

£1.25

The

Vol 126 No 9  
September 2006

# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

## Religion makes monkeys of Mel and Madonna

Former Catholic Madonna wants to help conservative Catholic actor/director Mel Gibson out of 'the low' place she thinks he inhabits. But who will rescue Madonna, aka Madge, aka Esther, from the clutches of the loopy Kabbalah cult, upon which she has lavished millions of dollars?

*– The bizarre soap opera  
continues on the  
centrepages*



### Also in this issue:

Government's engagement with UK Muslims is 'counter-productive' – p2

Jailed Isle of Man pastor paid building workers slave wages – p3

Putting the fun into fundamentalism – p6

THE familiar cry arises from some Muslims living in Britain that they are being "targeted", "persecuted" and "singled out" for special treatment after the arrests for an alleged plot to bring down civil aircraft over the Atlantic. There is a strong feeling among a number of "Muslim leaders" that there will be a backlash against them.

We have yet to discover whether this "plot" is any more real than the one at Forest Gate, but most would agree that it is better to be safe than sorry. If this current "plot" turns out to be another dud, then the already fissile resentment simmering among many Muslims will increase yet further. This should not dissuade the security services from acting if they have good reason to believe that another 7/7 or 9/11 or Madrid is in the offing.

If they restrain their actions in order to placate resentment among some hyped-up Muslim youths, then sooner or later disaster will ensue. Most Muslims see that the present attention being directed at them is reasonable and sensible, and is as much for their protection as anyone else's. If there's a dirty bomb in London, we all go up, whatever our "faith".

But the angry young men continue to wallow in outrageous conspiracy theories which are encouraged by the mad mullahs among them. Only last month in TV vox pops, we've heard bearded young men yet again telling us that Princess Diana was killed because she was planning to marry a Muslim, and that the attacks on the Twin Towers were actually committed by the US Air Force.

In a taxi ride with a young Muslim driver recently, I was subjected to the full panoply of paranoia as he paraded one anti-Islamic conspiracy after another, and nothing I could say would dissuade him of their authenticity.

This is the bind that the Government has got itself into. And it is encouraging discontent by nominating official "Muslim leaders" and "spokesmen", some of whom like nothing more than to stoke up the already raging persecution complexes among young Muslims.

Generally, however, Muslims are well accepted here and can go about their daily lives unmolested. There are undoubtedly incidents of racism committed against Muslims by young men from other "communities", but those "other communities" also, in turn, get their share of injustice.

The invention of the term "Islamophobia" has, however, set back the cause of integration by decades with its insidious suggestion that Muslims are not safe in Britain. It suggests that people are being abused on a daily basis and are holed up in their ghettos, afraid that at any minute the British population is going to turn against them, precipitating a wholesale pogrom. I cannot imagine anything less likely.

There is not the slightest evidence that "Islamophobia" is rife in Britain, despite the murderous activities of a minority of young men from that religion. I see veiled women every day, and men dressed as though they were living

in Islamabad. They seem relaxed, and so do the people with whom they share their towns. But any incident, however minor, is blown up by "community leaders" into a major catastrophe by the label "Islamophobia".

### **TERRY SANDERSON, Vice President of the National Secular Society, says that the Government's approach to Muslims in the UK is counter-productive**

Muslims in this country are not well served by the people whom the government has nominated as their spokespeople. As the *Daily Telegraph* put it: "And what precisely is this 'Muslim community'? Is it represented by Khurshid Ahmed, a member of the

### **Morales: Catholic leaders acting like 'the Inquisition'**

BOLIVIAN President Evo Morales last month accused some members of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy of behaving as if they were in "the time of the Inquisition" as he defended his government's plan to remove Catholicism as the sole religion taught in schools.

Morales' comments came a day after Education Minister Felix Patzi referred to Catholic monsignors as "liars" and said they have been serving the oligarchy for the 514 years since Spain colonised the country.

"I want to ask the [church] hierarchies whether they understand freedom of religion and beliefs in our country," Morales told reporters. "It's not possible for them to impose their views." He said he was "worried by the behaviour of some Catholic Church leaders who are acting like they did in the time of the Inquisition."

In July, Patzi proposed removing Catholic education from both public and private schools, including those run by religious groups. Faced with strong opposition from Bolivia's large Catholic population, he has since said that Catholicism will be taught alongside world religions, especially Bolivian Indian religions.

Many Catholics have expressed concern at the government's stance. One Catholic organisation in the eastern city of Santa Cruz organised a street march to defend the teaching of their religion in schools, and Bolivia's Cardinal Julio Terrazas told Catholics to stop being "passive" and defend their faith.

Recent polls show that roughly two-thirds of Bolivians consider themselves Catholic.

Patzi, sociologist and Aymara Indian, has said the government hopes to "decolonise" Bolivia's education system by knocking down "ethnic borders" that for more than 500 years have marginalised Indians.

Commission for Racial Equality, who expressed his shock that young Muslims could be involved in such a plot, and voicing relief that they had been apprehended? Or is it represented by Fahad Ansar of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, who depicted the operation aimed at 'diverting attention away from its policy in the Middle East'? In truth, there is no such thing as a single 'Muslim community'. The Muslim Council of Britain is held by the Government to be the authentic voice of this frequently disparate group, which hails originally from at least a dozen different countries. But is it? A trenchant analysis *When Progressives Treat With Reactionaries* written by Martin Bright, the political editor of the Left-wing *New Statesman*, concludes: 'The Government has chosen as its favoured partner an organisation that is undemocratic, divisive and unrepresentative of the full diversity of Muslim Britain.' Too frequently, its leaders depict as mainstream what most people would describe as extreme. Its stand against terrorism has been muted."

The Government must engage with the self-defined "Muslim community" in a different way. Instead of engaging militants and people whose loyalties appear to lie elsewhere, we should be encouraging integration. Here are three suggestions that could help this process.

- Appeal for volunteers from the mainstream community to "mentor" those from other cultures who are having problems understanding how Britain works. These mentors could be trained in providing lessons in English as a second language. Women, particularly, could go to the homes of Muslim women who are trapped, unable to speak the language and totally isolated because of their lack of understanding of the British way of life. One-to-one engagement by a large-scale volunteer force would make friendships across the boundaries and help understanding both ways.

- Stop the creation of any more "faith schools". Our arguments about the divisiveness of these institutions have been well rehearsed.

- Stop consulting self-appointed "Muslim" leaders and, indeed, "leaders" of all religions. Take the emphasis off religion as an identifying factor. Leave people to observe their "faith" in any way they want, but get rid of all "faith committees", "faith units" and "faith departments" in government. Engage with people as people and not as units of religious observance.

The latest poll shows that only 50 per cent of Muslims attend a mosque, so why are "religious leaders" treated as though they are the centre of the world for all Muslims?

The secularisation of Britain is long overdue. It is our only hope. Without it, religious interests will incite this already regrettable situation until it is completely out of control.

- **Terry Sanderson's piece first appeared in the NSS's *Newsline*, and is reproduced with permission.**

# Pastor jailed for breaching Isle of Man immigration laws



VISIT the the distinctly cheesy website of the evangelical Life Church on the Isle of Man, and you will be presented with a colour photograph of South African Pieter van Rooyen, 46, founder of the church, and his wife and children. The picture shouts out "wholesome, heterosexual, honest, devout family man."

Under it appears a brief biography, which informs readers that van Rooyen's "first passion is to see lost souls saved and to disciple people to see Christ Jesus manifested in them. He also has a calling for sharing Kingdom principles with business people. He is a member of the International Christian Chamber of Commerce and lectures at the SLM Business School in Kent. He holds a B.Com and Masters Degrees in Business Administration from the University of Port Elizabeth ... Pieter is married to Sonja, a qualified social worker and gifted painting artist and professional picture framer. They have two daughters; Lezandri and Shandri ... They now live in Onchan and serve Jesus Christ in the Isle of Man."

**What this glowing spiel neglects to say is that this "saver of lost souls" is currently serving a three-month prison sentence for flying in illegal immigrants from South Africa to renovate his house for slave wages – about £1.36 an hour.**

Van Rooyen came to the UK after being head-hunted by Barclays Bank in 2001. Last year, he and his family settled on the Isle of Man, where he subsequently started the Life Church. But his idyllic existence ran into the buffers earlier this year when he appeared in a Manx court, where he pleaded guilty to a charge of breaching UK immigration laws last September when he brought five South African men to the IoM, using false documents.

The court heard that van Rooyen had faked an invitation for the five workers to take part in a business coaching course. They were allowed into the UK on the strength of this.

Prosecutor Stuart Neale said that van Rooyen had made contact with a fellow South African building contractor Jacobus Visser in August 2005. Visser worked out the cost of the work and arranged the workers' travel.

He told the workers to tell immigration officers that they were going on a "timber management course".

The workers were paid, in British terms, "slave wages" for the renovation.

The work was to take three months, and the men lived at the house while working on it. Neale said Simon Gomba was the highest-paid of the workers. He was promised R12,000 a

month, which he was to split with his cousin. However, as work progressed, payment was reduced to R10,000, which worked out at £2 each an hour. The men's hours were then extended by 15 hours a week to 72 hours, so their hourly wage was reduced to £1.36. And the workers weren't allowed outside the property without Visser or van Rooyen escorting them. Concerned members of the public reported the presence of the workers to the police.

Later, immigration officials raided the property. Visser and the men were held in prison for two months before appearing in court. Van Rooyen, meanwhile, resigned from Barclays Bank – where he was a senior manager – the day before his court appearance.

High Bailiff Michael Moyle would not accept either Visser or van Rooyen's explanations, and concluded that the offences were committed out of greed.

He passed a six-month jail term on Visser, suspended for two years, and ordered him to pay £1 500 costs. Visser and his workers were deported back to South Africa. In addition, Visser was excluded from the Isle of Man for five years.

In an email to the South African *Saturday Star* after his arrest, van Rooyen said: "The press seeks sensation and is the mouthpiece of the devil himself.

"Life Church worldwide, including all members here in the Isle of Man, are standing with me in faith for a miracle from God Almighty.

"I have made a judgment error, nothing close to what the press reports, and have deep regret about the effect of the matter.

"Please stand in faith with us for a miracle on the 6th of July 2006 [the date of his sentencing] and that the Lord will deliver me as He has done so many times in the Bible!"

On his website, van Rooyen said the facts of the case had been "misconstrued".

"I had no knowledge of the rate Mr Visser was going to pay his workers nor the profit he was going to take. Mr Visser was responsible for the payments and how his workers were treated."

Van Rooyen said matters "overtook us both and I greatly regret that my decisions have caused Mr Visser and his workers to be detained. I trust that I will be able to reconcile this matter over time and want to continue my work as a pastor with the Life Church on the Isle of Man," he said.

God, however, failed to deliver the prayed-for miracle, and van Rooyen was given a custodial sentence by Michael Moyle, who also imposed £1,500 costs. Although he jailed van Rooyen, the High Bailiff stopped short of deporting him.

A statement from the Island's Immigration Office said it was completely satisfied with the case's outcome. "This case, which has been highly unusual for the Isle of Man, clearly demonstrates the need for vigilance and for the prompt and proper prosecution of anyone found to have committed such offences," it added.

## Victory for intimidation in Brick Lane furore

FILMING in London of the critically acclaimed *Brick Lane* novel written by Bolton author Monica Ali has been cancelled because of opposition from the Bangladeshi community in the Brick Lane area of Shoreditch, who crowed that the cancellation of filming was a "victory for the community".

Opponent, few of whom had read the book, were incensed at the novel about a Bangladeshi woman being sent to London for an arranged marriage, branding it "insulting".

Ruby Films said it had been advised by police and Tower Hamlets council not to film in Shoreditch after a local business leader ominously suggested that violence might break out if filming took place in the area.

The film makers are now seeking alternative locations for exterior scenes. "We wouldn't want to go anywhere where we are not wanted, or put anyone at risk," a spokesperson for the company said, reinforcing the perception among many Britons that there is an increasing number of religious "no-go" areas developing in the UK.

HERE are two cautionary tales, both true. In late December 1995, a woman of 72 was refilling a burning paraffin stove at her home in Lewisham, England, when the paraffin spilled and ignited. The house was partially gutted and she was rendered homeless. Many of her possessions were destroyed, but she fortunately escaped almost unharmed. A friend took her into his home until she was rehoused by the council a few months later. She was very lucky.

On October 30, 2005, a man of 33 was baptising converts in a pool of water in Waco, Texas, when he asked for a microphone to address the assembled congregation. It was handed to him, but unfortunately it was not earthed, and he was instantly electrocuted before 800 people. He was very unlucky.

How did the *Freethinker* report these events? The first – rather oddly – appears not to have been reported at all, even though the subject was (and is) well-known to all its readers. She was the President of the National Secular Society, and a regular contributor to the *Freethinker*, Barbara Smoker.

The second concerns a young Baptist Minister, Kyle Lake. *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke made no attempt, in the June 2006 issue, to disguise his glee at Kyle's tragic and fatal misfortune, describing him as "too damn dumb to realise that in the *real* world – and not in the religious La-La land in which he dwelt – electrical equipment and water don't mix terribly well." Had Ms Smoker's experience been reported, it might have been apposite to point out that it is also unwise to fill a paraffin stove while it is actually alight, although you may have done it before without mishap. Even so, there should have been no gloating at her – admittedly lesser – misfortune.

But Kyle Lake received no such sympathy or consideration, merely ridicule. How does the editor further view this young man? He describes him as "first in line when boyish good looks and perfect teeth were handed out". This suggests he might have thought Kyle better employed modelling for some of the magazines sold in the "shop selling adult material" where the editor now has a "hugely satisfying part-time job as a sales assistant". "Oh, what a pity [Kyle] did not stick around long enough to collect a decent dollop of common sense" coos the editor: but do we believe in his sincerity? The rest of the story suggests we should not! At least Ms Smoker lived to reflect upon her own lack of common sense, and perhaps on the different paths taken by those close members of her family who did not reject the Catholic faith in which they were all raised.

As for Kyle Lake, the *Freethinker* predictably ridicules any suggestion that he might be enjoying a post-mortem life with the Lord he tried to serve. It is almost as though it was his very faith – not an action no less unwise than Miss Smoker's – that justified his fate in the eyes of the *Freethinker*. Readers must, of course, make up their own minds.

# Two Cautionary Tales

**DAN O'HARA castigates  
*Freethinker* editor Barry  
Duke for ridiculing the  
dead American pastor,  
Kyle Lake**

**Editor's note: Dan O'Hara, ex-cleric, ex-President of the National Secular Society, circulated his "Two Cautionary Tales" on the web, prior to submitting it to the *Freethinker* for publication. Among those who reacted in a calm and considered manner to his round-robin email was Diesel Balaam, who responded as follows.**

I don't think the editor of the *Freethinker* regards the fate of the unfortunate Kyle Lake as any less tragic than the fate of Barbara Smoker would have been, under slightly different circumstances (thankfully not so). I'm sure if he had been a sceptical observer at Lake's baptismal pool, he would have been the first person either to disconnect the electronic equipment in order to avert the tragedy, or otherwise offer cardio-vascular massage or mouth-to-mouth once it had happened (whether the preacher had boyish good looks and perfect teeth, or not).

Isn't he – admittedly dark – humour in this story based on irony? The unforeseen tragedy of one who claims to have special insight, one who is trying to "save" others, one who believes himself chosen to do God's work, and one who believes our benevolent Father will dramatically intervene to protect the righteous? There is also something very British in enjoying the calamities that befall pompous self-regard and authority (hence our love of Hyacinth Bucket and Captain Mainwaring). None of this detracts from the horror of another human being accidentally electrocuting themselves – it's the circumstances surrounding the tragedy that are funny, not the tragedy itself.

The Barbara Smoker story holds no such irony or compositeness (and hence no comedic or illuminating value), although there is a small amount of irony in her surname and her momentary lapse in rational thinking. It's worth remembering that no amusing joke or anecdote is ever in bad taste, there is only bad context (spatial and temporal). The treatment of the Kyle Lake tragedy is amusing in the

*Freethinker*; it would be cruel and reprehensible in Lake's parish magazine, though less so, many years after the tragic event occurred. Similarly, Barbara's misfortune shouldn't be made light of in the *Freethinker*, though it might well amuse a congregation of Texan evangelicals, should any of them be capable of grasping the scintilla of irony in her story.

Jokes and humorous anecdotes perform useful social functions, one of which allows us to cope with life's often grotesque game of chance. I once laughed out loud after hearing that someone had died after being struck by a cabbage thrown at random from a passing lorry. Does that make me a bad, uncaring person? Of course not. Rather like the editor of the *FT*, I've just got a Pythonesque sense of humour. Graham Norton got himself into hot water a couple of years ago for topically making light of the death of one of the BeeGees (was it Maurice?), by pondering aloud whether he sang "Staying Alive" in his American hospital bed. A funny remark, made on this side of the Atlantic, but possibly uttered a bit too soon on a TV programme widely syndicated in the US, where it was inevitably seen by the surviving Gibb brothers.

Even more controversially, there was the female Tory MP, who shortly after the Morecambe cockling tragedy in 2004 opened a private speaking engagement with a joke about two hungry sharks swimming up to Morecambe Bay because they "fancied a Chinese". And who remembers the (then) topical joke in the mid-1980s "Why is a gay man like a turkey? Because they both go gobble-gobble-gobble and they'll both be dead by Christmas!" What should our response as humanist freethinkers be to these jokes, given the pain of the tragic situations that inspired them?

Our first response should be to laugh, if we find them funny. Then we can marvel at the very human capacity to use black humour creatively as a coping mechanism for all the dreadful things that happen in the world, or that we fear might happen to us. Finally, we can admit to, and even celebrate, our own very human capacity for sadism and *schadenfreude*. Freud wrote extensively about jokes, of course, and we should not underestimate their value, even if we find ourselves tut-tutting at the way our unconscious reveals our latent desire to think the unthinkable and speak the unutterable. Jokes are freethought in its purest form.

One of my favourite amusing anecdotes involves Noel Coward, who once attended a royal procession, during which a very large and regal black lady swept past in an open carriage. "Who's that lady?" someone enquired of Coward. "The Queen of Tonga" he informed them. "And who's that little man sitting next to her?" they asked. "Oh, probably her lunch!" he replied. Naughty and very un-PC, but I bet you smiled at that too, Dan.

Humour is amoral, because it mirrors our unconscious and the vicissitudes of the natural world, which are also amoral.

# Muslims call for special bank holidays

MUSLIM leaders summoned to talks with the Government on tackling extremism in their midst have called for public holidays to mark their religious festivals, according to a report last month in the *Daily Mail*.

The Whitehall meeting was set up in response to last month's alleged airline bomb plot discovery.

Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly had prepared an uncompromising message on the need to tackle dangerous radicalism.

But, in what she admitted were "sharp"

## Muslim anger leads to Tory's suspension

A Conservative Party supporter who manages community affairs for a large telecoms company, Orange, has been suspended after complaints from Muslims about items he published on his blog, *Conservative Home*.

Inigo Wilson's "Leftie Lexicon" contains a great many "humorous definitions", but the two that raised the wrath of Muslims were these: "Islamophobic – anyone who objects to having their transport blown up on the way to work", and "Palestinians – archetype 'victims' no matter how many teenagers they murder in bars and fast food outlets. Never responsible for anything they do – or done in their name – because of 'root causes' or 'legitimate grievances'."

Wilson said his lexicon had been published in response to an article in the *Telegraph*, in which journalist Simon Heffer expressed the hope that someone would "write a book on the language of the Third Way, outlining the abuse of words – and with it the abuse of truth – that this administration has either implemented or condoned."

The *Freethinker* learned of Wilson's suspension through an item on [mediawatchwatch.org.uk](http://mediawatchwatch.org.uk), set up in January 2005 in reaction to the religious campaign against the BBC's broadcasting of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*.

MWW says "We keep an eye on those groups and individuals who, in order to protect their beliefs from offence, seek to limit freedom of expression. And we make fun of them."

MWW reported that the two definitions "caused the dribbling Allah-struck loons of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee to have a minor fit. Several of them telephoned and emailed Orange until Wilson was suspended.

"Now Inigo Wilson may be a Tory twat with a underdeveloped sense of humour, but what he writes on a blog in his own time is surely no business of his employer. And the fact that a few calls from a bunch of religious maniacs has meant he is now in danger of losing his job is rather worrying."

exchanges, some senior Muslim figures turned the tables and made a series of demands which also included the introduction of Islamic law for family matters.

Dr Syed Aziz Pasha, secretary general of the Union of Muslim Organisations of the UK and Ireland, said: "We told her if you give us religious rights, we will be in a better position to convince young people that they are being treated equally along with other citizens."

Dr Pasha said Miss Kelly had agreed to look at the proposals, though her spokesman insisted later that she did not favour any legal change which would give "special treatment" for the Muslim community.

Some of the 30 Muslim leaders at the meeting told Miss Kelly that important days in their two main religious festivals – Ramadan and Eid-ul-Adha – should be made public holidays for followers of the faith.

Sharia law, which is practised in large parts of the Middle East, should also be introduced in Britain, they argued. While it specifies stonings and amputations as routine punishments for crimes, Dr Pasha said he wanted it only for family affairs.

"We are willing to co-operate but there should be a partnership," Dr Pasha said. "They should understand our problems, then we will understand theirs."

A recent poll suggested that a third of British Muslims would rather live under Sharia law, while a similar number said they also hope Britain will one day become an Islamic state. But Dr Pasha claimed the legal changes he proposed would help convince young Muslims to integrate better into British society.

The Union of Muslim Organisations of the UK and Ireland claims to be a widely representative umbrella group. However, it does not include more influential and high-profile bodies such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Inayat Bunglawala, spokesman for the MCB, also attended the meeting but distanced his group from the calls for Sharia law.

He said: "We believe one legal code should apply for all citizens of the UK. There is no place for multiple legal systems for people of different religious or ethnic backgrounds.

"If people object to a certain law they should campaign peacefully and democratically for a change – but only so that it applies to all people, not just Muslims."

The Government has accused Muslim leaders of a "dreadful misjudgment" for claiming its foreign policy has fuelled the threat of extremism. An open letter, signed by three Muslim MPs, three peers and 38 community groups, said the "debacle" of Iraq, combined with the recent failure to do more to bring about an immediate end to the Middle East conflict, had encouraged extremists who threaten Britain.

After more than three hours of talks with the senior Muslims, Miss Kelly insisted foreign policy in Iraq and the Middle East was not the "root cause" of fundamentalism.

But she acknowledged there were "different views" over aspects of Government policy and there had been a series of "sharp and challenging exchanges".

"There is a battle of hearts and minds to be won within the Muslim community, working with the Muslim community to take on the terrorist and extremist elements that are sometimes found within it, not just in the Muslim community, but elsewhere as well."

Muslims must feel that if there was frustration on particular issues, there were "democratic channels for that to be vented", she added. "What I do accept is that there is a lot of anger and frustration out there in the community that needs to be properly expressed and vented through the democratic process."

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and Communities Minister Meg Munn also attended the meeting. Moves being discussed include "de-radicalisation forums" to help young Muslims engage with Government policy, improved spiritual guidance for Muslim university students and support for training of imams. Haras Rafiq, of the Sufi Muslim Council, said: "The first thing that we need to do as a community is admit there is a problem.

"It is like being an alcoholic – we need to stand up and say these things and have an open and honest debate."

## Hamza given leave to appeal

RADICAL Islamic cleric Abu Hamza has been given the go-ahead to challenge his convictions for incitement to murder and race-hate offences.

Three judges in London allowed his application for leave to appeal.

Hamza, who was jailed for seven years in February, was not present for the Court of Appeal hearing before Sir Igor Judge, Mr Justice Gray and Mr Justice McCombe.

Hamza, 48, was convicted by an Old Bailey jury of 11 of the 15 charges he faced. At his trial, the prosecution alleged Hamza was a recruiting sergeant for global terrorism.

The court announced its decision after submissions were made on Hamza's behalf by Edward Fitzgerald, QC, who said the long delay in bringing a prosecution against Hamza had made it "impossible" for him to have a fair trial.

Giving the court's conclusion, Sir Igor said: "We do not wish to raise any false optimism in the applicant but in our judgment there are a number of grounds drawn to our attention which are arguable." A full hearing will be heard at a later date to be fixed.

# 'Putting the fun into fundamentalism'

THE biggest collective laugh at religion and all the ludicrous and deadly things it embodies echoed throughout Edinburgh last month when a staggering number of Fringe shows with a religious theme were staged.

Some people, of course, were less than amused, notably the Christian Voice's grim head honcho Stephen Green, who was trotted out (yet again) by the BBC to appear on the mind-numbingly banal *Heaven and Earth Show* on July 6.

The vacuous Green, who keeps parroting the phrase that his imaginary friend in the sky "shall not be mocked", probably anticipated an easy ride, having forced the spineless BBC to drop Australian comedian and atheist Jim Jeffries from the *Heaven and Earth* debate about the religious content of this year's Fringe. Jeffries' *The Second Coming* was vaunted as "his most morally bankrupt show to date."

Instead, Green got Irish comedian and another outspoken atheist, Ed Byrne, who had the foresight to examine Christian's Voice's website before entering the debate, and he used it to marvellous effect. Green looked every bit like a sulky adolescent as Byrne exposed the hate-laden content of CV's website. Britain's bigot-in-chief could only writhe in discomfort.

Byrne, in his highly-successful show, *Standing Up And Falling Down*, uses mock anger to raise laughs, but, as Roger Cox of the *Scotsman* observed, "all the mock anger turns serious for a minute towards the end, when Byrne gets on to the topic of the US-based Christian activist group known as God Hates Fags. His rant draws a massive round of applause from the house and should be posted on the internet in full as soon as humanly possible."

Some of that real anger came through again when Byrne came face-to-face with Green, and this confrontation alone made the *Heaven and Earth Show* well worth watching.

At the start of the festival, under the headline "Putting the fun into fundamentalism", Stephen Armstrong of the *Sunday Times* wrote "the beauty of the Edinburgh Fringe and its uncurated philosophy is that it provides a useful annual barometer of the nation's obsessions. And this year, unsurprisingly, the nation is obsessed with God. There are a record-breaking 50 shows about religion or with religion as a theme on the Fringe next month, mainly covering the big three – Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Most of these shows are so cynical about faith that you'd almost think people were fed up with years of endless slaughter in the name of supposedly merciful gods."

Performances included a Danish Islamic comedian debating the recent Mohammed cartoon scandal, a speculative show about Jesus being arrested at US immigration and shipped off to Guantanamo Bay, plenty of spoof evan-

gelists and a farce about the Afghanistan's Jewish community under the Taliban.

"Perhaps the most interesting group of performers," wrote Armstrong, "is the stand-up comics."

## The Edinburgh Fringe pulled out all the stops to lampoon religion, reports ANNE DYSON

"Comedy and religion have had an uneasy relationship over the past two years. Stewart Lee's *Jerry Springer, The Opera* incited Christian wrath, and the recently passed Racial and Religious Hatred Act prompted even Rowan Atkinson to speak out, concerned that satire would become a criminal offence. Since the Bill received Royal Assent in February, there has been a sense in the comedy community that some stand-ups are tackling faith as a barefaced challenge to the Act: 'Come and get me, copper,' as the comedian Glenn Wool says.

"Wool's show, *You Don't Go to Hell for Eating Elephants*, is loosely based on his spiritual search for the site of the eternal inferno. Along the way, he manages to step on the conceptual toes of almost every faith's view of damnation. 'Put it this way,' he says. 'If, when I die, I hear a voice – I'm in trouble.' His theme was prompted by 'the endless destruction of the world's public transport systems in the name of God', although he's actually hoping the blasphemy laws will ultimately damage all religions. 'Islam, Judaism and Christianity say you have to go out and kill gay people,' he argues. 'Now, take Apollo. Right there you've got a god who's bisexual, if not gay. So those other faiths are actually saying you should kill another guy's god. I reckon that bans them under those laws, doesn't it?'

"The gay comedian Jason Wood's show, *My Anus Horribilis*, also deals with faith and sexuality. 'I've watched over the past year or so as the Christian right has launched endless attacks against homosexuality,' he explains. 'They're pushing the country backwards, and I wanted to point that out. It's insane when they're quoting Leviticus to outlaw gay sex, yet most people, who have never read the Bible, won't know that the same book also threatens punishment for people who wear shirts of mixed fibre.'"

Islam, Armstrong points out, also gets a working-over. Shappi Khorsandi's show, *Asylum Speaker*, recounts her family's hardship after her father was sentenced to death by the ayatollahs for criticising them in print.

"I'm not attacking people's beliefs," she explains, "but I am attacking governments that

use religion."

"The show," wrote Armstrong, "includes a nice riff on the imposition of Islam on Iran. 'I mean, we're in the middle of the desert,' she says. 'The last thing we need is a faith that covers us from head to toe. Islam is really designed for a cooler climate. Why couldn't we have been invaded by Hindus or Buddhists, so we had a nice summer wardrobe?' Khorsandi includes the Danish cartoon scandal in her show, seeing echoes of her father's story, but the Danish-Egyptian comedian Omar Marzouk uses it as a centrepiece. He supported the religious-hatred Bill on stage at last year's festival, but the cartoon furore changed his mind. 'The problem is, you can't legislate for people's stupidity,' he says. 'So the only thing to do is to allow everyone to say whatever it is they want.'

"This summer ought to provide a welcome opportunity for religious rabble-rousers everywhere – but with performances spread across 27 venues, it will take either a large or an extremely nimble protest group to cover the lot. Disappointingly for fans of extreme street theatre, Christian Voice's director, Stephen Green – who claims to have led the protests against *Jerry Springer, The Opera* – looks unable to attend, despite the presence of shows such as *Sister Mary McArthur: Celebrity Num*. 'We're not rent-a-demo,' he grumbled when I phoned him, in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

"Fortunately, the Scottish Christian party may be stepping into the breach. Its leader, the Reverend George Hargreaves – who also claims to have led the protests against *Jerry Springer, The Opera* – is hovering over the festival like a cloud of protesting Christian bees. 'There's little point us picketing the shows that are just using religion to boost their audience,' he says. 'If there are more people outside the show protesting than are inside watching, it's a waste of time. *Jerry Springer* proved the greatest rallying point for Christian activism in the past 10 years because it was a commercial success to begin with, so it's in that area we would concentrate our efforts.' In other words, it's the successful shows that need to watch out.

"The question is: which will succeed? Will it be the spoof *Christian Folk Act God's Pottery*? Will it be the Catholic-abuse play *Breaking the Pope? Mary and the Stripper*, about Ms Magdalene's dubious past? Or the sketch troupe StageCoach's *Black Jew Dialogues*? It makes the whole festival just that little bit more interesting, doesn't it? Just think, if you and all your mates get together and go to a show, it will be a hit and might be the first thing banned under the new Act. How often do you make legal history by buying a Fringe ticket?"

# Religion-related fraud on the increase in the US

RANDALL Harding sang in the choir at Crossroads Christian Church in Corona, California, and donated part of his conspicuous wealth to its ministries. In his business dealings, he underscored his faith by naming his investment firm JTL, or "Just the Lord". Pastors and church-goers alike entrusted their money to him, according to Associated Press's religion correspondent, Rachel Zoll.

By the time Harding was unmasked as a fraud, he and his partners had stolen more than \$50 million from their clients, and Crossroads became yet another cautionary tale in what investigators say is a worsening problem plaguing America's churches.

Billions of dollars has been stolen in religion-related fraud in recent years, according to the North American Securities Administrators Association, a group of state officials who work to protect investors.

Between 1984 and 1989, about \$450 million was stolen in religion-related scams, the association says. In its latest count from 1998 to 2001 the toll had risen to \$2 billion. Rip-offs have only become more common since.

"The size and the scope of the fraud is getting larger," said Patricia Struck, president of the securities association and administrator of the Wisconsin Department of Financial Institutions, Division of Securities. "The scammers are getting smarter and the investors don't ask enough questions because of the feeling that they can be safe in church."

Cases in recent years show just how vulnerable religious communities are.

Lambert Vander Tuig, a member of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, ran a real estate scam that bilked investors out of \$50 million, the Securities and Exchange Commission revealed. His salesmen presented themselves as faithful Christians and distributed copies of *The Purpose Driven Life* by Saddleback pastor Rick Warren. Warren and his church had no knowledge of Vander Tuig's activities, said the SEC.

At Daystar Assembly of God Church in Prattville, Alabama, a congregant persuaded church leaders and others to invest about \$3 million in real estate a few years ago, promising some profits would go toward building a megachurch. The Daystar Assembly was swindled and lost its premises.

And in a dramatically broader scam, leaders of Greater Ministries International, based in Tampa, Florida, defrauded thousands of people of half a billion dollars by promising to double money on investments that ministry officials said were blessed by God. Several of the con

men were sentenced in 2001 to more than a decade each in prison.

"Many of these frauds are, on their face, very credible and appear legitimate," said Randall Lee, director of the Pacific regional office of the SEC. "You really have to dig below the surface to understand what's going on."

Typically, a con artist will target the pastor first, by making a generous donation and appealing to the minister's desire to expand the church or its programmes, according to Joseph Borg, director of the Alabama Securities Commission, who played a key role in breaking up the Greater Ministries scam.

If the pastor invests, churchgoers view it as a tacit endorsement. The con man, often promising double digit returns, will chip away at resistance among church members by suggesting they can donate part of their earnings to the congregation, Borg said.

"Most folks think 'I'm going to invest in some overseas deal or real estate deal and part of that money is going to the church and I get part. I don't feel like I'm guilty of greed,'" Borg added.

If a skeptical church member openly questions a deal, that person is often castigated for speaking against a fellow Christian.

Ole Anthony of the Trinity Foundation Inc in Dallas, which investigates fraud and televangelism, partly blames the churches themselves for the problem. Anthony contends that the "prosperity gospel" which teaches that the truly faithful are rewarded with wealth in this life is creeping into mainstream churches.

Chuck Crites, a former member of Crossroads Church, learned firsthand how effective con artists can be.

The businessman was swindled out of \$500,000 by Harding. Crites said Harding, who pleaded guilty last year to wire fraud and money laundering, boasted about helping fund a new Christian high school for Crossroads and hired a music pastor from the megachurch as a sales agent. "At one point he even told me how much money he had given to the church that year," Crites said.

Investigators say all denominations are at risk, but the most susceptible communities are ones where members are deeply engaged in church activities, such as service programmes and small group prayer, giving con artists plenty of chance to ingratiate themselves with congregants.

Often, perpetrators are so successful building an image as good Christians that churchgoers won't co-operate with law enforcement authorities even after the crime is revealed.

## Unholy row breaks out between two police groups

THE Gay Police Association (GPA), under investigation for the "faith crime" of publishing an advertisement in the *Independent* linking anti-gay violence with the Bible (see *Freethinker* report, August) has now become embroiled in a row with the Christian Police Association, according to a report in *Gay Times*.

When a gay police officer applied to join the CPA, "he was told in no uncertain terms that he would have to give up sex first".

Vic Codling, the GPA's national co-ordinator, was outraged, and reported the CPA to the governing body, the Police Federation.

Codling told the BBC: "Black or female police officers would not be asked to be 'less black' or 'less female' in order to join police associations, so why should gay or lesbian officers? Reasonable? No!"

Meanwhile, the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship (LCF) has joined the fray over the *Independent* ad, and is inciting Christians to add to the original complaint made to the police by a cleric representing a fringe political party, Operation Christian Voice.

In a separate row, another lunatic fundy outfit, Christian Voice, has lodged an official complaint with Sussex Police after the chief of police took part in the Brighton Pride parade at the beginning of August.

Joe Edwards, who became the first police chief in the country to march in a gay pride parade, was condemned by CV's director Stephen Green for taking part in the event.

"What he's saying to the Christian people of Sussex is that he holds their faith in contempt," said Green. "That's a very serious thing."

On the day of the parade, CV mounted a pathetically small demonstration, which attracted jeers and derisive laughter. The protestors called the act of two men kissing in the street "offensive to normal people" and insisted that the police arrest the men under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. No arrests were made.

A Sussex Police spokeswoman said: "We always have a presence at Brighton Pride. Chief Constable Joe Edwards wanted to celebrate the diversity of the police force."

She added that it was not an offence for two men to be seen kissing in public.

Christian Voice also staged a demonstration at July's EuroPride parade in London, Mr Green told [PinkNews.co.uk](http://PinkNews.co.uk): "We are protesting about sodomy being openly paraded in the capital, bringing shame and judgement to the UK."

"We are standing up for righteousness and preaching a message of repentance."

He refused to accept the gay churches on the parade as "brothers and sisters."

"You don't have to be gay, there is a way out."

**H**ad he claimed that "religion is responsible for all the wars in the world", Mel "Mad Max" Gibson, the 50-year-old Australian actor/director, would have been right on the button. Certainly, he would have drawn fire from religious leaders and their followers around the world, but a vast number of non-believers would have nodded sadly in agreement.

But Gibson, in a drunken outburst, declared: "Fucking Jews – the Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world". Already unpopular with the Jewish community – many of whom interpreted his controversial and gratuitously-violent *The Passion of the Christ* as anti-Semitic propaganda – his remarks, which followed his arrest in Malibu in July for drunken driving, reinforced the perception that the man is little better than a crude bigot.

Jewish groups lost no time in calling for the ultra-conservative Catholic Oscar-winner to be ostracised in Hollywood, and investigated for a breach of race hate laws. Their call came after an intoxicated Gibson launched a verbal attack on sheriff's deputy James Mee when the star was pulled over for drunken driving. After his anti-Jewish rant, Gibson asked Mee "Are you a Jew?"

Gibson, who received a three-year probationary sentence for drunk driving, issued an apology, saying "I acted like a person completely out of control when I was arrested, and said things that I do not believe to be true and which are despicable. I am deeply ashamed of everything I said. Also, I take this opportunity to apologise to the deputies involved for my belligerent behaviour. They have always been there for me in my community and indeed probably saved me from myself."

He added: "I have battled with the disease of alcoholism for all of my adult life and profoundly regret my horrific relapse."

But the US Jewish Anti-Defamation League said that the apology was not enough, and that Gibson should be ostracised by his peers.

The group's national director Abraham H Foxman said, "It appears that the combination of liquor and arrest has revealed his true character. We believe there should be consequences for bigots and bigotry. One way to combat bigots is to put a price on bigotry. I would hope that if this is in fact true, his colleagues will condemn him and distance themselves from him."

At this point Pat Boone (remember him, the fresh-faced, wholesome crooner of the sixties whom many parents saw as an antidote to the sexually-charged bad boy Elvis Presley?) entered the fray, with a sloppily-written article posted on *WorldNetDaily*, the on-line religious news service. Under the heading "Lay off Mel Gibson, for Christ's sake!" Boone, who joined the ranks of the godly when his career nose-dived, stated: "I'm not being sacrilegious; I mean this admonition literally and reverentially.

"I know both individuals personally, Mel and Christ – and my friend Mel is no anti-Semite. He

worships and magnifies the most famous Jew who ever lived, Jesus of Nazareth, whom millions and millions call 'Christ', or Messiah.

"We've both committed our lives and eternal destiny to this *rebbe* (rabbi), this central figure of human history, the One from whose earthly life our calendar has been constructed. This year is 2006, AD – anno domini, 'the Year of Our Lord'. The Year of the Jew who with his disciples, also orthodox Jews, forever changed and shaped religion, culture, philosophy, art – and a little thing called democracy..."

"And from the first century (as the world describes it) till this minute, wherever JUDEO-Christian principles have been dominant, that nation or society has tended to prosper in every conceivable way. Compare those nations to any and all others, and you must concede that truth.

"And it's for His sake, and in His name, I urge, *Get off Mel's back! He's admitted his grievous mistake, apologized in the most humble and earnest way, and has gone into alcohol rehab! For Christ's sake, forgive him and leave him alone!*"

Well, one person not content to leave Gibson alone was another controversial show-biz figure, Madonna, who reportedly wrote to Gibson to offer advice. The singer was said to be furious with Gibson for his anti-Semitic remarks, but decided to pen a four-page letter to see if she could help. A source said: "Madonna thought Mel was out of order but also in a low place, so she has written to him to try and help him."

If Madge was correct in saying that Mel was in "a low place", this could well be the result of the influence Gibson's father has had over his son. Hutton Gibson is a follower of an ultra-conservative branch of Catholicism that rejects the liturgical reforms adopted in the early 1960s resulting from the Second Vatican Council – commonly referred to as Vatican II.

In January, an American paper, the *Tribune-Review*, revealed that Gibson Senior has been making a three-hour drive each week for the past year from his home in Summersville, West Virginia, to rural Westmoreland County, a round trip of more than 300 miles, to attend Sunday Mass at a "traditional" Catholic church. No doubt weary of this weekly trek, the 87-year-old Gibson decided that what he needed was a church of his very own, closer to home, and he got his son to stump up for St Michael the Archangel Chapel in Mount Pleasant Township.

The church, as it now stands, is a ranch-style brick home and its pastor is a former diocesan priest, Leonard Bealko, who is not in good standing with the Catholic Diocese of Greensburg, according to Monsignor Lawrence Persico, vicar-general of the diocese.

Persico said St Michael was not recognised by the Diocese of Greensburg. "A Catholic church, to be truly in communion with Rome, must be in communion with the diocesan bishop", Persico said. "I don't know where they get their legal authority. It's not a Roman

# Mel and M have they grip on r

Catholic church, no matter what they say.

"Union with Rome and the Holy See is very important if you're going to be a Roman Catholic. It's essential."

Hutton Gibson says he despises the casual dress and lack of piety of today's mainstream Catholics. "The mass of the church has been held for centuries. Vatican II did not just translate it into English. They changed the rite."

## Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE spotlights the bizarre behaviour of two religious and influential celebrities

In an analysis of the "traditionalist" brand of Catholicism embraced by Gibson and his son, Michael G Lawler, of Creighton University, writing in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, said: "Instead of speaking of traditionalist Catholicism I speak of sectarian Catholicism, because traditionalist Catholicism exhibits all the characteristics of a sect – a religious body that has separated itself from a larger religious institution. The sect's separation from the larger religious institution is accompanied by claims of moral and/or doctrinal purity, of true religion abandoned by the larger institution ... The exclusivity of sectarians in general and, in this case, of Catholic sectarians in particular, leads them to eschew dialogue of every kind, including ecumenical dialogue. One is either a member of the sect and, therefore, saved, or not a member and, therefore, not saved.

"Contemporary Catholic sectarianism is a small, global movement that arose after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, largely in response to the Council's embrace of a renewed vision of Church, which softens the monarchical papacy Gibson cherished in his youth and continues to cherish. The movement crystallised in 1971 with the prohibition of the Latin Mass authorised by and in use since the 16-century Council of Trent. Though the movement is diverse, its flagship became the Society of St Pius X, a priestly fraternity founded in 1971 by dissident French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who was eventually excommunicated by Pope John Paul II for consecrating bishops to ensure the continuation of his society.



# Madonna – lost their reality?

“The most radicalised of the traditionalist group are so incensed by John XXIII and what they perceive as the Council’s betrayal of true (by which, unwittingly, they mean Tridentine) Catholicism that they adhere to a bizarre doctrine of *sede-vacantism*, which means literally the Chair [of Peter] is vacant, and embodies the ludicrous doctrine that all the Popes since Pius XII have been false Popes. It is not clear that Mel Gibson adheres to *sede-vacantism*, though he does repudiate Vatican II, but it is clear by self-confession that his father does.”

Lawler pointed out that “prior to the Second Vatican Council, the charge of deicide against Jews was taken as proven in Catholic circles. The liturgical celebration of Good Friday, the ritual memorial of Jesus’ passion and death, included prayers for ‘the perfidious Jews’. The Council banished such prayers, and the mindset that underpinned them, with the publication of its *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. ‘Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Jesus’, it decreed, ‘neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time nor Jews today can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.’ There follows an instruction, ‘Consequently all must take care, lest in catechising or preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the gospel message or the spirit of Christ.’ That instruction could have been written specifically for Mel Gibson and the fear is that, in ignoring the Vatican Council in general, he has ignored this important ecumenical instruction in particular [by making *The Passion of the Christ*].

“Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League calls attention to the dangers of a literalist interpretation. Mel Gibson is not necessarily anti-Semitic, Foxman judges, but he is most definitely ‘insensitive’. [He clearly changed this view after Gibson’s drunken outburst.] The real problem is that any visual presentation of a literalist reading of the passion narratives can overwhelm, and all the reports suggest that Gibson’s passion play is emotionally overwhelming. Reports of people crying during a viewing are common. What bothers Foxman, and correctly, is that in that overwhelmed state any message of love can be

twisted into something hateful. The film can, beyond any intention of the filmmaker, ‘fuel, trigger, stimulate, induce, rationalise, legitimise anti-Semitism.’”

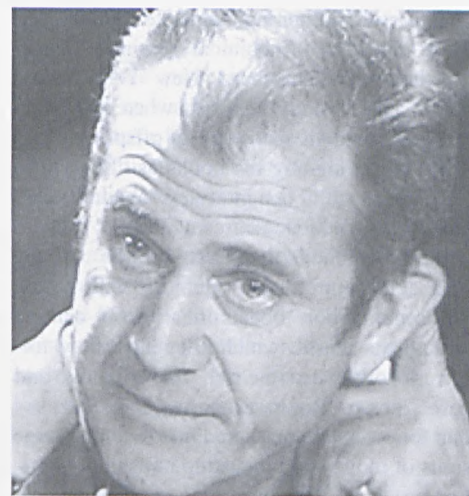
It has been frequently reported that Hutton Gibson is a Holocaust denier, when in fact he is merely a Holocaust “minimiser”. Defending his dad, Mel Gibson said “My father never denied the Holocaust. He just said there were fewer than six million [killed]”. Hutton Gibson once suggested in print that Germany lacked the gas to kill that many people, lacked the technology to cremate that many bodies, and that many of those millions weren’t killed, but instead “fled to countries like Australia and the United States”.

“My dad taught me my faith and I believe what he taught me,” Gibson once explained to *Reader’s Digest*.

When he isn’t carefully measuring his words about his father, Gibson can also be breathtakingly honest. When *New York Times* critic Frank Rich suggested that anti-Semitism may have motivated Gibson to make *The Passion*, Gibson responded, “I want to kill [Rich]. I want his intestines on a stick... I want to kill his dog”.

Mel Gibson believes Jews will burn in hell – not because they’re Jews, but because they aren’t Christians, and specifically because they aren’t Catholics. And Gibson sees the same future for his own wife. “She’s a much better person than I am”, he says, “Honestly. She’s Episcopalian, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it’s just not fair if she doesn’t make it [to Heaven]. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it”.

After spending a week trying to convince the public that he’s not an anti-Semite, Gibson is now being accused of homophobia as well. MSNBC reports that the director made anti-



Mel (‘do I look gay?’) Gibson

gay comments during an interview that took place 14 years ago. When Spanish newspaper *El Pais* asked Gibson about homosexuals in 1992, he told the reporter that he was once worried that if he became an actor, people would think he was gay. “With my looks, who’s going to think I’m gay?” he retorted. “It would be hard to take me for someone like that. Do I sound like a homosexual? Do I talk like them? Do I move like them?”

After some people were offended by his comments, *Playboy* magazine asked the actor if he would apologise. “I’ll apologise when hell freezes over,” he told the mag.

Gibson’s homophobia emerges in his Oscar-winning 1995 film *Braveheart* about Scottish hero William Wallace. Included in it is a ludicrous and a-historical anti-gay scene where Prince Edward is portrayed as an effeminate gay man whose lover is defenestrated by King Edward I. Gibson went on to portray Herod in *The Passion of the Christ* as an effeminate homosexual surrounded by boys.

## Madonna, Queen of Kabbala, is immersed in a sea of superstition

IF Gibson is in “a low place”, Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone, to give her her full name, appears to be in a decidedly murky place where she has become enveloped in a miasma of religious confusion and credulity – the result of her involvement with the Kabbalah cult, which has an uncanny ability to help people discover their inner wallets.

Madonna was born and raised a Catholic, but developed an interest in Kabbalah after being introduced to it by her friend, the comedian and actress Sandra Bernhard, in 1997. She then took on the Jewish name Esther. Followers wear an extortionately-priced red string around their wrist to ward off the “Evil Eye”, and believe the path to spiritual enlightenment lies in a fusion of Orthodox Jewish tradition and positive thinking. They are also advised to drink blessed water, which is peddled to them at £4.00 a bottle.

Another pop celebrity who fell for Kabbalah is Britney Spears, who splashed out £2,000 on “holy” kabbalah water. Not to drink, mind, but to use for a water birth! Spears subsequently extricated herself from the cult.

Madonna’s spiritual guru is the man who founded the huge Kabbalah Centre chain, Feivel Gruberger, who uses the alias Rabbi Philip Berg. The family business is run by his wife Karen, and sons Michael Berg and Yehuda Berg, both Israeli-trained rabbis. Yehuda recently told the BBC: “Our London centre serves 5,000 people, but we expect that to grow to 10,000 very soon.”

Feivel Gruberger was born in Brooklyn in 1929, and was an insurance salesman before leaving his first wife and eight children to rein-

(Continued on p10)

vent himself as a spiritual guru. He was ordained as a rabbi at a rabbinical seminary, Torah VaDaat, in Williamsburg, New York, before moving on to study in Israel, where the randy rabbi spawned his second set of offspring.

He began signing his books as "Dr" Philip Berg, although in one interview he admitted to having no academic degree at all.

Berg founded the first branch of the Kabbalah Centre in Jerusalem in 1969. Today, his organisation boasts nearly 60 centres around the world, which allegedly show followers how to become rich, find true love and cure illnesses. But investigative journalists say that followers are pressured into donating large sums of money and investing in useless 'spiritual products'. Madonna, however, insists that those who attack Kabbalah do not understand it. "It frightens people," she has said. "So they



**Kabbalah water is said to cure cancer**

try to denigrate it or trivialise it." Madonna's involvement with Kabbalah has raised its profile around the world. The best known of around 3.5 million followers globally, she devotes several million pounds to the cult each year, and she forked out £3.6m to buy the venue for the cult's London operation. Her

favourite Kabbalah charity is worryingly called "Spirituality for Kids", and she is reputed to have donated \$21-million to a Kabbalah Centre school in New York. She is said to divert a chunk of her touring profits to the organisation.

In 2004, Madonna joined forces with Moore to host a £40,000 party for Rabbi Berg when he came to the UK to promote a new book. Guests at the event included stars such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Donatella Versace, who were served "blessed" water.

Madonna's alignment with a Jewish faith caused shockwaves when it became public because she had drawn on her Catholic roots throughout her career. This included draping herself with crucifixes and famously kissing a black Jesus in the video for her No 1 single "Like A Prayer". But in 1990 she had a spectacular falling out with the religion, after the then Pope declared her performances "blasphemous". She hit back, saying in an interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine that the Church "completely frowns on sex – except for procreation."

A BBC2 documentary last year about Berg's London Kabbalah Centre revealed, among other things, that the "healing" spring water sold to cancer sufferers comes from a Canadian bottling plant – it is not sourced from springs and treated by an exclusive Kabbalistic process, as claimed, and that pieces of red string, meant to be "tied around the left wrist to imbue one's self with the power of its protection – protection from other people's judgment, other people's jealousy," are not cut from "long strands that were wrapped around

the tomb of the biblical matriarch Rachel."

The BBC2 programme team also interviewed senior figures in the Jewish community who were desperate to distance themselves from what they described as "a nefarious bunch of charlatans." The 2004 April edition of *The Times* ran a piece about the Kabbalah Centre. The following is an excerpt:

"It was the rabbi's sudden demand for £105,000 to cleanse her late parents' souls that finally drove Susie to speak out. She had already faced moments of doubt. There was the instruction to work on those not yet ready to buy, and forget those with their wallets already out. Then the intense pressure for her to spend £350 on holy books and £900 to attend a religious ceremony. Susie met with Rabbi Philip



**Feivel Gruberger aka Rabbi Philip Berg**

Berg last January near the Centre's new offices in Stratford Place in the West End of London. She recalls 'I explained that my mother had died of cancer in 1980.' According to Susie, the rabbi looked at her and said that there was one thing she could do to honour her parents' memory: she could buy the Centre a new Kabbalistic Torah for £58,000. To get out of what was now a very uncomfortable situation, Susie explained that everything was invested in property. And he

## Madonna's latest *Confessions* tour condemned as 'blasphemous'

WHEN Madonna offered Mel Gibson help, she herself was in the midst of yet another fury-inducing exercise – or a concert tour, to be more accurate..

Madonna's tours are rarely free of controversial religious imagery, and her latest, *Confessions*, was no exception, drawing fire from Christian, Jewish and Muslims leaders, who predictably branded it as "blasphemous."

At one point during the show Madonna, 47, is the subject of a mock crucifixion. During the song *Live to Tell*, Madonna wears a crown of thorns and appears against a giant mirrored cross.

When her concert was staged in Rome, about three kilometres from the Vatican, it was condemned by Muslim and Catholic leaders, who denounced it as an insult to the Roman Catholic Church.

The two-hour show contained other religious imagery, including two male dancers with a Star of David and a Muslim crescent painted on their torsos, who embraced and held hands in a manner designed to induce a great deal of teeth and sphincter-clenching among the horrified devout.

A figure wearing a robe and turban played



the *shofar*, a ram's horn traditionally blown during Jewish high holidays, before joining Madonna in a song about some 16th-century Jewish mystic.

"Two miracles have happened," Madonna told the crowd at the Rome concert. "Italy won the World Cup, and it stopped raining before

my show."

During the course of the tour, Madonna's husband Guy Ritchie expressed fears that the singer could be kidnapped by religious fanatics. Ritchie was afraid that her Kabbalistic faith might make her a target for a protest about Israel bombing Lebanon.

replied: "Then give us a property!" The rabbi then made another suggestion. He said, "I'll let you pay by instalments." He said she could write a series of post-dated cheques. When she insisted that the cheques would bounce, he started to argue quite aggressively that she did have it, and that she should go straight to the Centre and sign."

In October last year, *Ynet.news* reported that a woman suffering from cancer was talked into paying tens of thousands of dollars to the Israeli Kabbalah Centre, on the pretext that the donation would help improve her condition.

After her death at the age 50, the woman's husband filed a complaint against the head of the centre, Shaul Youdkevitch, who was consequently arrested by the police.

Youdkevitch, one of the main figures in Kabbalah studies worldwide and the man behind Madonna's visit to Israel last year, was arrested on suspicion of exploiting and deceiving the woman and her husband.

The couple had previously complained that they were told by the rabbis who run the centre in Tel Aviv that the woman should make "a significant and painful donation" if she wanted to get well and overcome cancer.

A devotee of Kabbalah, the ill woman put her faith in the centre and contributed £19,000 to the organisation. When her condition deteriorated, members of the Israeli branch recommended she donate another £13,000. Meanwhile, rabbis recommended that she also purchase holy water to improve her condition – at an exorbitant price.

The couple, who soon ran out of cash, continued to seek help at the centre. The rabbis then suggested that the husband leave his job and devote himself completely to working for them. The husband, a father of two young children, turned down the proposal and instead turned to the police to report the incidents.

#### Red string "technology"

One of the most ludicrous aspects of the Kabbalah is its claim to possess the "technology" to ward off the "Evil Eye". This "technology" is embodied in a length of expensive red string. This is the Kabbalah Centres' promotional spiel regarding red string, a packet of which costs £14 and contains enough woollen thread to make seven bracelets. This is what the official Kabbalah website has to say about the string.

"Long ago, the ancient Kabbalists revealed a powerful technology of protection. Its purpose is twofold: to protect us from the envious looks of others, and to help us eliminate feelings of jealousy and resentment in ourselves. The technology is the Red String: a strand of red wool worn around the left wrist. This technology is an indispensable tool for spiritual and physical protection.

"The teachings of Kabbalah do not include prohibitions or commandments. Instead, the Kabbalists speak of positive and negative energies. The negative energies of jealousy and

envy emanate through the eyes – which gave rise to the very vivid and very ancient term, the Evil Eye. The Evil Eye is part of the wisdom history of all humanity. It was spoken of by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was written of in the Bible. It has been accorded fear and respect by kings, queens, and conquerors throughout the ages. The ancient Greek seafarers painted eyes on the prows of their ships as protection against this power. The Romans called it *oculus malus*. To the Scots it was *droch shuil*. Kabbalists refer to it as *ayin horeh*.

"According to the kabbalists, this form of negative energy can affect our lives and well-being. It can hold us back from achieving our destinies and it can also cause us to lose what we have already achieved.

"Worn around the left wrist, the Red String works in the same way as the vaccines of modern medicine. When we receive a vaccination against a disease, a weakened strain of the illness is integrated into the vaccine. Spiritual immunizations are based on a similar principle. Kabbalah teaches that colors have specific frequencies and energies. Red, for example, is the color of danger. By binding a Red String to ourselves in a very specific manner, we shield ourselves against the dangerous negativity that might be directed our way – a spiritual vaccine against the destructive forces of the Evil Eye.

"The color red is one part of the technology. The rest begins in Israel, where a length of Red String is wound around the tomb of Rachel, the matriarch of the Bible. Rachel is considered by Kabbalists to be the mother of the world, and

her greatest desire is to defend all of her children from evil. Throughout her life, Rachel acted as the protector of all humankind. According to Kabbalah, the burial sites of the righteous are a portal to the energy they created in their lifetimes. The Red String is brought to Rachel's tomb where it is infused with her force of protection – for no power is stronger than a mother's natural protective love. In a practical sense, this is a challenging task, because Rachel's tomb is located in one of the most politically volatile areas of Israel. But each and every Red String sold by the Kabbalah Centre must undergo this process in order to be considered an authentic form of protection against the Evil Eye.

"The Red String is individually sized and worn around the left wrist. The left side of the body has been identified by Kabbalists as the area where energy enters. The left arm and hand pertain to the concept of receiving; the right arm and hand embody the power of imparting. Negative forces, therefore, enter the body through the left side. By wearing the Red String on the left wrist, negative energies are intercepted at the precise point of entry. The string is tied in a carefully prescribed sequence of seven knots, each of which symbolizes a separate spiritual dimension that infuses our reality. It's important that someone who loves us – someone we deeply trust – ties the string around our wrist. As they do, we should ask for the power to radiate kindness, compassion, appreciation, and absence of the Evil Eye to everyone around us."

## Madonna seeks a ringside seat for the Second Coming

FURTHER evidence that our Madge's tenuous grip on reality is slipping even further was provided in a *Sunday Times* report of March 4, 2006, in which Ian MacKinnon revealed that the diva was trying to buy a house overlooking the Sea of Galilee at the place where followers of her Kabbalist faith expect the Messiah to reappear to herald world peace.

Representatives of the 47-year-old US singer have been cold-calling home-owners in the picturesque mountain retreat of Rosh Pina and offering to pay any price to secure a property on her behalf. The world most successful female singer – and a gay icon – wants the house to turn it into a Kabbalah study centre where followers can pore over the mystical texts.

Kabbalists believe that the Messiah will appear at Safed and walk to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, travelling along the ravine that cuts through Rosh Pina.

The fabled gorge, or wadi, cuts through the rambling back garden of Shiri Havkin's ramshackle home. The 100-year-old stone house was owned by her mother, Drora, a famed Israeli singer who passed on the property. Ten days ago Mrs Havkin, 41, herself a singer and actress, got a telephone call out of the blue from someone claiming to represent an "international celebrity" and asking if she wished to sell the house.

Her response was that she had no desire to sell. But, during the short conversation, the caller told Mrs Havkin, whose three children were born in the house, that he represented Madonna and that the price was not an issue. "I was wondering why my house?" she told *The Times*. "It's old. It's not fancy and it only has five rooms. But for me it has great sentimental value. Anyway, I thought the whole call was just a hoax."

Some days later when a television company asked if she could confirm a rumour about Madonna's interest, Mrs Havkin questioned her neighbours. She found that they, too, had been approached. "The house is worth a little more than \$500,000 (£294,000), but I would sell it to Madonna for a million dollars and buy another property for me and my family in the area," she said.

# Abba star Björn Ulvaeus

ONE of Sweden's best-known cultural figures is a member of the Swedish Humanist Association (an IHEU member organisation). Björn Ulvaeus is instantly recognisable to most Swedes and many others as one of the four members of the pop super-group Abba. Together with his fellow Abba member Benny Andersson, he wrote the musicals "Chess" and "Kristina". Now he is involved with the hit musical "Mamma Mia!" which has been seen by 25 million people around the world.

Chairman of the Swedish Humanist Association, Christer Sturmark, recently interviewed Ulvaeus for the magazine *Humanisten* about religion, politics and his humanist view of life.

Ulvaeus began by saying "I have noticed how religion is becoming a power in politics, and is also competing with the scientific way of thinking. That worries me. I have always been a huge friend of 'the Enlightenment' and of science.

"When I saw irrational, religious conservative values and hostility against science influencing society, I searched for an organisation dealing with these questions.

"I miss those days when people believed in science and common sense, as they did in the fifties and sixties. Now fundamentalism and contempt for science seem to be spreading. I believe that religion should be totally separated from the state. That's not the way it is today, not even in Sweden. For hundreds of years we have struggled to achieve a secular society, and now we seem to be going backwards. I find it quite astonishing that more women don't stand up to these questions.

"I believe that religious faith schools are highly dubious. I also think that it's absurd that organisations that have secular aims, for example the Swedish Humanist Association, don't get the same government grants as organisations that hold services. Perhaps we should start holding gatherings where we pay our respect to Voltaire!"

He added: "Contempt for science may have arisen because science hasn't been able to solve many of our basic problems, for example environmental pollution or the problems of HIV and AIDS. This is the worst disease of our time, and scientists are lost. I believe that many people become disappointed with science when the answers we need are not delivered.

"I also believe that the atomic bomb and other weapons of mass destruction show that science can be used in evil ways."

Addressing the issue of religious fundamentalism, this he said might be due to globalisation, and the fact that many people feel insecure in a rapidly-changing world. "In crises of identity people often turn to their religious origins."

Ulvaeus described himself as "an agnostic, leaning towards atheism. I don't have, and I think I cannot have, a clear view of God's existence. I do not believe in the god that is described in the Middle East religions or in

any other religions for that matter. I'm not denying that there is something out there, but I don't think that we should try to explain and understand what it might be.

"If atheism means that you're categorically denying God's existence, I wouldn't go that far. I would like to say I'm a 'freethinker', a better word than both agnostic and atheist. Maybe it should be reintroduced in our modern vocabulary.

Asked where he thought the dividing-line was between freedom of religion and freedom of speech and human rights, Ulvaeus replied: "I am so incredibly tired of giving respect to a lot of delusions and crazy ideas just because they are regarded as religious. Private faith should, of course, be respected, but it can't be allowed to influence society or other people. Where do you draw the line between superstition and religion? If you bear in mind that we are living on a small planet in a solar system at the edge of a small galaxy at the edge of the universe, it might be a slight exaggeration to state: 'We have the answer!' All religions claim to be the correct and genuine one. It's just too much for me. I think it's important that you should be able to criticise and analyse religions, the same way that you can criticise opinions and values. Religious people must learn to cope with that."

He added: "The UN declaration on human rights must always take precedence over religious beliefs or cultural differences. It seems to me that this isn't explicitly stated by our politicians today. Some values must be universal, like human rights and the equal worth of every human being. I believe that politicians in Sweden are too cautious in emphasising this, probably out of fear of being regarded as discriminating against non-democratic cultures.

"Cultural diversity is always worth striving for, but it must never trump the declaration of human rights. There are brave representatives of other cultures and religions around the world who take active parts in fighting for human rights, for instance Ayaan Hirsi Ali of Somalia, who fled to the Netherlands. She wrote the book *Demand your Right!* about the repression of Muslim women. Those kinds of spokesmen and women from the Muslim world should be taken better care of in the political debate today. She is saying clearly that most politicians are beating about the bush when approaching these issues because they are so afraid of being politically incorrect.

I think that it is mostly western and left-leaning liberals who take up that attitude. I consider myself being a social liberal, but on this subject even the Swedish liberals are too careful and scared. Hirsi Ali believes that 'to avoid voicing your opinion' is the worst thing you could do to women in the Muslim world. I also think it's disrespectful to the Arab culture,



Björn Ulvaeus, of the super-group Abba – pictured on the cover of *Humanisten* – believes that the religious should learn to cope with criticism

implying 'they are Arabs, you can't discuss human rights with them'. Of course we should have the same dialogue with Muslims about human rights as we have with others. Also many Muslims are no more religious than the average Swede. For them it's natural that human rights come first."

Describing his own path to humanism, Ulvaeus revealed that he had "a short flirtation with religion in my youth, when I studied the Bible. When I was about 15 I read Dan Andersson's novel *David Ramm's Heritage*, about a young man, David, who was pondering over existential and religious questions. When I read that novel, I thought I would also like to be a brooder and severe. But it was merely a pose. The school and the music started to take over my life and I didn't have time trying to be severe and pondering.

"I believe I didn't really start thinking about religion until 15 years ago. I got interested in why religion existed and why human beings were in such need of it. I wondered about the religious questions which started being asked such a long time ago. Who were the storytellers and why did they tell them? Perhaps in order to achieve power and influence. It must have been a very good way of achieving that if you didn't have soldiers and armies at your disposal."

Christer: "In the Swedish translation of the musical *Mamma Mia* one can trace your outlook on life. I'm thinking of the song 'Thank You For The Music' translated to Swedish as *Tack för alla sånger*. You obviously dissociate yourself from religion in the lyrics." (The Swedish lyrics are presented here in a direct translation back to English: "...Thanks for all

# us embraces humanism

the songs, words and tunes, who needs religion? We can do without that, but imagine if music didn't exist, not anywhere. Everybody needs a song and a dance...").

"Did you have a deliberate intention with those words?"

Ulvaeus said "I thought we could do like John Lennon did in 'Imagine' and sneak in a statement. He wrote 'Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do, nothing to kill or die

for, no religion too.'

It is sung in churches and nobody objects to the wish for a 'world without religion'. I wrote the Swedish version of 'Thank You For The Music' with Niklas Strömstedt, and we were both prepared for the fact that it would cause reactions. But not one single complaint has been made! Not one single letter of complaint!

Asked about political developments in the US in the light of President Bush's distinct reli-

gious beliefs, Ulvaeus said: "It is very distressing. The US should have been our allies in the fight for secularisation. The struggle against terrorism is weakened if it's regarded as a battle between Islamic and Christian fundamentalists. But, at the same time, I don't think the American people are as religious as they seem. When they answer in various surveys that they believe in God, it makes me wonder if it's simply a routine answer.

The church in America is also very much a social institution. Let's hope that a Democrat will win the election after Bush, perhaps Hillary Clinton.

## Catholic schools seek to usurp students' human rights

CATHOLIC educators are opposing the Government's proposal to allow students over 16 to withdraw themselves from collective worship, despite a parliamentary committee saying that forced worship is a breach of their human rights.

The Catholic Education Service have claimed: "When you choose a religious school, Collective Worship and RE Lessons are 'part of the package'." They made this statement in full knowledge that a report of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) expressed their expert opinion that it was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights to deny older pupils the right to opt themselves out of Collective Worship – and of Religious Education too.

Dr Evan Harris MP, Lib Dem member of the JCHR said: "Freedom of – or from – religious worship is a fundamental freedom for those old enough to make their own decisions and such human rights do not end at the school gates. State schools should not be dragooning young people into prayer against their will, regardless of how important the school authorities believe it to be.

"The Select Committee made it very clear that state schools have a duty to respect the freedom of conscience of students, and if the Government continues to allow faith schools to opt out respecting that then they will run into legal challenges and lose. I believe that schools are for teaching and learning, not for proselytising and forced worship."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, which is campaigning for this change in the law, said: "The Catholic Education Service appears to think

that religious schools should be exempt from the duty to apply human rights in its schools. But these are publicly-funded institutions and human rights are universal. There can be no exemptions, and especially not for religious bodies, who, history has shown, are not above abusing human rights."

He added: "Some children have no alternative but to go to religious schools because they are the only ones in their area – particularly in rural locations. They may also have been admitted at the behest of their parents,

whose religious views they may not share. Young people must be given the opportunity to exercise their own conscience, and not depend on their parents to make the decision for them."

The right of parents to withdraw their children from Worship and RE was introduced in 1944, decades before the Human Rights Act, and the RCs appear even to be saying that they want to abolish this right, which is being steadily eroded by religious schools throughout the country.

## Muslims and Catholics 'the main offenders' in hampering the global fight against Aids

FAITH activists in Toronto last month called on religious leaders to shun biblical terms like "scourge" when discussing AIDS and to use places of worship to battle a disease that respects no creed, according to a Yahoo news report.

There were also calls from the sidelines of the 16th International AIDS conference here for apologies from leaders of some religions judged deficient in the fight against an epidemic which has killed 25 million people.

"We encourage people not to speak about 'a scourge'. A scourge is a biblical term that says a punishment from God," said Reverend Jape Heath, Secretary General of the African Network of Religious Leaders living with or affected by HIV and AIDS.

"Just by using the word, it emphasises the view that God is punishing humanity," he told reporters.

Others went further, saying religious leaders must apologise for inaction faced with the epidemic, which has killed 25 million people worldwide.

"We must publicly confess and repent of our complicity in the stigmatisation of people who live with HIV/AIDS and the marginalisation of people with HIV and AIDS, particularly women and children," said Bishop Mark Hanson, head of the US Evangelical Lutheran Church.

"We have to be honest that our silence has made us complicit, that our shaming deeds and words ... the way we have formed moral arguments ... and by our patriarchal structures, we

have been complicit," he said.

Specifically, the elevation of morality above pragmatism in sex education and AIDS prevention has been troublesome, he said. It has led to demonising of condom use, for example.

Notably absent from the discussion were the Roman Catholic Church and Muslim leaders, whom some in the anti-AIDS community target as the main offenders.

While it would be wrong to say such groups have completely dodged the battle against AIDS, their actions have "done more harm than good," Heath said.

Many have preached abstinence, cared for the sick, and reached out to console people after they bury their dead.

"Quite frankly, as a person living with HIV, I don't want my faith community to say to me: 'Shame, shame, let me help you die'," Heath said.

"When we approach prevention messages from a moralistic point of view, we will increase the stigma which will lead to more people facing challenges to access care."

### Brighton and Hove Humanists

ON the front page of the August issue, we reported the involvement of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Association in the support of *Jerry Springer, the Opera*. The correct name of the group is the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society. We apologise for this error.

## Folded Freethinker

WE apologise to readers for despatching this issue in a folded state. This is due to the Royal Mail almost doubling the cost of postage for an item sent in an A4 envelope. We are investigating ways of sending future issues in the larger envelope in a more cost-effective manner.

**Science and religion: the final shots**

IN the best debating tradition Daniel O'Hara (*Points of View*, August) gives scant attention to the principal points in my June letter, but seizes gleefully on supposed errors in a throw-away line.

Alas for Mr O'Hara's italicised triumphalism, James H Leuba's 1914 survey, published as *The Belief in God and Immortality* (1916), found 34.8 percent of "greater" (ie, "leading") physical scientists, who often deal in hypothetical abstractions, believed in God and 40 percent in immortality. More significantly, 16.9 percent of "greater" biological scientists, more familiar with natural processes and the nature of belief, believed in God and 25.4 percent in immortality. In 1934 Professor Leuba conducted another survey, which saw a notable decline in belief to what I cited.

I was feeling generous when "disdainfully" naming only the articles of faith in the Apostles' Creed, regularly trotted out in all Christian churches, as claptrap. Had I been feeling ungenerous, I would have observed that three of the six Christian scientists paraded before us are practising Roman Catholics (two being Jesuit priests), obliged also to believe in purgatory and donations/legacies (as well as free intercessions) to reduce the time spent therein, Papal Infallibility, the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and ritual cannibalism in the Mass. I leave it to readers' imaginations what epithets I might have applied to that catalogue of beliefs.

Is your correspondent aggrieved because I was disrespectful of his rediscovered Christian friends in a way he would not have reacted to any objective assessment of Voodoo, astrology, Islam, flatearthism and teacup-reading, or is he so besotted with postmodernism that he regards any and every belief as equally deserving of credence and respect?

Nobody could scientifically criticise religionists if they believed only in a spiritual world beyond human experience and comprehension or in some anonymous primordial First Cause. But who would bother to worship such abstractions? The faithful instead posit a God with claimed interventions in the natural world, and thus susceptible to scientific investigation and refutation. As I suggested in June, why people should believe or claim to believe in both scientific principles and religious absurdities depends on their "personal circumstances", which I doubt if "a few mouse clicks" (so touchingly relied on by Mr O'Hara) would elucidate.

Like Oxford University, his feverish mind is a veritable "home of lost causes". So I see he is now recruiting to his cause the "naturalistic fallacy", which has traditionally been relied on by religionists to place morality beyond the natural world but which we have heard little of since I refuted it in *Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society* (1972). And poor old William

Shakespeare has been summoned from the grave by your truly desperate controversialist. Now, any decent, let alone great, dramatist puts appropriate words into his characters' mouths, and a tendentious selection of Shakespeareana can show him to be Roman Catholic, Anglican, Puritan and freethinker. As I elaborated in *Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare* (1964), the balance of probabilities lies with the last hypothesis. *The Tempest*, with Prospero's "We are such stuff/As dreams are made of, and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep", is generally regarded as his most autobiographical play, and his sonnets show little trace of personal piety.

DAVID TRIBE  
Australia

I AM writing to express my intense anger and deep disappointment with the way you are handling the debate initiated by Daniel O'Hara in the April issue. This man has taken up a disproportionate amount of space in your correspondence columns, and I was almost incandescent with rage when I saw that in the current issue (August) you published yet another of O'Hara's screeds.

It really is intensely annoying to see an almost regular monthly letter from Mr O'Hara taking up so much space, and treating us to yet another of his almost arcane homilies arising from his peculiar kind of medieval mystic theism. Perhaps he should address his letters to the *Church Times*.

I should also point out that in the July issue Mr O'Hara totally misquotes and misunderstands J B S Haldane who actually wrote in his book *Possible Worlds* (1927) that "My own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose". I suggest to Mr O'Hara that the late professor was actually saying that the universe is totally senseless and meaningless, and to invest the remark with any kind of profound metaphysical connotation is completely wide of the mark. Indeed, I strongly incline to the view that Prof Haldane would have readily agreed that as cosmic processes serve no observable purpose whatever, the entire universe is neither more nor less than a kind of vast cosmic chaos!

Mr O'Hara's reference to C E M Joad's reconversion to Anglicanism reminds this 80-year-old of the time way back in the 1950s when the rather garrulous Joad fell out of grace and favour with the BBC when he was caught travelling on a train without a ticket and trying to mislead the train inspector as to where he exactly had boarded the train. Later in life Joad renounced his long-held left-wing views and rejoined the Church of England.

The splendidly ascerbic Bertrand Russell commented that "Joad found his God after he had lost his railway ticket."

MARTIN O'BRIEN  
Gwent

DAN O'Hara is correct to assert that the Jesuits are included in the most outstanding intellects in the world today. But this intellectual prowess has been responsible for all the anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist feeling in the world.

High Jesuit integralism seeks to intellectually control reality in the name of priestcraft. Those who oppose them are regarded by Jesuits with loathing and hatred.

It is sad to find secular humanists siding with the vicious, twisted Jesuits.

J HAGGERTY  
Scotland

**Editor's note: This correspondence is now ended.**

**Satirising Christianity**

WITH regard to your report in August about *Jerry Springer, the Opera* I must conclude that the Evangelical Alliance's Head of Theology, Mr Hilborn, has not read the texts of Islam. If he had he would understand why Christianity appears to be singled out for satirical treatment and Islam in particular is not.

Islam is a state and has, among the other features of a state, the crucial capacity, the monopoly of legal violence. From the time "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," was established as doctrine, Christianity has never had the monopoly of legal violence. It is not a State. However, in the sweaty propaganda times we are living through, even those who should know better, as Ms Toynbee points out, want us to believe that Islam is a religion like any other religion.

Not only is it not like Christianity – not that I am batting for that either – it is not a religion. I repeat. Islam is a State.

The understandable discomfort of leaders of the West in dealing with it, is no excuse for the rest of us to go along with propaganda which tells a different tale. As David Hume pointed out all those years ago, you just cannot be a Muslim and not be a paid-up member of the sovereign *jama'ah-i-islamiyya*. Impossible.

So, there are no double standards. While one can attack Christianity safely, one may not attack ANY sovereign State safely. Worse every individual citizen of Islam has the DUTY to kill those deemed to be enemies. In a word, every Muslim is always on a war-footing. He or she doesn't need some conference to give the go-ahead. There is no "church" in Islam. Indeed, Mohammed, deemed a prophet, appears to have said that where there is no learned man in sight, Muslims must get behind even a "clip-eared Abyssinian slave".

We shall be in terrible trouble for at least the next fifty years. Whether it could be different were the West to deal with Islam with the degree of frankness it faced up to Soviet communism. I can't say.

KEITH BELL  
Wrexham

**The paranormal**

IF Dave Simmonds (*Points of View*, August) had read my piece more carefully he would



have realised that I do not believe the Cross Correspondences provide evidence of communication with the dead. I expressly stated that the phenomena could be accounted for on the assumption that the controlling intelligence was the unconscious mind of the living Mrs A W Verral. What I did say was that if, for the sake of argument, survival was granted, I would find myself an atheist ghost.

As for the absence of evidence in my article for the occurrence of PK and ESP, the reason is that the purpose of the paper was not to prove the existence of these phenomena, but to demonstrate that even if their existence is granted, the case for atheism is not affected.

However if Dave Simmonds really wants to study the evidence more closely, he will find the primary source material in the volumes of the *Proceedings and Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*. In case he may be unwilling to embark on such a lengthy project without some prospect that it might pay dividends, I would suggest he dips into *The Poltergeist Phenomenon* (J & A Spencer, Headline, 1996) for an introduction to some of the evidence for PK. For ESP, *Immortal Remains* (S E Braude, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003 pp 71-86, 138-173, 245-283), or *Is There an Afterlife?* (D Fontana, O Books, 2005, pp121-156, 410-425) would be useful. Braude and Fontana both believe in an afterlife, unlike myself, but both not only present the evidence, but include discussions of its theoretical implications.

JACK HASTIE  
Scotland

### Spoof protest placards

I WONDER how many *Freethinker* readers caught a new BBC satirical show, *Time Trumpet*, created by Armando Iannucci. Even before it went out on BBC 2 last month, the comedy generated squeals of protest, with even MPs expressing their concern over its content.

What generated the most anger was an Oscar-style "Terrorism Awards" ceremony, which showed a variety of hilarious spoof Islamic protest placards.

These included:

- Behead the infidel and cackle at his stump!
- Cut off the tits and balls of the apostates and feed them to the proselytes!
- Set fire to the enemies' flag, jump up and down on it, thus extinguishing it. Relight flag. Repeat as necessary!
- Death to everything after the 8th century!
- Slaughter the laughers!
- Kill Islamophobes – queers especially!

This got me thinking. What other spoof slogans can we concoct to poke fun at the religionists? Over to you, *FT* readers.

BARRIE TAYLOR  
Edinburgh

### Humanists support Gay Pride

THE Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) warmly welcomes the support given by Belfast Humanist Group to the recent Gay Pride event held in Belfast. It also wel-

comes the article in *Humani*, the journal of the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland, supporting the introduction of same-sex Civil Partnership legislation in the province.

Brian McClinton of BHG, who edits *Humani*, reported: "Humanists marched with two banners (one for the BHG and another for *Humani*) to support a hugely successful and colourful Gay Pride parade. What struck me in the square beforehand was the atmosphere of friendliness and love that pervaded the whole event. Not a negative word was heard on this hot August day, and this applied throughout the parade, which was applauded by many in the big crowd that lined Royal Avenue and Donegall Place. Humanists were making a contribution to this progress and I am sure that our open display of tolerance and support for diversity will be viewed positively by many good, decent people here. It was a great public relations exercise – not that that matters a fig if the cause is just and good and true, and here it was all these."

BHG's official support goes back to 1985 when it published a policy document in which it called for an equal age of consent for gay men. What a refreshing contrast this is to the religious bigotry that LGBT people in Northern Ireland have had to put up with for years from both Roman Catholic and Protestant sources.

Ever since Rev Ian Paisley launched his "Save Ulster from Sodomy" campaign in 1977, religionists have strenuously opposed LGBT rights.

GEORGE BROADHEAD  
Secretary  
GALHA

### Shakespeare's humanism

BRIAN McClinton's article on Shakespeare's humanism (*Freethinker*, July) seems to support the many Christian apologists who like to claim Shakespeare for their own faith.

Shakespeare was very familiar with atheism – his friendship with Marlowe must reflect this. But Mr McClinton's argument that the many Christian undercurrents in Shakespeare's plays points to his being a Christian is surely to draw a false conclusion.

All education in Shakespeare's day would be affected by the strong Christian background to society, and any writing would show that that background had been absorbed, without it necessarily meaning that it had been believed.

The National Secular Society's leaflet on Shakespeare by David Tribe is a good starting point for any discussion about this subject.

D A LANGDOWN  
Kent

### Intelligently-designed bananas

IN the July 2006 *Freethinker* you described the "Atheist Test" claim that the banana is an example of "intelligent design" by God. Do these Christians explain why God designed a mouth-sized, nice-tasting fruit in the shape of a penis? Perhaps the answer is best answered by the God Hates Fags lot..

About 40 years ago we all ate Gros Michel bananas which were genetically modified by selective breeding to be suitable for the human palate. This variety succumbed to a disease which wiped out the crop, and the Cavendish variety we eat today was similarly developed. This is now threatened by a fungus which could destroy the variety.

In its natural state there are many varieties of the fruit, all of which are either small, bad-tasting, or, worst of all, *straight*. It is only the intelligence of scientists who design the selective breeding programmes that produces the banana we eat today. So it is neither the beneficence of God, nor accident, but intelligent *human* design that allows us to eat this excellent fruit.

ROBIN FENNEL  
Wolverhampton

## The Free thinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687  
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

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

E-mail: [fteditor@aol.com](mailto:fteditor@aol.com)

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

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

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

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son  
Sheffield



## Events & Contacts

**Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Friends Meeting House, George Rd- St James Rd, Fiveways. Tuesday, October 10, 7.45pm. Jim Herrick: *The Pain and Pleasure of Humanism*.

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. [www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html](http://www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html). The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove, Tuesday October 3, 7.30pm. Peter Vlieland: *Dying in Dignity*.

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

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, Wendover High Street. Tuesday, September 12, 8pm. Speaker Hanne Stinson. Executive Director, British Humanist Association.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**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.

**Having & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Lane, Gidea Park. Thursday, September 7, 8pm. Christine Bondi: *My Humanistic Past – how One Thing Led to Another*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, October 10, 7.30pm. Joyce Miller: *Values in Education*.

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

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

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Full programme of events on website: [www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk](http://www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk)

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford. Thursday, September 21, 8pm. Barbara Smoker: *Shaw and Religion*.

**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. Wednesday, September 6, 8pm. Andy Sangar: *How Sheffield got its Academies*.

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

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

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

**Suffolk Humanists:** 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. [mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk](mailto:mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk). [www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk). Next meetings September 13 in Ipswich, October 19 in Colchester.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto:BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net).

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

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

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

website: [www.nirelandhumanists.net](http://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