feel when he reads this that he was cheated out of his just rewards.

Despite my less-than-honest efforts, the Special English prize at Holme Valley Grammar School was pushed in my direction and I shall use this honour, no matter how humble, to justify my qualification as a suitable reviewer of the word of God.

The Bible, for those few people not familiar with it, is a long book; usually presented in such small print that one would be forgiven for thinking that the publishers are in league with the Royal Institute of Opticians. It has a large word count and is divided into smaller books which combine to make the whole. I have therefore decided that reviewing such a work

in its entirety at one sitting is far beyond my limited capabilities, and I shall tackle the individual books of the Bible separately. I intend to start with Leviticus. This may seem a strange choice since it is possibly one of the more obscure sections of the Bible. I do have my reasons, however. I have been reliably informed that a comedian at last year's Edinburgh Festival based his entire act on the contents of Leviticus. I have therefore decided to start my task with what must be one of the more light-hearted books that constitute the writings of the scribes and prophets. What follows is my own personal literary review of the Bible's book of Leviticus, apparently a riot of comedy.

I must say, though, that the comedic content of Leviticus is disappointing. It totally lacks the traditional shaggy dog stories and one-line gags that I had been led to believe were its stock in trade. It seems to have been written not to amuse or entertain the reader but to inform. At first glance it appears to be little more than a series of household hints. These include: culinary advice, particularly in relation to barbeques, tips on personal hygiene and a section on sex education thrown in for good measure.

The first nine chapters of the book are dedicated entirely to various recipes and recommendations to those lovers of the barbeque. Being an enthusiast of outdoor cooking myself I found many of the suggestions quite fascinating. There are descriptions of how to prepare a variety of meats. These include suggestions on slaughtering and preparing the fuel for the barbeque. I do, however, have some reservations. My own barbeque apparatus is quite small, of the kettle variety with a diameter of fifteen inches (approximately 40 cm) and it is difficult to see how it is going to cope with complete bullocks, sheep and goats – even when they have been appropriately "flayed". However, I am looking forward to trying out the recipes for lamb and turtle dove, although, without further research in my local supermarket, I am at a complete loss as to where I might obtain a reliable source of frankincense. After all, I have enough trouble finding good quality goose fat. The suggestion of sprinkling fresh blood from the animals around the barbeque is a novel idea, and will almost certainly keep flies away from the cooked food while it is being consumed at the table.

There are, however, some unfortunate omissions from this section of the book. This I feel is rather disappointing in what purports to be a comprehensive text on the subject. For example, there is no mention of the preparation and cooking of pork or fish. This is a pity, as virtually all other types of meat are dealt with extremely thoroughly. There is also no mention of barbeque sauces or marinades. The former did not particularly bother me as I find some of the commercially available sauces a little strong for my own taste, smothering the flavour of the food. Marinades however are a different matter. Marinating the meat for a few

Leviticus:

hours in a mixture of olive oil, herbs and wine (white for poultry and fish, red for beef, lamb and pork) not only tenderises the meat, but also compliments the flavour in a more delicate way than does a barbeque sauce.

A couple of final comments regarding this part of the book: I can appreciate that one should always try to use the freshest ingredients available when preparing and cooking food, particularly outdoors. However, actually slaughtering the animals at the barbeque could be fraught with problems. Surely the food hygiene inspectorate will have to be involved and those carrying out the killing will require the appropriate licences. This could over-complicate what is surely supposed to be a leisurely social event with friends and family. I also found the literary style of this section of the book unimaginative and in places very repetitive.

DR RAY NEWTON, a 'devout' Darwinian, and a member of the National Secular Society, goes in search of laughs in Leviticus, but finds precious little humour

Chapter ten of Leviticus I found rather rambling in its style. It is difficult to ascertain what the author is getting at here, apart from a few tips on eating close to the barbeque (presumably so that the food is consumed hot and fresh), and what appear to be vague instructions on washing your hands before handling food, a rather obvious tip which hardly requires the laboured emphasis that it receives here.

Chapter 11 seems to be in the wrong place. It surely would have served better as an introduction to the book, rather than positioning it here in the middle of the narrative. The beginning of the chapter simply lists the foodstuffs that the author likes and dislikes and it has to be said that he seems to have a somewhat fussy appetite. But it does go some way to explain some of the omissions of the opening chapters.

His main likes are those animals that are cloven-hoofed and chew the cud. He does not recommend creatures which do either, but crucially *not both*. This perhaps explains the exclusion of pork from his barbeque menu since pigs are cloven-hoofed but do not chew the cud. His other dislikes include: eagles, vultures, ospreys and various other birds. He recommends fish with scales, but not without scales. This presumably means such items as prawns, crayfish, crabs and lobsters. If this is the case then I can only say that he does not know what he is missing! Strangely he does recommend two varieties of locusts, but not

s: A review

other crawling specimens. In trying to analyse all this I could only conclude that the author has had unfortunate experiences with some of these foods when he was a child. If this is true then I have some sympathy. The first boiled egg I was given as an infant caused me to vomit. Since then I have had a serious aversion to boiled, fried or even poached eggs. To be truthful, I still have problems with omelettes. The chapter concludes with advice regarding the consumption of contaminated water.

The hygiene and health theme continues in the following chapters. The suggestions for dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of contagious diseases are fundamentally sound; interestingly, the author gives no statistics regarding recovery rates for patients treated in the manner described. He also appears to have a particular obsession with leprosy. Removal of contaminated clothing and bedding to an "unclean place" will no doubt reduce the possibility of further infection, but demolishing a house that has suffered two such contaminations is perhaps a little draconian. No specific advice is given on methods to avoid further contamination of the immediate area while contaminated material is moved to an "unclean place". Surely face masks would be a minimum requirement.

I am afraid I now have to discuss sections of the book that will no doubt cause considerable controversy. First of all Leviticus' attitude towards feminine hygiene. He suggests that women who have just given birth should be regarded as "unclean". Furthermore, he incorporates ideas which can only be described as sexually discriminatory in that if the woman has given birth to a son she should be considered "unclean" for a week, if she has given birth to a daughter this period should be extended to two weeks.

Similarly, women who are menstruating should be considered "unclean" and furthermore should not be touched during this time! I congratulate the author on his misplaced courage and sincerely hope that the feminist lobby don't find out where he lives! Besides, the advice given here is totally impractical. Adult human females are what is biologically known as secret ovulators. Only themselves and those enjoying intimate knowledge of them will be aware of their condition. Surely Mr Leviticus is not advocating that women should hang a sign round their necks when they are having their period. Perhaps he would like those in charge of public transport to set aside clearly marked seats for women to use at "that time of the month".

There is also a long chapter devoted to sex education. Here the book understandably

strongly discourages incest and bestiality, but again the author seems to be unable to avoid the controversial as he also shows his disapproval of masturbation and homosexuality. In particular his advice on men not "lying together" will have the gay rights protesters up in arms. Should they get together with the feminists, Mr Leviticus' life will not be worth living!

The concluding chapters of the book are concerned with general morals and curiously some agricultural tips; when to plant, sow and reap etc. The moral guidance given does seem unnecessary; consisting of advice on refraining from stealing, committing adultery, murder etc. Not

God does not hate shrimp – just Jews it would appear

SAMUEL Silver, chairman of a fundamentalist Jewish organisation, Toward Tradition, has been clearly rattled by the appearance on the American scene of the God Hates Shrimp movement – so much so that he was driven to post an article on the TT website to counter the GHS campaign of "disinformation".

In it, he makes a rather startling assertion. "No, God does not 'hate' shrimp, but He does instruct the Jewish people that they should not eat it as one part of their particular spiritual regimen to be a 'holy people' and a 'light unto the nations'. He made shrimp tasty for non-Jews, so they should enjoy shrimp as He intended. For Jews, we now have fake shrimp, made from kosher fish, to satisfy our desire for the taste of shrimp."

Depriving Jews of the scrumptious taste of real shrimp and other shellfish – while allowing gentiles to indulge to their stomach's content – seems mean-spirited, if not actually cruel, but, let's face it, God is the most vindictive, dysfunctional character in world fiction, and we should not be surprised by one more unpleasant aspect of his vile personality.

Silver then points out that "the Bible forbids the eating of shrimp and other shellfish for Jews as part of the kosher dietary laws. It also forbids homosexual behaviour for all humans, Jew and non-Jew alike. In an attempt to justify and normalise homosexual behaviour while ridiculing religious opposition, secular fundamentalists claim Judaism and Christianity equate the two because the Bible describes both as 'abominations'. They are wrong.

"These attempts at 'argument by ridicule' are completely baseless ... The words in the original biblical Hebrew, both loosely translated by some as 'abomination', are completely different: *toeivah* for homosexual behaviour (Leviticus 18:22) and *sheketz* for shrimp/shellfish and kosher food (Leviticus 11:10). 'Detesting' or 'loathing' might be better translations of *sheketz*; while 'abomination' with a moral connotation seems to be a more appro-

only does this seem a superfluous recommendation for any civilised society, regardless of religious belief, but I suspect that portions of the text here have been plagiarised from other books in the Bible. If this is so, I don't feel that this is a good example to set, particularly by a writer so keen on capital punishment for even the most innocuous transgressions.

In summarising Leviticus, I would say that it contains a treasure chest of extremely useful advice for those enthusiastic time-travellers wishing to return to the Middle East of two thousand years ago, but I suspect that it will be of limited appeal to most readers.

appropriate translation of *toeivah*. Since these words are completely different in derivation, there is no linguistic basis for direct comparison, much less religious equivalence. This alone reduces the claim of equivalence to nonsense, but in fact there are other enlightening differences between shrimp and homosexuality.

"With shrimp (Leviticus 11:10), the full phrase is *sheketz hame lachem*, 'they shall be a detestable thing to you'. *Lachem* means 'to you' in the plural. The description of homosexual behavior as *toeivah*, an 'abomination', excludes any reference 'to you'. For shrimp, this might be interpreted as 'detestable to the Jewish people', but for homosexual activity, there is an implied 'abomination to God', not 'to you' – a major difference.

"Another interpretation of the lack of 'to you' for homosexual activity points to the universality of this prohibition, compared to the laws of kosher food, which are applicable only to 'you', the Jewish people. Judaism considers homosexual behavior a universal prohibition for all mankind ...

"The 'punishments' for homosexual activity include death (not necessarily enacted by humans) and *kares* (spiritual excision), but death and *kares* are not punishments for violation of the kosher dietary laws. Obviously, homosexual behavior is clearly a much more serious sin than eating shrimp. Again, direct comparison is meaningless.

"Without a deep understanding of the true meaning of biblical prohibitions and punishments, people are easy prey for this type of disinformation."

– Barry Duke

No shrimp – and no internet either

ORTHODOX Jewish leaders in Lakewood, New Jersey, have ordered parents with children at religious schools to remove the internet from their homes, or face the penalty of having their children expelled.

Many, if not most, Orthodox Jews in Lakewood have complied with the edict, but others are quietly defying the ban, or ridiculing it online in anonymous blogs.

Community leaders say no one yet has had their children expelled from school. The ban was apparently ordered to protect youngsters from accessing "undesirable" internet sites.

Faith and Science

MAY I add a footnote to the debate occasioned by Dan O'Hara's letter on faith and science in the April issue?

Much has been made of the distinction between "methodological" naturalism and "philosophical" naturalism, and several contributors, most notably Prof Pigliucci, have pointed out that, although science is conducted exclusively in accordance with methodological naturalism, this does not automatically entail the conclusion that the supernatural does not exist.

True, in the sense that it is impossible to prove a negative.

When the astronomer Laplace told Napoleon that he had no need of that hypothesis (God) to explain the movements of the planets, he had not proved the non-existence of the deity.

However, science does possess a methodology for dealing with unprovable negatives; the principle of parsimony: what Dr Stovold calls Occam's Razor. If Laplace like every other scientist did not find it necessary to invoke the supernatural in explanation of observed fact – and O'Hara's love of Bach is as much a red herring here as my predilection for haggis – then philosophical naturalism, although not ineluctably entailed by logic, should be accepted – at least until pigs fly.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

SOME 40-odd years ago I reviewed a number of works by modernist theologians. Thankfully, I've since turned to more profitable reading, and I recall little about them save that they all appealed to philosophical and pseudophilosophical jargon to confound the innocent.

Daniel O'Hara follows in this noble tradition (June) with "methodological naturalism", "ontological naturalism", "first order substantives" and "second-order disciplines".

What does all this dreary jargon mean?

No, no, I'm sorry. Please don't even think of replying. Instead, let us apply some increasingly uncommon common sense.

If there is a "category mistake" in this argument, it's Mr O'Hara's belief that all emotions have similar causes and explanations, so that aesthetic feelings equate to religious feelings. But whereas music, poetry and art are demonstrable entities, God and eternal life are not. Religious feelings come under the categories of hope, fears, illusions, hallucinations and delusions, which may seem real to those who experience them but have no objective reality.

I'm delighted to hear that postmodernism (and the Bishop of Durham) has abolished "the traditional divide between 'nature' and 'supernature'". If so, it's probably the only good thing post-modernism has done. But spiritualists and Blavatskian Theosophists have traditionally sought to prove the spiritual materialistically through Mahatma letters,

materialisations of the dear departed, transmutation and/or levitation of the medium and a cacophony of aerial bells, trumpets and disembodied voices. Unfortunately, all of these phenomena have, on investigation, turned out to be non-reproducible or demonstrable frauds.

We're also told that the bishop has revealed Occam's (actually, Ockham's) Razor as "two edged". May I guess that the learned father-in-God has shown that scientific explanations of natural and supernatural phenomena are complex and the simplest explanation is "God did it"? As W S Gilbert wrote of another incredible explanation in *The Mikado*, nothing could possibly be more satisfactory!"

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

IN June's *Freethinker*, Dan O'Hara defends religious scientists, but is critical of more sceptical scientists such as Richard Dawkins who "go beyond methodological naturalism and embrace an ontological naturalism that is in no way demanded by the scientific enterprise". In reality, however, the sceptic's position is the more restrictive. Ontological naturalism says that only natural forces exist, but religious scientists go beyond this because they invoke supernatural forces as well.

I'm a little unsure as to what Dan O'Hara actually believes. He stated that Occam's razor was a double-edged sword, yet he felt free to use it himself in accusing sceptical scientists of "going beyond" what is necessary. On the one hand, Dan agrees with me that scientific methodology should adhere to methodological naturalism. Implicit in this idea is, of course, the assumption that the nature/supernature dichotomy can be drawn. (How can one adhere to methodological naturalism unless one can distinguish it from methodological supernaturalism?) On the other hand, he notes that the Bishop of Durham, Dr. Tom Wright, "perhaps the ablest Anglican thinker for generations", "completely rejects the dichotomy" between the natural and the supernatural! So either Dan and I have it wrong, or "the ablest Anglican thinker for generations" is mistaken. I'm with Dan in this instance.

Dan derives benefits from listening to Bach, and asks, "If others gain the same from prayer, who are we to gainsay them?" Evangelicals claim that prayer can heal the blind and the lame in an instant. Prayer can even raise the dead. Unless listening to Bach has some pretty remarkable effects on Dan, I think his comparison is somewhat spurious. Granted, prayer may well "work" for people in ways that are less remarkable, just as the placebo effect does, or as music can – but that only shows us that the power of the mind is not fully understood – it's not a good reason to leap to supernatural "explanations".

Of course, scientists have a sense of wonder – and Dawkins has written of what he calls his own "poetic wonder" for science. Some people

think an idea "true" because they find it wonderful. Scientists like Dawkins, however, take a more cautious approach. They provisionally accept a wonderful idea as being true only if it is not overly complex and agrees with the evidence.

It's rather simplistic to accuse Dawkins of "scathing animosity towards all forms of religion". He agrees with some religious teachings but rejects the doublethink that comes with them: "We pick and choose the nice bits of Scripture (like the Sermon on the Mount) and blithely ignore the nasty bits (like the obligation to stone adulteresses, execute apostates, and punish the grandchildren of offenders)". In his book *The Ancestor's Tale*, Dawkins quotes Charles Darwin on the same page as the prophet Ezekiel, and draws a parallel between the two. Hardly "scathing animosity"! Clear-thinking scientists, it seems, can share a religious person's sense of poetic wonder, and at the same time be harsh critics of religious methodology.

DR ROBERT STOVOLD
Brighton

SOME of those who criticised me here in May and June (the latter must wait for a detailed response) seem in danger of confusing science with scientism, defined (in Webster, 1983) as: "An exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation, as in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities."

On 21 April 2006, Kevin Shapiro, a researcher in neuroscience at Harvard, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*: "The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins ... has compared faith to a "virus" that enfeebles the mind. This kind of notion is no longer science – it's scientism." Dawkins' fellow ultra, Daniel Dennett, who regards Darwinism as a "universal acid", also embraces scientism, as such eminent evolutionists as Niles Eldredge and Simon Conway Morris have recognised. Dennett's claim to have "explained" consciousness is perhaps no less "preposterous" than the chameleon-like F H Amplett Micklewright, whose eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism must seem doubly incomprehensible to someone of Bill Mellroy's Ulster Protestant background. [Two other leading secular humanists who embraced a religious worldview were Annie Bessant, a former vicar's wife and close associate of Charles Bradlaugh, who became a theosophist; and the philosopher CEM (Cyril) Joad of the Brains Trust, also an Appointed Lecturer at SPES, who returned to Anglicanism.]

In his 1990 Conway Memorial Lecture, the gerontologist, sexologist and Humanist, Alex Comfort (1920-2000) specifically attacked scientism. And the world-famous biochemist and geneticist, JBS Haldane (1892-1964), a Marxist and long-time supporter of the Rationalist Press Association, memorably declared: "The Universe is not only stranger



than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine", echoing Shakespeare's "There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio." Neither provides a ringing endorsement of ultras like Dawkins. Dennett and Peter Atkins, who even claims that through science alone humans will achieve omniscience. A strongly reasoned argument against such views, and S J Gould's "non-overlapping magisteria", can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/jj5k2>.

We must never forget that science is, above all, a human construct and activity; a good servant but a bad master. Its practitioners have produced many wonderful benefits for mankind, as well as outcomes with disastrous consequences for us and our planet, mostly unforeseen or unintended. It certainly does not deserve unqualified adulation, or valuing above our humanity, which some consider to have flourished more generously before the rise of modern science than it does today. Not that I wish a return to a pre-scientific age; just to see the claims of science registered with due modesty and some proper humility.

DAN O'HARA
London

The Koran

IN his article on the Koran (part 1), Gary Otten says "the same history of scepticism and degree of critical examination has not yet apparently been given to the Koran". Leaving aside the lack of parallelism in the two subjects of that sentence, I should like to draw attention to the work done by John Wansburgh, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. Ibn Warraq, in his *Why I am not a Muslim*, pp 81-4, discusses the book written by the latter two called *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, in which they claim that Islam came about in a much more eclectic and haphazard fashion, and rather later than. Muslim tradition would have it.

Denis Giron's article "Qur'an: A Work of Multiple Hands?" argues that the Koran was not the work of Mohammed but a cut-and-paste job of later hands. We know of Mohammed not through the Koran but from rather shaky traditions.

Certainly, even Muslim tradition has it that the Koran ("Recitation") was dictated to the illiterate Mohammed by the archangel Gabriel (Jibril) rather than Allah directly, and that the words ended up in written form in a variety of ways through different hands. There was no authoritative collection of the alleged revelations until after Mohammed's death in the time of the Umayyid caliphate.

BARRY THORPE
Cheadle

THERE is no other explanation of the repetitiveness and a-syntactical quality of the Koran than that it was cobbled together in the 100-120 years after Mohammed's death. So, whereas such as Ecclesiastes and the Sermon on the Mount in the

Authorized Version come over like Lewis Carroll and Gerard Manley Hopkins, magically, the Koran grabs you like some torn, wet page from an old *Readers Digest*.

I have lived in the *dar*, have long been familiar with the Koran, know about the Perso-Byzantine context and, what's more, have often heard the Koran chanted in Arabic as if it were a beautiful piece of music. Still, a question never leaves me nor the immediate answer. As this text can no more charm people for longer than, for example, most of Dryden's stuff, what is the hold?

That is where Gary Otten's main point (in his "Sceptical Reading of the Koran") is crucial, especially today, that Mohammed endlessly says that you had better accept it and keep your mouth shut.

It is a terrorized tract. Someone with the money in some country proud of its freedoms would have little difficulty bringing extensive use of the Koran to court. It is loaded with the sort of menace which is toxic to those freedoms. Certainly, our politicians are guilty of lying, singling out such as Bin Laden or Sheikh Stumpy. They only pass on the message.

As Anwar Shaikh makes clear, neither the message nor the necessity to state it becomes less imperative because of the official pretence that neither is intended.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

The cilice

THERE seems to be some confusion in terminology in your regard to your reference to a "cilice" in your June editorial. As I had never heard of this weird-looking object I looked up the word in both *Chambers* and *Oxford Dictionaries*, and both describe it as penitential haircloth garments made from the hair of Cilician goats. Cilicia was an ancient region on the southeast coast of Asia Minor, which now corresponds to the present-day province of Adana in Turkey.

It would seem you have been misinformed as to the actual name of the object featured on your editorial page, and I am now intrigued to know what exactly it is called. The plot thickens!

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Gwent

Editor's note: The object is, in fact, a cilice. What I got wrong in my original editorial was the spelling: it only has one "l". The website Wordsmith.org defines the cilice thus: Cilice (SIL-is) noun – (1) An undergarment of hair-cloth, worn by monks in penance. (2) Haircloth. From Old English cilic, from Latin cilicium, from Greek kilikion, from kilikios (Cilician). This cloth was originally made of Cilician goats' hair.

Crucially, Wordsmith adds: No more hairy undergarments now – modern cilices are usually made of wires and studded with spikes.

AS a female who suffered from the Holy Church in Ireland, long ago, I was wondering about the following: Do female members of Opus Dei get any dispensation re flagellation, the cilice etc during menstruation, lactation and pregnancy?

Obviously, "*inter urinam et faeces nasimur*", but if the child were injured, whose would be the guilt? Perhaps the rules would be like those forbidding abortion which enforce the deaths of both mother and child.

Mind you, there has been an improvement for women's status since Odo of Cluny wrote that woman was *saccus stercorum* – a bag of sh*t.

It must be some advance that women are allowed to join Opus Dei.

B L ABLE
Croydon

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Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html. Summer programme available.

Bristol Humanists: Information: Margaret Deamaley 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. Summer programme available.

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

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

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

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.

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: Meetings 2nd Wednesday of the month December to June (but not January) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information: 020 8863 2977.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Lane, Gidea Park. Thursday, July 8, 8pm. Robin Greator: *Thoughtful Thoughts about God*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Sunday, July 16, 3-7pm. 65 Austhorpe Road, Cross Gates, Leeds 15. Summer Social and Garden Party.

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. Full programme of events on website: www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens. Tel: 01553 771917.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group): Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group): Information: the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Information: Linda Wilkinson, 0208 882 0124.

North Yorkshire Humanist Group: Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm. Priory Street Centre, York.

Norwich Humanist Group: Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

Reigate & District Humanist Group. Information: Roy Adderley on 01342 323882.

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Summer programme available.

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.wmhhumanists.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: brianmcclinton@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