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# The Freethinker

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The voice of atheism since 1881



**Grudge  
Match of  
the Century**

## **Benedict v Mohammed**

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CHRISTIANS are best at exposing their ignorance when indulging in their ancient art of book-burning. While I am totally opposed to the burning of *any* books, I do feel that any action that highlights the moronic mind-set and the sheer vindictiveness of Bible-thumpers cannot be *all* bad. After all, drawing attention to, say, the "evilness" of Harry Potter books by consigning them to a bonfire can only serve to increase their popularity.

But, environmental concerns in the US, where the burning of "objectionable" material can include records, CD's, posters and "offensive" T-shirts, may soon spell the end of the tradition.

According to an Associated Press report, a planned burning organised last month by Pastor Scott Breedlove of the Jesus Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, hit the buffers when city and county officials refused to grant him a fire permit.

"We don't want a situation where people are burning rubbish as a recreational fire," Brad Brenneman, a district fire chief in Cedar Rapids, told AP. Going outside the city wasn't an option either, because county air-pollution rules prohibited the burning of material outside city limits.

The city fire inspector suggested shredding the offending material, but that didn't seem biblical enough for Breedlove, so he decided to dump it into trash cans and light candles – which don't require fire permits – as a symbolic act of burning. What a poor substitute for the real thing!

The last big book-burning to attract wide media attention took place last December in New Mexico when pastor Jack Brock, of the Alamogordo Christ Community Church, scheduled a "holy bonfire" of Harry Potter books. The 74-year-old parson said the books were "an abomination to God and to me", and were liable to "destroy the lives of many young people." His Christmas Eve sermon asked the question, "Baby Jesus or Harry Potter?"

While some were all in favour of a spectacular conflagration for the Baby Jesus, others in Alamogordo (population: 30,000) were mortified, as their town was subjected to mass media scrutiny of the least flattering sort. Radio, TV and press reporters swamped the town, prompting one outraged resident to write to the Alamogordo *Daily News*, "There's nothing better than showing the entire state that blind ignorance is alive in our town." This sparked a lively correspondence in which Brock and his flock were compared to the Nazis and Osama bin Laden.

In the end, around 800 protesters turned up to vent their anger at the burning by Brock and 400 of his parishioners, not only of Harry Potter novels, but works of Shakespeare and J R R Tolkien. Anti-Brock demonstrators included Unitarians, pagans, Democrats, Methodists, Presbyterians, atheists – oh, and one Adolf Hitler impersonator. Many of the demonstrators said that the book burning reminded them of *Fahrenheit 451*, the Taliban's destruction of ancient Buddha statues, and similar acts of cultural repression. The protesters could draw on a long, sad string of historic precedents by which

to denounce the event. Even John Calvin, that great exponent of Christian liberty, famously forced his godless opponents to burn their own books publicly in order to escape execution.

Landover Baptists, the spoof Christian website which thousands, if not millions, of dupes regard as a genuine fundie organisation, has a superb take on book-burning. Here is an extract.

**Freethinker Editor  
BARRY DUKE  
finds some a merit  
in the Christian art  
of book-burning**



"The burning of books is nothing new to True Christians®. We invented the practice over 2,000 years ago as a way to promote our faith in the Lord Jesus. In the early days of Christianity, when new believers in Christ were converted, they were naturally moved by the Holy Spirit to grab as many books as they could and pitch them into a fire. Unlike the sissy 'Jesus is Love' fake Christians (whom both the Lord Jesus and we loathe) the early followers of Christ were never ashamed to burn books. In fact, if you ever find yourself being grateful for the destruction of most of the works of pagan nincompoops like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, you have a Christian to thank! In the Book of Acts we learn that anyone who wants to follow Jesus, should get ready to start burning books at the drop of a hat. The Book of Acts teaches us that burning someone's books is a great way spread God's word.

*Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together and burned them before all men and they counted the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.* Acts 19:19-20

"In the aftermath of September 11, a spiritual awakening is sweeping across the USA. One of the great signs that the Holy Spirit is moving in the hearts and souls of Americans is our glorious and sacred return to the practice of book burning. Secular humanists and atheists have spent hundreds of years trying to make 'book burners' look bad. Oftentimes the media paints a terrible image of book burners. 'They make us out to look like fanatics or Germans,' said one Christian. Did you know that a militant homosexual named Ray Bradbury even wrote a popular book called *Fahrenheit 451* about book burning? He made Christians out to look like fools! Well, Mr Bradbury, if you are still alive, and God hasn't sent you to Hell yet, we'd like you to know that *Fahrenheit 451* is also a book that can be burned. And nobody would miss it!

"The truth is, burning a book is one of the most loving things a Christian could do for a person they really care about. The Landover Baptist Church is proud to be sponsoring America's Largest Book Burning on Satan's Birthday, October 31st. This will be the third

consecutive year we have held the event.

"As a Christian, you should be eager to participate in this Bible-based tradition. Burning books just like the first Christians did in the New Testament is a great way to say 'no' to Satan and 'yes' to Jesus."

PRESIDENT Bush's The War on Terror (TWOT), formerly known as The War Against Terror (TWAT) was subsequently changed to the Global War on Terror (GWOT), but – given its failure to win the hearts and minds of most of the rest of the world – semantics experts who advise the President have come up with yet another term, the War Against Islamic Fascism (WAIF).

Predictably, Muslim groups immediately cried foul. Bush's use of the phrase "contributes to a rising level of hostility to Islam and the American-Muslim community," whined Parvez Ahmed, chairman of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

White House aides said the new description is an attempt to identify more clearly the ideology that motivates many organised terrorist groups and represents a shift in emphasis from the general to the specific. "I think it's an appropriate definition of the war that we're in," said GOP pollster Ed Goetas. "I think it's effective in that it definitively defines the enemy in a way that we can't because they're not in uniforms."

Dennis Ross, a Middle East adviser in the administrations of Presidents George H W Bush and Bill Clinton and now the director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, disagrees. "The war on terror has always been a misnomer, because terrorism is an instrument; it's not an ideology. So I would always have preferred it to be called the 'war with radical Islam'."

Muslims are demanding to know why religion should be mentioned at all. "Because that's who they are," Ross says. "Fascism had a certain definition. Whether they meet this or not, one thing is clear: They're radical. They represent a completely radical and intolerant interpretation of Islam."

To confuse matters further, the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, waded in, saying it was unhelpful to call Muslim terrorists Islamic fundamentalists or fascists as these were Christian and political terms that "further alienate those who commit these crimes."

He said they should be called Salafi Jihadists, after the Islamic concept of struggle, which has been bent into the pursuit of murder and mass destruction by members of the Salafi movement. "For the modern-day Salafi Jihadists, who define themselves through acts of mass destruction and terror, Jihad has taken on a whole new meaning."

When the next terrorist atrocity takes place, as it no doubt will, will the headline writers be scratching their heads over whether to call the perpetrators "Islamic fascists", "Islamofascists", "Islamist terrorists", "radical Islamists", "salafi jihadists" or simply "murderous, god-crazed barbarians"? I know which one I would choose!



# Catholics pitch headlong into a hornet's nest

AMIDST violent protests in many parts of the Muslim world over remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI about the Prophet Mohammed, one protester in Srinagar, India, declared – without a trace of irony – “Islam’s message of peace and brotherhood is universal!”

The passage in the Pope address, which plunged the Vatican into its greatest crisis for decades, focused on the words of the 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, who said everything Mohammed brought was evil “such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached”.

The Pope used the terms “jihad” and “holy war” in his lecture at the University of Regensburg, while on a pilgrimage to Germany.

In his speech, the Pope appeared to endorse a Christian view, contested by most Muslims, that the early Muslims spread their religion by violence. Afterwards, the Pope was at pains to point out that “these (words) were in fact a quotation from a Medieval text which do not in any way express my personal thought”. Within hours of his speech being reported, angry Muslims were out on the streets. In India, effigies of the Pope were burned and two churches – neither of them Catholic – were fire-bombed in the West Bank of Gaza.

Despite a grovelling apology, in which Benedict told Muslims he respected their faith and hoped they would understand the “true sense” of his words, protests and condemnations continued in many parts of India last month, and Muslims in the Kashmir Valley were urged by local firebrands to take part in a one-day general strike.

“The Holy Father is very sorry that some passages of his speech may have sounded offensive to the sensibilities of Muslim believers,” Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone said in a statement.

Yemen’s president was the first head of state publicly to denounce the Pope and threaten to review ties with the Vatican unless he apologised. Ali Abdullah Saleh, campaigning for re-election, told voters at a rally that Benedict had wronged Islam.

But Chancellor Angela Merkel and other German politicians defended his comments, saying he had been misunderstood.

“It was an invitation to dialogue between religions, she told the mass-circulation *Bild* newspaper in an interview. “What Benedict XVI emphasised was a decisive and uncompromising renunciation of all forms of violence in the name of religion.”

“He should apologise to Muslims,” the president of the German Council of Muslims, Ayyub Axel Koehler, told the *Neue Presse* newspaper on Saturday. “That would be a contribution towards unwinding the tension and creating clarity.”

Support for that view came from the *New York Times*, which said in an editorial that he

must issue a “deep and persuasive” apology for quotes used in his speech.

“The world listens carefully to the words of any pope. And it is tragic and dangerous when one sows pain, either deliberately or carelessly,” it said. “He needs to offer a deep and persuasive apology, demonstrating that words can also heal.”

Turkey’s nationalist paper *Vatan* quoted Salih Kapusuz, head of the ruling Justice and Development Party’s parliamentary group as saying: “The mentality of the Crusades has returned. [Benedict] will go down in history in the same category as leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini.”

But Turkey’s English-language *Daily News*, while deploring the Pope’s comments, said: “We just disagree with this vendetta-like approach of continuing to abuse the Pope after his spokesman made a statement saying that he respected Islam and did not intend to offend Muslims.” Castel Gandolfo, Italy – Pope Benedict XVI said he was “deeply sorry” about the angry reaction sparked by his speech about Islam and holy war and said the text did not reflect his personal opinion.

## ‘Riddled with invocations to violence’

However, the Pope’s apology appears to put him at odds with the the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, who earlier this year angered Australian Muslims with his description of their holy book as an incitement to violence.

In a speech delivered to a group of Catholic business leaders in the US, the Archbishop also took aim at what he claimed were hysterical and extreme claims about global warming.

Pell’s central argument was that an understanding of Islam was vital for the future of western democracies. September 11, according to Pell, was a wake-up call that prompted him to dust off a copy of the Koran.

“I recommend that you too read this sacred text of the Muslims, because the challenge of Islam will be with us for the remainder of our lives,” he said.

Pell says the Koran was riddled with so many invocations to violence that after about 50 or 60 or 70 pages, he stopped taking notes of them. He also said that, considered strictly on its own terms, Islam is not a tolerant religion and its capacity for far-reaching renovation is severely limited, and he pointed to the difficulty that scholars and commentators face when analysing the Koran, such as receiving death threats and violence when questioning the divine origin of the holy book.



Above: Muslims in India demonstrate the sweet-natured character of Islam by burning effigies of the Pope, and flouncing about in high dudgeon. Below: Anti-Pope demonstrators bearing placards.



Keysar Trad, founder of the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia, says this is not the first time Cardinal Pell has made “ill-informed comments.”

“I think there will be many Catholics out there who’ll be cringing when they hear these comments, and they’ll be saying ‘what happened to the legacy of Pope John Paul II?’ The Catholic Church is being changed from the top and not necessarily for the better.”

Cardinal Pell’s speech also described concerns about global warming as “hysterical and extreme”. He said these worries were a symptom of pagan emptiness. He added that, in the past, pagans sacrificed animals and even humans in vain attempts to placate the gods, but today they demand a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.

Senator Christine Milne reacted by saying that the Cardinal’s comments were unhelpful and insulting. “I think it’s unfortunate that Cardinal Pell refers to a pagan emptiness and western fears about global warming as being hysterical and extreme,” she said.

“Cardinal Pell must surely be aware of the late Pope John Paul’s comments about the need for ecological conversion.

“He must also be aware that there’s a very strong view in the Catholic faith across the world that we need to recognise that we are stewards of God’s earth and therefore have a responsibility to maintain it in its pristine form.”



# Death sentence hangs over Saudi man accused of joking about the Prophet Mohammed's penis

A 31-year-old Saudi man, Hadi Saeed al-Mutif, last month began a hunger strike after spending almost 13 years behind bars for allegedly cracking a joke about the prophet Mohammed's penis.

Hadi, a Shia Muslim from the Ismaili branch, which many in the Saudi religious and legal establishment regard as heretical, grew up in the countryside in southern Saudi Arabia, and at the age of 18 started training to become a policeman. Two months into his training, Hadi gathered with other recruits for afternoon prayers. "Let us pray upon the Prophet", the Imam said – at which point Hadi allegedly quipped: "... and upon his penis".

According to a report last month by the Middle East editor of the *Guardian*, a couple of Hadi's fellow recruits reported him to the authorities at the training centre, and he was ordered to stand under the Saudi flag for two hours as a punishment. That might have been the end of the matter, wrote Whitaker, except that a military inspector happened to be visiting at the time. Instead, this silly incident set in motion a train of events which is still continuing after almost 13 years, involving every level of Saudi Arabia's Byzantine justice system and even reaching the ears of the king.

From the training centre, Hadi was taken to the local police station where the officers scratched their heads over what to do about

him. After detaining him for 13 days, they unburdened themselves by handing him over to the Mabahith, the kingdom's domestic intelligence service.

During his 25 days in the custody of the Mabahith, according to Hadi's account, he was tortured with beatings and sleep deprivation. Finally, a judge arrived and ordered him to sign a confession – which he refused to do, claiming that he was the victim of a fabrication.

He then spent a year in military detention awaiting trial. After hearing two or three witnesses and holding six court sessions, the judge decided Hadi was guilty and sentenced him to death. Two appeals followed – one to a court in Mecca and another to the Supreme Judicial Council. Both were rejected, and in both cases the judges' views on the religious inadequacy of Ismaili Muslims seem to have been a major factor.

In a final bid to save his life, Hadi's family made an appeal for mercy to the acting monarch at the time, Crown Prince Abdullah, who ordered a special committee to look into the case. In fact, three committees became involved: a judicial committee, an administrative committee and a forensic committee.

For the purposes of the forensic committee, Hadi spent six months in a psychiatric facility in Ta'if, which found he was suffering from depression and psychosis, and had not been responsible

for his actions at the time of the incident.

The judicial committee, however, over-ruled the forensic committee and decided that Hadi should be punished in a way that would set an example for others.

Crown Prince Abdullah has since become king and six months ago Hadi's father, together with a local sheikh from Najran, managed to secure an audience with him. The king expressed a desire to find a solution: some say he commuted the death sentence to life imprisonment – though no one seems entirely sure.

In a bid to end the uncertainty shrouding his future, Hadi decided last month to force the authorities to bring his case to a conclusion by starting a hunger strike. He said he is determined to continue it until death.

Whitaker observed that "the quip about the Prophet's penis is not totally unheard of, at least in some circles. I have been unable to find out much about its origin and usage, but it seems to be something that laddish types say to make their mates snigger at an inappropriate moment – a bit like the occasionally irreverent antics of choirboys in Christian churches."

At least two other cases of people getting into trouble for using exactly the same phrase have been documented in Saudi Arabia. In one case a high school student (also an Ismaili) was reported by his teacher and received a 14-year jail sentence with 4,000 lashes.

## Saudi Arabia's religious police clamp down on pet owners

SAUDI Arabia's religious police, normally tasked with prowling streets and malls to ensure that unmarried men and women do not mix, and to confront women they deem to be improperly dressed, have found a new target – pet cats and dogs.

The Mutawa, as the religious police are known, have banned the sale of these pets, which they say are a sign of Western decadence.

The prohibition on dogs stems from the fact that conservative Muslims despise dogs as unclean. But the cat ban has befuddled many, since Islamic tradition holds that the Prophet Mohammed loved cats.

The decree – which applies to the Red Sea port city of Jeddah and the "holy" city of Mecca – prohibits the sale of cats and dogs because "some youths have been buying them and parading them in public," according to a memo from the Municipal Affairs Ministry to Jeddah's city government. The memo urges city authorities to help enforce the ban.

Pet-owning is not common in the Arab world, though dogs are kept for hunting and guarding. However, in recent years, owning dogs or cats has become a fashion statement among Saudis. Dobermans, pit bulls or a fancy

breed of feline has become a status symbol.

"One bad habit spreading among our youths is the acquisition of dogs and showing them off in the streets and malls," wrote Aleetha al-Jihani in a letter to *Al-Madina* newspaper. "This is blind emulation of the infidels."

The ban has come as a shock to distressed cat and dog lovers.

"I was shocked when I heard about it," said Fahd al-Mutairi, who owns 35 cats. "What was even more shocking was to hear that the ban came from an authority that has nothing to do with such an issue."

"I would understand if it came from the Health Ministry or anybody charged with ensuring pets coming from outside do not carry diseases," added the 23-year-old flower shop owner.

### Quotable quote

IF a man would follow today the teachings of the Old Testament, he would be a criminal. If he would follow strictly the teachings of the New, he would be insane.

– Robert Ingersoll

No other Arab country restricts pet ownership. But in Iran, ruled by Shi'ite clerics, religious police sometimes harass people seen outside with their dogs. Last year, Iranian police told people not to bring their dogs out in public, but the order was never backed up by law, and dog owners widely ignored it.

The inclusion of cats in the Saudi ban puzzled many because there's no scorn for them, as there is for dogs in Islamic tradition.

One of the prophet's closest companions was given the name Abu Huraira. Arabic for "the father of the kitten," because he always carried a kitten and took care of it.

A number of hadiths – traditional stories of the prophet – show Mohammed encouraging people to treat cats well. Once, it is alleged, he let a cat drink from the water he was going to use for his ablutions before prayers. On another occasion, Mohammed said a woman who kept a cat locked up without feeding it would go to hell.

Dogs – considered dirty and dangerous – are less fortunate. According to one hadith, Mohammed said a Muslim loses credit for one good deed each day he keeps a dog and even said dogs should be killed unless used for hunting or protection.



# Pope John Paul II resurrected as a comic book super-hero

POPE John Paul II was reborn this summer as a Colombian Superhero known as Homopater or the Incredible Popeman

Homopater's creator, Colombian artist Rodolfo Leon, describes himself as a non-practising Catholic, which, one commentator on the internet site, *The Gag Report*, suggested "probably means he simply doesn't want to catch AIDS or impregnate every woman he gets jiggy with, especially since Colombia already has so many hungry mouths to feed".

"The Pope was a real-life superhero, of flesh and blood," Leon told reporters. In the comic book, the Pope dies but is reborn as the Incredible Popeman complete with a whole array of special equipment to help him battle evil here on earth.

First, the muscular super-pontiff has a yellow anti-Devil cape and special green chastity pants to protect him from temptation.

Second, Homopater also carries the Staff of Faith which has a cross on top, and an abundant supply of holy water.

Finally, the Incredible Popeman also has an ever-lasting supply of communion wine.

Leon admitted to reporters that he had initially worried that some people might be offended by his work, but said the reception so far had been very positive. In fact, publishers in Mexico, Canada and the United States have also expressed interest in the comic, and Leon also plans to produce Incredible Popeman action dolls.

## Christian Voice director Stephen Green arrested in Wales

THE National Director of Christian Voice, Stephen Green, was arrested by South Wales Police last month for distributing Gospel tracts at a gay event. According to a CV press release, "an Inspector Chad, wearing a fluorescent vest with 'Minorities Support Unit' on the back, detained Green when he refused to stop giving out the leaflets to people entering Bute Park in Cardiff, where the 'Mardi Gras' event was being held."

Green was kept in the cells at Cardiff Police Station for over four hours before being charged with using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour.

Green said afterwards: "I thank God for the honour of being locked up for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All the same, I am astonished that South Wales Police have a special unit dedicated to silencing those who disagree with homosexuality.

"Stonewall, the homosexual rights organisation, say the South Wales Police 'Minorities Support Unit' works closely

### Catholic nun assassinated

GUNMEN shot and killed an Italian nun at a children's hospital in Mogadishu last month. A high-level Islamist source in Somalia told Reuters the attack may well have been linked to the controversy over Pope Benedict's remarks about holy wars, which have been taken by many Muslims as an attempt to portray their religion as innately violent. The nun was shot three times in the back.

with the LGBT communities'. Maybe they work a bit too closely when an evangelist can be victimised simply because he is giving out leaflets quoting verses from the same Bible police officers swear on in court.

"Speaking about righteousness, morality, sin, repentance and the forgiveness sinners can find in the cross of Jesus Christ may well offend the fragile sensibilities of homosexuals, but should the police have a partisan unit whose job is to round up Christian dissidents, treat them like thought criminals and trample on freedom of speech?

"I am constantly hearing stories of Christian preachers being told to shut up by bullying police officers with personal issues or axes to grind. In most cases they simply comply. But if we are to safeguard our historic freedoms, someone has to make a stand.

"The leaflet itself, 'Same-Sex Love – Same-Sex Sex: What does the Bible say?' isn't even that hard-hitting. Sure, it quotes the Bible to establish that same-sex sex is sin, it says that no-one has to stay gay and asks how the reader will stand in the Day of Judgment.

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, Green was due to appear before Cardiff magistrates for a pre-trial review.

When Green first appeared before magistrates in early September, the Public Prosecutor admitted to the Magistrates that the case raised human rights issues, not the least of which was freedom of expression



### Celtic player gets a police caution for making the sign of the Cross

CELTIC goalkeeper Artur Boruc has been cautioned for a breach of the peace by police for blessing himself in an Old Firm match at Ibrox in February.

The Scottish Crown Office said in August that the procurator fiscal had issued the caution as an alternative to prosecution. A spokesman explained that Boruc's actions "included a combination of behaviour before a crowd in the charged atmosphere of an Old Firm match", and that the Polish keeper's behaviour had "provoked alarm and crowd trouble".

The incident was said to have taken place at the start of the second half of the game on 12 February. Police investigated the complaints and submitted a report to the procurator fiscal.

The Crown Office said Boruc's behaviour had taken place before a crowd in the charged atmosphere of a match between Celtic and rivals Rangers. As such it constituted a breach of the peace.

The goalkeeper, who played during this year's World Cup in Germany, signed for Celtic from Legia Warsaw in July last year.

Peter Kearney, spokesman for the Catholic Church, said the move to caution Boruc was "regrettable". He said: "It is a worrying and alarming development, especially since the sign of the cross is globally accepted as a gesture of religious reverence.

"It's also very common in international football and was commonplace throughout the World Cup.

"It is extremely regrettable that Scotland seems to have made itself one of the few countries in the world where this simple religious gesture is considered an offence."



*Freethinker* reports (August and September 2006), of how the Gay Police Association's religious hate crime advert in the *Independent* itself became the subject of a "hate crime" investigation, illustrates perfectly the pitiful level to which public debate has sunk in this country.

Every self-interested minority, be it gay, Christian, Scottish, or whatever, clamours for the mantle of victimhood, while seeking to silence critical or dissenting voices with insidious "hate crime" legislation, applied heavy-handedly by a confused and politicised police force.

The GPA's advert, which pictured a Bible next to a pool of blood, presents a number of challenges to freethinkers. Firstly, their advert offered no supporting evidence for its dubious statistic that religious queerbashing has increased by 74 percent in 12 months (meaningless without empirical data). Nor did it provide evidence for the extravagant claim, albeit implied, that Christian queerbashers are roaming the streets preying on vulnerable homosexuals. No one in the gay press has even bothered to ask the obvious question – how do you know if your assailant is motivated by Christianity?

Do they quote Leviticus or Romans 1 as they knee you in the groin? Do they bash you over the head with a crucifix? Are they, perhaps, wearing a tell-tale surplice or cassock? Seriously, though, outside of a handful of grim sectarian hotspots, who has ever been queerbashed by an identifiable Christian? ASBO-thugs from sink estates are not generally noted for their piety; indeed, most are probably atheists.

On July 20, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) issued a press release, which fully and uncritically supported the GPA against the Christians the advert had offended: "It is outrageous that Christians should suggest that ... 'religious freedom' amounts to a freedom to attack and insult gay people", it huffed and puffed, in predictable high dudgeon. For GALHA, any obligingly secular gay group that puts the boot into Christianity can do no wrong, though I suspect that if the GPA had dared to have a pop at Islam, GALHA would have maintained a buttock-clenching silence, unwilling to upset either practising Muslims, or the patronising Lefties for whom Muslims are a fashionable constituency of victims, ripe for electoral exploitation.

The trouble with GALHA press releases is that they only ever have one response to anything – robotic indignation. Impotent outrage is uniformly applied, whether GALHA is objecting to nativity scenes appearing on postage stamps at Christmas, or real obscenities, like the hanging of gay teens in Iran. Intelligent criticism of something like the GPA's advertisement is simply beyond its grasp.

The GPA, far from being guilty of a hate

## Public debate over 'hate crime' sinks to a pitiful level

crime, is actually guilty of dodging the real issues. At the very least, their advert should have included a pie chart illustrating gay-bashers' religious affiliations as a proportion of the whole.

Even if we accept, at face value, that there has indeed been a 74 percent increase in homophobic attacks motivated by religious fervour, then it seems highly improbable that your average cheek-turning, forgiving, enemy-loving Christian is going to be wielding the pickaxe handle.

### DIESEL BALAAM finds the current 'hate-crime feeding frenzy' all a bit juvenile

The GPA also appears to have conflated perfectly acceptable hostile criticism with unacceptable verbal intimidation and violent abuse. The National Director of Christian Voice, Stephen Green, is probably the most vociferous Christian critic of homosexuality in Britain today, yet even his sneering repertoire of wrist-flapping "bumboy" provocations falls well short of a hate crime (as most of us would understand that term). He just looks and sounds like some third-rate northern comedian from the 1970s!

Am I the only freethinker who finds all this mutually assured censorship, feigned indignation and reporting each other to the police if we utter a word out of turn, all a bit juvenile? Personally, I stopped telling tales out of school when I left Dunsmore Boys' Grammar in 1980. What exactly is wrong with open, unlimited, grown-up debate? What is so terrifying about listening to an alternative point of view? It has served us very well in the past, while the perverse premises of things like racism, communism and Islamo-fascism soon begin to fall apart when subjected to the rigours of rational argument. We should have considerably more confidence in the persuasiveness of reason and humanity, and utter contempt for the PC-brigade who seek to reduce political life to a

series of sterile sound-bites that offend, or inspire, nobody.

Take a deep breath everyone. The next bit is controversial. If the GPA is correct in claiming a 74 percent increase in religious anti-gay hate crimes, in spite of organised religion having been in free-fall decline for several decades, then where did this surge of religious hatred for all things poofy suddenly spring from? Left-wing readers might want to reach for the *sal volatile* at this point, but could there possibly be a link between the GPA's 74 percent and the huge influx of immigrants in recent years, many of whom adhere to rigidly dogmatic creeds, including virulent strains of both Christianity, and, more especially, Islam? We know that many newcomers from alien cultures have difficulty adapting to Western societies in which gay people are permitted to live freely and visibly. The Dutch have recently taken heed of this and started educating their immigrants about sexual tolerance, in order to assess their suitability for naturalisation. Perhaps it is time for the UK to do likewise.

In this country, prominent gay activists, including Peter Tatchell and the gay Muslim group, Al-Fatiha, are fond of claiming that they are the subject of Islamist death threats. Jihadist followers of Omar Bakri have called for gays in Britain to be beheaded. Muslim spokesmen like Sir Iqbal Sacranie have certainly been as vocal as their Christian counterparts in condemning gay lifestyles, probably more so (it's true that Sacranie was investigated for airing his anti-gay views on Radio 4, but in the "pack of cards" that is the hate crime hierarchy, the Muslim Ace of Spades will always trump a Queen, so he got away with it).

To stretch the pack of cards analogy further, one may consider white, working class, heterosexual men as the Two of Diamonds, Christians as the Five of Clubs, with secular humanists as the Seven of Hearts, beneath feminists but above the Countryside Alliance. The point is, you can get away with criticising any of these social constituencies, providing that they are lower down the politically correct caste system than you. Direct that criticism upwards and you're guilty of a "hate crime". So, Muslims can criticise gays, gays can criticise Christians, but not the other way round.

This explains why the GPA has not repeated their advert using the Koran next to a pool of blood. For politically correct gay campaigners, like GALHA and the GPA, Christians are fair game in the current "hate crime" feeding frenzy of litigation and counter-litigation, but Muslims are strictly off-limits. More pertinently, while some Christians may take issue with your opinion, or gay lifestyle, there are some Muslim radicals who would simply take your life. Remember the bloody repercussions of the "cartoons" fiasco?

The GPA is not guilty of a "hate crime" but it is guilty of cowardice, double standards and ineptitude.



# A separate education system for UK Muslims looks like moving a step closer

IN a new move that will separate Muslims even further from the majority population of this country, The Association of Muslim Schools and the Christian Schools' Trust have asked for a "Faith Schools Inspectorate" to do the work that is presently carried out by Ofsted.

According to a report in the National Secular Society's *Newsline* (September 15), the inspectorate would "operate under a more religiously and culturally aware and sensitive regime" than current inspections in order to "protect and promote the religious ethos and philosophy of independent faith schools' communities."

The education spokesman for the Muslim Council of Britain, Tahir Alam, said: "Currently, you can get inspectors who do not have a faith-school background and who know nothing about Islam. It can be easy to misunderstand things such as the school ethos. Some aspects of the syllabus are unique – in areas such as spiritual development for instance."

Conservative MP for Monmouth, David Davies, commented: "We have already seen how easy it is for extremist preachers of hate to take over mosques. It would be equally easy for them to take over schools. The real losers are the moderate Muslims. Unfortunately, the Government is too busy buttering up extremists to listen to them."

Terry Sanderson, vice president of the National Secular Society, said: "We have been predicting that this would happen for some time, and now here it is. The undefined 'spiritual development' that Tahir Alam speaks of could result in inferior education for girls or allowing the curriculum to be totally dominated by religious indoctrination. We must not allow a separate education system to develop in this country, giving religious fanatics the opportunity to foist their hatred on to the children in their care. The Ofsted inspections should only take reasonable religious requirements into account, and they must apply consistent standards to all schools in this country. There must be no opt-out that would give succour to religious extremists."

The Islamia school in north-west London was the first Muslim school to achieve state-sponsorship. It claims to have a waiting list of 2,500, and achieves good results. This is its admissions policy:

"The aim of the School is to produce total Muslim personalities through the training of children's spirits, intellect, feelings and bodily senses. Education at Islamia caters for the growth of students in all their spiritual, intel-

lectual, imaginative, physical, scientific and linguistic aspects, both individually and collectively, motivating all these aspects towards goodness. The ultimate aim of Islamic education is the realisation of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large. Islamia Primary School promotes an ethos of positive yet critical and non-confrontational dialogue within general society. We aim to educate our children to participate effectively and con-

structively within society from within a spiritual, Quranic and Prophetic perspective through the means of example, dialogue and positive communication. In particular, a dignified and measured response to all manner of situations is an essential part of the ethos taught at our school. The above are all aimed at improving and contributing to the society that we live in and to communicate the Deen of Allah to all people through positive and constructive interaction."

## Pope pokes his nose into Canadian politics

POPE Benedict sparked a debate about the place of religious beliefs in Canadian politics when he told Ontario bishops that Canada has excluded "God from the public sphere" with laws supporting same-sex marriage and abortion.

The pontiff told a group of seven visiting bishops in Vatican City that Canadian Catholic politicians were ignoring the values of their religion, yielding to "ephemeral social trends and the spurious demands of opinion polls."

"In the name of tolerance your country has had to endure the folly of the redefinition of spouse, and in the name of freedom of choice it is confronted with the daily destruction of unborn children," the Pope said.

Alfonse Ainsworth, general secretary of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, said

he expects the bishops will take the Pope's words into consideration when planning their strategy for the next provincial and federal elections.

"I'm sure they'll be studying the comments and the context and making sure they follow through," he said.

The meeting was a routine one the Pope has with regional bishops every five years. When the Pope met with the Canadian bishops he told them that Canada was "suffering from the pervasive effects of secularism" and pointed to "the plummeting birth rate" as proof.

But the pontiff's strong criticism re-ignited a debate about the separation of church and state in Canada. Gilles Marchildon, executive director of gay-rights advocates Egale Canada, said politicians represent all Canadians of various faiths and should keep their personal beliefs out of the House of Commons.

"Because of that, politicians have a responsibility to not be proponents of a particular faith when making decisions that affect everyone," said Marchildon. "We don't have a state religion in Canada."

Just as government doesn't instruct the Catholic Church how to celebrate communion, Marchildon said the church shouldn't instruct politicians on who can get married.

"I'm surprised the Pope doesn't realise that gate can swing both ways," he said.

Benedict has made the defence of traditional family values a major goal of his papacy, speaking out often on the issue. During a trip to Spain in July, he challenged that country's Socialist government for instituting liberal reforms such as gay marriage and fast-track divorce.

Same-sex marriage was recognised by Canada's Parliament last year, but Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said there will be a vote in the House of Commons this autumn to determine whether the issue should be reconsidered.

## Outspoken Italian journalist dies

ORIANA Fallaci, one of Italy's best-known journalists, who shocked the literary world with a vitriolic attack on Islam after the September 11 attacks on America in 2001, has died aged 77.

Italian media said Ms Fallaci died in her home town of Florence after battling cancer for several years.

She interviewed some of the most famous leaders of the 20th century. They included Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and US secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

She set the pace for a daring life when she joined Italy's anti-fascist resistance during World War II, then showed the same fearlessness as a war reporter.

Ms Fallaci divided her own public when she wrote *The Rage and the Pride* in the wake of the 11 September attacks, an angry book in which she described Islam as oppressive and Arab immigrants in Europe as dirty and bigoted. In a later book, she said that the Islamic faith "sows hatred in the place of love".



**H**alf a century after his death at the age of 75, freethinker and journalist Henry Louis Mencken has become the subject of renewed interest in the United States, not least because many of his caustic observations about American life in his era have particular relevance to what is happening now in post-9/11 America.

Early in the 20th century, Mencken noted that there was “a sudden change ... Holes began to be punched in the Bill of Rights, and new laws of strange and often fantastic shape began to slip through them. The hysteria of the late war [WWI] completed the process. The Espionage Act [passed in 1917] enlarged the holes to great fissures. Citizens began to be pursued into their houses, arrested without warrants, and jailed without any form of trial. The ancient writ of *habeas corpus* was suspended: the Bill of Rights was boldly thrown overboard.”

Eighty-four years on, the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-56), commonly known as the USA Patriot Act or simply the Patriot Act, was signed into law by President George W Bush on October 26, 2001.

Originally passed after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the controversial Act dramatically expanded the authority of American law enforcement for the stated purpose of fighting terrorist acts in the United States and abroad. It has also been used to detect and prosecute other alleged potential crimes such as providing false information on terrorism. It was renewed on March 2, 2006 and signed into law by President Bush on March 9, 2006.

Gore Vidal, the American novelist and honorary associate of the National Secular Society, in his foreword to *The Impossible H L Mencken* (1991) edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, wrote “Inevitably, Mencken’s journalism is filled with stories of how our enumerated rights are constantly being evaded or struck down because it is the reflexive tactic of the politicians ‘to invade the Constitution stealthily, and then wait to see what happens. If nothing happens they go on more boldly; if there is a protest they reply hotly that the Constitution is worn out and absurd, and that progress is impossible under the dead hand. This is the time to watch them especially’.”

Vidal added: “Although the extent of the decadence of the democratic process at our end of the century was unknown if not unsuspected, to Mencken, he knew enough of history and its engine, entropy, to declare that ‘no government, of its own motion, will increase its own weakness, for that would mean to acquiesce in its own destruction ... governments, whatever their pretensions otherwise, try to preserve themselves by holding the individual down ...’”

Mencken was undoubtedly an extraordinary visionary. In 1930, commenting that communist literature was “as childish as the literature of

# H L Mencken – ‘The S

## honoured at a spec

Christian Science,” he predicted that communism “will probably disappear altogether when the Russian experiment comes to a climax, and Bolshevism either converts itself into a sickly imitation of capitalism or blows up with a bang. The former issue seems more likely.”

For freethinkers, Mencken’s observations about religion remain an enduring source of delight. In a piece entitled “Aftermath” in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* (September 14, 1925), following the notorious Scopes trial, he wrote: “The way to deal with superstition is not to be polite to it, but to tackle it with all arms, and so rout it, cripple it, and make it forever infamous and ridiculous. Is it, perchance, cherished by persons who should know better? Then their folly should be brought out into the light of day, and exhibited there in all its hideousness until they flee from it, hiding their heads in shame.

“True enough, even a superstitious man has certain inalienable rights. He has a right to harbour and indulge his imbecilities as long as he pleases, provided only he does not try to inflict them upon other men by force. He has a right to argue for them as eloquently as he can, in season and out of season. He has a right to teach them to his children. But certainly he has no right to be protected against the free criticism of those who do not hold them. He has no right to demand that they be treated as sacred. He has no right to preach them without challenge ...”

In the same year Mencken declared that “religion is fundamentally opposed to everything I hold in veneration – courage, clear thinking, honesty, fairness, and, above all, love of the truth”.

An unnamed writer, in a review posted on the internet of S T Joshi’s *H L Mencken on Religion* (Prometheus, ISBN: 1573929824), said “Mencken’s views on religion are intimately tied to his political philosophy. Throughout his career he reiterated the opinion that ordinary people are incapable of grasping the complexities of the world around them. To be blunt, they are too stupid to have an intelligent opinion on religion, science, society, or even politics, so that the very principle of democracy (by which Mencken really meant universal suffrage) is a farce and a tragedy.”

The reviewer observed “People [in the USA] today tend to be too polite to criticise religion. Even gentle and mild criticisms of religion are considered ‘off-limits’, especially in the popular media, lest one be considered bigoted. That

is, after all, just the sort of reaction we have seen to criticisms of how the Roman Catholic Church has handled its problems with abusive

priests. It seems unlikely then that H L Mencken would fit in with today’s society.

“Of course, that politeness expected of people really only extends to mainstream religions. We can still see news anchors joking about fringe religious groups like the Raelians – for example, poking fun at Paul Vorilhon’s robes or asking one another if they really take Raelian beliefs seriously. We would never see such commentary about a Catholic priest or the Pope, thus revealing a serious double standard when it comes to this so-called ‘politeness’ towards religion.

**This year marks the 50th anniversary of the death of H L Mencken. Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE reports on a resurgence of interest in Mencken’s writings**

“As S T Joshi demonstrates in his book, Mencken made no such discriminations when it came to his commentaries about religion and religious organisations. He was an equal-opportunity satirist, lampooning religion at every turn. He didn’t care if the religion was ‘mainstream’ or ‘minority’: if he found it absurd, he wouldn’t hesitate to say so.

“This is not to say, however, that Mencken was militantly atheist or anti-religious. Indeed, he wrote that he had no objection at all to church-going, ‘so long as it is honest’. Even the Bible itself was something he considered a worthwhile and honest book:

“The Bible, despite all its contradictions and absurdities, its barbarisms and obscenities, remains grand and gaudy stuff, and so it deserves careful study and enlightened exposition. It is not only lovely in phrase; it is also rich in ideas, many of them far from foolish. One somehow gathers the notion that it was written from end to end by honest men – inspired, perhaps, but nevertheless honest. When they had anything to say they said it plainly, whether it was counsel that enemies be slain or counsel that enemies be kissed. They knew how to tell a story, how to sing a song, and how to swathe a dubious argument in specious and disarming words. ... Seeking to save the world from Hell, they failed; but they at least gave it a superb literature.”

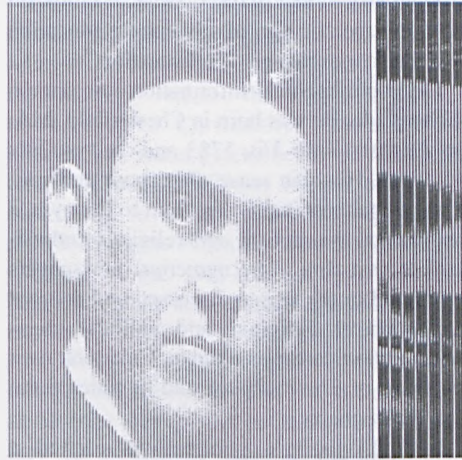
The reviewer concludes: S T Joshi has brought together dozens of Mencken’s articles on all manner of topics related to religion – his own beliefs, fundamentalism, the Scopes Trial,



# Sage of Baltimore' – Special US Exhibition

spiritualism, science, and much more. This is an excellent and well-organised single-volume collection of Mencken's work on religious issues, accompanied by an informative introduction to his life and philosophy. Anyone who has read some of Mencken and would like to read more would probably enjoy this book.

A Baltimore native, Mencken was a *Sun* reporter and columnist for more than 40 years and one of America's leading literary and social critics in the first half of the 20th century. The cynical freethinker is often remembered as the "Sage of Baltimore", and to mark the 50th anniversary of his death, an exhibition of his works was set up last month at Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, which houses Mencken's personal library. The exhibition takes its title – "Yet Another One!" – from the fact that he sent so many of his books to some friends that he sometimes inscribed them, "Noch eins" or, in English, "Yet another one!"



The exhibition, which runs until January 7, 2007, is drawn from the Robert A Wilson collection of H L Mencken, a rich assemblage that includes Mencken publications and original letters and photographs inscribed by Mencken.

## Enter our caption contest and win a copy of *H L Mencken on Religion*



THIS hilarious picture of a man photographing a bin-bagged group of women (or could they be Muslim transvestites in burkhas?) cries out for an amusing caption. The funniest entry received by November 15 will win a brand-new copy of *H L Mencken on Religion*, which normally retails around £20.00, plus a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*. There will be two runner-up prizes of an annual subscription to the magazine. Please send your entries to *Freethinker* Caption Contest, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

### Memorable Mencken Quotes

**EVANGELICAL** Christianity, as everyone knows, is founded upon hate, as the Christianity of Christ was founded upon love.

**WE** must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.

**THE** most curious social convention of the great age in which we live is the one to the effect that religious opinions should be respected.

**PEOPLE** say we need religion when what they really mean is we need police.

**MORAL** certainty is always a sign of cultural inferiority. The more uncivilised the man, the surer he is that he knows precisely what is right and what is wrong. All human progress, even in morals, has been the work of men who have doubted the current moral values, not of men who have whooped them up and tried to enforce them. The truly civilised man is always skeptical and tolerant.

**THE** priest, realistically considered, is the most immoral of men, for he is always willing to sacrifice every other sort of good to the one good of his arcanum – the vague body of mysteries that he calls the truth.

**DEEP** within the heart of every evangelist lies the wreck of a car salesman.

**THE** men that American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars; the men they detest the most violently are those who try to tell them the truth.

**THE** essence of science is that it is always willing to abandon a given idea for a better one; the essence of theology is that it holds its truths to be eternal and immutable. To be sure, theology is always yielding a little to the progress of knowledge, and only a Holy Roller in the mountains of Tennessee would dare to preach today what the popes preached in the thirteenth century.

**THE** notion that science does not concern itself with first causes – that it leaves the field to theology or metaphysics, and confines itself to mere effects – this notion has no support in the plain facts. If it could, science would explain the origin of life on earth at once – and there is every reason to believe that it will do so on some not too remote tomorrow. To argue that gaps in knowledge which will confront the seeker must be filled, not by patient inquiry, but by intuition or revelation, is simply to give ignorance a gratuitous and preposterous dignity.

**MEN** become civilised, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt.

**SAY** what you like about the Ten Commandments, you must always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.

(Continued on p10)



## Memorable Mencken Quotes

**METAPHYSICS** is almost always an attempt to prove the incredible by an appeal to the unintelligible. The truth is that Christian theology, like every other theology, is not only opposed to the scientific spirit; it is also opposed to all other attempts at rational thinking. Not by accident does Genesis 3 make the father of knowledge a serpent – slimy, sneaking and abominable. Since the earliest days the church, as an organisation, has thrown itself violently against every effort to liberate the body and mind of man. It has been, at all times and everywhere, the habitual and incorrigible defender of bad governments, bad laws, bad social theories, bad institutions. It was, for centuries, an apologist for slavery, as it was the apologist for the divine right of kings.

**FAITH** may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.... A man full of faith is simply one who has lost (or never had) the capacity for clear and realistic thought. He is not a mere ass: he is actually ill.

**GOD** is the immemorial refuge of the incompetent, the helpless, the miserable. They find not only sanctuary in his arms, but also a kind of superiority, soothing to their macerated egos: He will set them above their betters.

**WHY** assume so glibly that the God who presumably created the universe is still running it?

**THE** truth is, as every one knows, that the great artists of the world are never Puritans, and seldom even ordinarily respectable. No virtuous man – that is, virtuous in the YMCA sense – has ever painted a picture worth looking at, or written a symphony worth hearing, or a book worth reading, and it is highly improbable that the thing has ever been done by a virtuous woman.

**WHENEVER** a reporter is assigned to cover a Methodist conference, he comes home an atheist.

**IF** a politician found he had cannibals among his constituents, he would promise them missionaries for dinner.

**THERE** is only one honest impulse at the bottom of Puritanism, and that is the impulse to punish the man with a superior capacity for happiness – to bring him down to the miserable level of “good” men, ie, of stupid, cowardly, and chronically unhappy men.

**PROGRESS:** The process whereby the human race has got rid of whiskers, the vermiform appendix, and God.

**SUNDAY** school: A prison in which children do penance for the evil conscience of their parents.

**PURITANISM:** The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.

**ARCHBISHOP:** A Christian ecclesiastic of a rank superior to that attained by Christ.

**A NUN,** at best, is only half a woman, just as a priest is only half a man.

# Who was Obadiah Dogberry?

ANOTHER American freethinker who is being remembered this year is Obadiah Dogberry, the pen name of Abner Cole, who published *The Reflector* in Palmyra, NY, from 1829 to 1831, and *The Liberal Advocate* in Rochester, NY, from 1832 to 1834.

Dogberry's newspapers were established with the specific aim of advocating education and the free exchange of information.

Little biographical information remains on Abner Cole. He was born in Chesterfield, MA, on August 17 (or 16), 1783 and died on July 13, 1835. His own sense of purpose and confrontational personality led him to Palmyra, a hot-bed of evangelism and religious enthusiasm at that time. The numerous newspapers published in the region discussed and debated philosophical, religious and political ideas. After a short career as a judge, Cole took over as editor of *The Reflector* and he entered the fray as Dogberry.

Both Dogberry's publications carried a humanistic epigram.

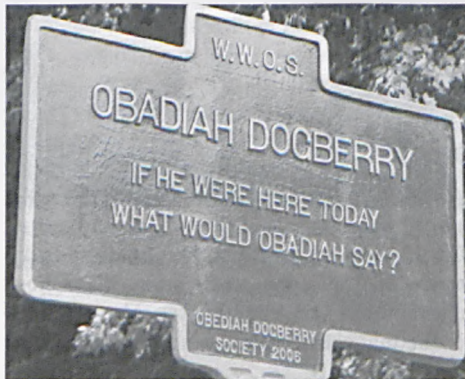
*Know then thyself, presume not god to scan!*

*The proper study of Mankind is MAN*

– Pope.

By this time Joseph Smith Jr. founder of Mormonism, had gained a small following around Palmyra. Dogberry printed the *Reflector* in the Grandin Building where the first edition of the Book of Mormon was being prepared and typeset. Dogberry appropriated selections of the revered text in *The Reflector*, subjecting it to analysis before it was widely distributed by the Mormons. Dogberry continued for several issues to publish a parody titled *The Book of Puke!* It is this first act of copyright violation for which Obadiah Dogberry is most widely known. Dogberry has also been credited with giving *The Book of Mormon* its lasting cognomen “The Gold Bible” in a September 1829 issue of *The Reflector*.

Dogberry's publications were remarkably diverse and informative. A single issue covered topics such as mineralogy, chemistry, the manufacture of cotton, European history, local news and gossip, and his own commentaries on the debates of the day. Above all, Obadiah promoted a literary lifestyle and the free exchange of timely information and ideas.



He regularly lambasted religion as being the enemy of all his ideals, and, in closing the last issue of *The Reflector*, Dogberry lamented the fact that religionists – the “short-sighted bigots of the day” – were intent on reducing all learning “to the compass of a Sunday school tract”.

In another comment about education, Dogberry said “We have for a long time lamented the languid state of useful knowledge and science, in most of our flourishing villages. The ordinary journals of the day team with little else than politics and light reading, and there appears to be little to stimulate our youth to more solid as well as useful researches (*The Reflector* October 7, 1829).

In 1832 Obadiah moved his publication to the growing city of Rochester, renaming it *The Liberal Advocate*.

One of his many scathing comments about the administration of the day could well apply to the neo-conservatives of modern America.

“Let us turn our attention for a moment to those circles who arrogate to themselves the pompous appellation of ‘good society’, and what do we discover? Do we find men and women discoursing gravely on the aspect of the affairs abroad – of the science of government, and political economy – of ancient and modern history – of general science and the arts? No, we too often find a coterie of wittings of both sexes – descendants from cobblers, tinkers and tailors, who, ashamed of their ancestry, attempt to set up a kind of aristocracy, and govern in all matters of taste and fashion; and notwithstanding the frail tenure by which they hold their authority, multitudes as simple as themselves are found ready to ape them in every particular vice or folly.

“Conversation in such societies is generally, if not obscene, light and trivial – all useful knowledge is scouted as vulgar, and only fit for mechanic. Jealousy, the sure characteristic of little minds, is vented in low and vulgar insinuations. A little novel reading, interspersed with a slight knowledge of party politics, makes up ‘the well informed’ of modern ‘exclusives’.”

To mark Obadiah Dogberry's contribution to the advance of learning and science, the Obadiah Dogberry Society this year unveiled a large plaque in Rochester. The society, founded by Bleu Cease, says it exists to resurrect the spirit of its namesake, the era of the freethought press, and to practise history through “research, creative production and spectacle.”

“He had interesting and timely things to say that many have agreed are applicable today,” says Cease, who was drawn to Dogberry because of his outspoken character and wit. As for the name? It is thought that Cole chose Obadiah from the Old Testament, and Dogberry is the goofy character from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.



# The religion of George Bernard Shaw, and the atheism of Marcel Proust

In July we commemorated Bernard Shaw's 150th birthday. It is his gift for turning a received idea on its head and making us think, with a laugh, that fills more pages in the quotations dictionaries than any other writer since Shakespeare.

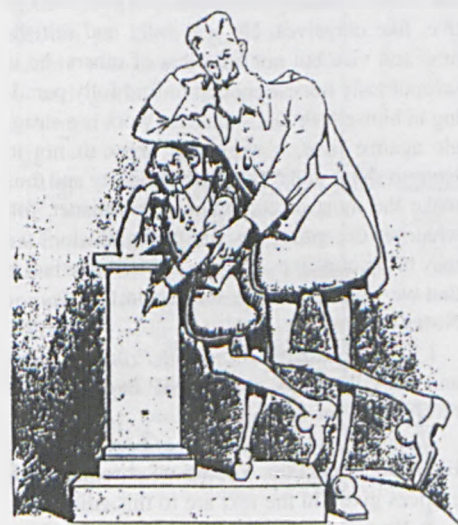
Many of those laughs are at the expense of religion — meaning that he took it seriously.

His very first published article, in fact, was a long sceptical letter written at the age of 18 to the magazine *Public Opinion* on the subject of the American Dwight Moody (a forerunner of Billy Graham) who had just been evangelising in Dublin with his sidekick, the hymn-singer Ira Sankey. The letter was merely signed "S", but 75 years later GBS wrote another letter to the same paper claiming authorship. He goes on to say: "The only result was an emergency meeting of my uncles to discuss the horrifying news that the Shaw family had produced an Atheist. I still hold that thinkers who are not militant atheists in their teens will have no religion at all when they are 40."

Another long-lived paper which published letters from him over the years was our own *Freethinker*, of which more later.

So what religion did Shaw espouse at 40 and later? Was he still an atheist? A humanist? In the broadest sense of both, yes; but he was also a mystic — though certainly a secularist, too, in the Holyoake sense.

In a long article, "On Going to Church", published in *The Savoy* in January 1896, he acknowledged his aesthetic appreciation of the architecture and embellishments of beautiful churches, as follows. "If you should chance to see, in a country churchyard, a bicycle leaning against a tombstone, you are not unlikely to find me inside the church if it is old enough or new enough to be fit for its purpose ... There is still one serious obstacle to the use of church-



Shaw with some lesser playwright

es on the very day when most people are best able and most disposed to visit them. I mean, of course, the services."

Like any other Victorian, Shaw felt he had to declare his intellectual religious standpoint in relation to orthodox Christianity, but he unhesitatingly rejected the moralistic pietism of institutional Christianity. Above all, he rejected its sadomasochistic creed, which he called "Crosstianity", but he did accept its underlying mysticism, and he liked using phrases from the evocative King James Bible. Clinging to the 19th-century belief in perpetual progress and ultimate purpose in the universe, Shaw's religious standpoint was what he called "creative evolution", through the experiments of the "Life Force", an abstract sort of god, or god in the making. And he obstinately rejected the Darwinian theory of natural selection, in favour of will-power and the inheritance of acquired characteristics.

## BARBARA SMOKER examines the beliefs of George Bernard Shaw, while DAVID JONES highlights the godlessness of Marcel Proust

Ascribing to an impersonal god (if one can imagine such a thing), such personal attributes as intention and will, hardly bears logical scrutiny — but logic was not Shaw's strong point, and he never got down to the deeper levels of philosophy.

The most humanistic aspect of his religion was passionate devotion to social service: "You have got, in the very short space of life that is yours, and which is your only chance, to give the world everything you possibly can." This he thought best achievable through Socialism, which was therefore his real religion; while, needless to say, he constantly campaigned against most of the same social evils and for most of the same social aspirations as we in the secular humanist movement do today.

However, Shaw would certainly not have been a card-carrying member of the National Secular Society, or of any other atheistic or rationalistic organisation, as he made clear in a long letter to the *Freethinker* in 1908. He told the editor, G W Foote, whom he regarded as a friend, that he left it to him to "treat this letter (of which I have kept no copy) as a public or a private one just as you think fit." Needless to say, though it ran to some 1800 words, Foote published it in full (on 1 November, 1908), and



Marcel Proust

it is Shaw's most comprehensive statement of his religious standpoint.

In it he describes himself as "implacably anti-rationalist and anti-materialist" and explains that when, years before, he had called himself an atheist, it was "to make it clear that I was on the side of Bradlaugh in his fight with the House of Commons". He had "repudiated the term Agnostic (logical as it was), because an Agnostic was then understood to declare, with regard to the existence of God (which then meant Jehovah), that he did not know. I said I could not take that position, because I did know that there was no such person."

Shaw continues: "I cannot force any man to use my term Life Force to denote what he calls God; but if we both mean the same thing, and if the Neo-Darwinian atheist means something profoundly different, I had better be taken to be on the theologian's side against the atheist."

Though we in the secular humanist movement are not, then, unreservedly Shavian, we do recognise Shaw as a great man and a wonderful writer, with the "divine" gift of wit and (serious) fun.

— Barbara Smoker.

Marcel Proust was born in 1871 in Auteuil, Northern France. As a semi-invalid from asthma he was cosseted by his mother, on whose death he withdrew almost completely from society. He remained a hypochondriac, living in Paris in a sound-proofed room and devoting himself to writing. In 1912 he produced the first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but publication of the second volume was delayed by the First World War. In 1919 he was awarded the Prix Goncourt and the following year the Legion of Honour. After a lifetime of illness he died in 1922.

In spite of the fact that Marcel Proust expressed a wish that Abbé Mugnier should pray at his death-bed and that a rosary given him by a dear friend should be entwined in his fingers, one finds in his life and work a scrupulous aversion to belief in a hereafter. In fact, throughout

(Continued on p12)



the near two million words of his rambling autobiographical novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* (now correctly translated in the Kilmartin edition as *In Search of Lost Time*) God is conspicuous by his absence.

Brooding on death and the passing of time is, of course, Proust's abiding theme, but there is never any suggestion of survival prospects beyond the grave, no reference to a vengeful or loving creator nor any indication of his belief that the joys and pains of existence might possibly be prolonged in any supernatural realm. What he cherished most about religion were the artifacts that the belief of others had left for him to ponder over. The art, the architecture, the paintings, the spires of Combray and so forth, these and such relics touched by human beings, objects which had acquired a patina over time, such as the aforementioned rosary brought back from Jerusalem, these are food for his meditations on the transience of existence rather than objects of spiritual enlightenment. As Céleste Albaret, his maid and confidante in his last years, pointed out, it was the aesthetics of church architecture, the fear of the loss of churches and cathedrals, that caused his sadness at the separation of church and state rather than any regret at the decline of belief.<sup>1</sup>

The Proustian obsession with his narrator's *moments bienheureux*, those key moments of revelation, such as the dipping of the madeleine in tea or his first sight of the hawthorn blossom in the fields around Combray, has been well documented. Such revelations seem to suggest, both to the narrator and to the reader, some precious and paranormal spirit beyond his ken, something permanent wrested through memory from the transitory nature of existence. They are, as he says, sensations recalled and revived such as "make death a matter of indifference to me."<sup>2</sup> But nowhere are these experiences seen as anything more than a personal revelation. They are very far from the phantom messages discovered by, for instance, Walt Whitman who found letters in the street signed by God, or from Wordsworth's conviction about Nature's holy plan. For Proust there is no divine order, no plan but that which consciousness makes itself, in other words there is no God behind the facade of nature. Revealed truths are found only in man's human imagination, which, do all he can, is subject to decay and extinction like everything else. Proust finds there is no paradise outside the mind of man, which, whatever claims are made for its being of divine or immortal origin, is far from being so. Thus one evening he tells his maid, "The only place where you can regain lost paradises, Céleste, is in yourself" (MP, p 147), a sentiment echoed in the novel: "true paradises are the paradises we have lost" (VI, 448): in other words those we have imagined.

While at times Proust expresses an indifference to his own mortality, he is especially moved by the death of others. This, as he well knows, is not a purely selfless regret but a

## The atheism of Marcel Proust

(Continued from page 11)

highly personal one in which he sees the passing away of time that can never be regained. For not only time passes, but memories too: "The dead decompose rapidly, and there remains even in the proximity of their tombs nothing but the beauty of nature, silence, the purity of the air" (VI,452). Even the memory of the dead, which on the death of a loved one we swear to keep forever sacred in our hearts, eventually fades into indifference, proving us at the last all liars, or, at best, self-deceivers.

For just as the body is mortal, so is the mind and the imagination: "After death Time withdraws from the body, and the memories, so indifferent, grown so pale, are effaced in her who no longer exists, as they soon will be in the lover, whom for a while they continue to torment but in whom before long they will perish" (VI, 635).

Not that Proust is all doom and gloom in the Hardy vein when facing a blank and meaningless universe. His novel also celebrates sudden joys, unexpected pleasures, artistic inspiration and spontaneous affection, just as frequently as their reverse. None but the most refined intelligence and hypersensitive non-believer could have written the following passage, for in truth Proust is a believer, a believer in humanity in all its chequered nature. "In the human race, the frequency of the virtues that are identical in us all is not more wonderful than the multiplicity of the defects that are peculiar to each one of us. Undoubtedly, it is not common sense that is the commonest thing in the world; it is human kindness. In the most distant, the most desolate corners of the earth, we marvel to see it blossom of its own accord, as in a remote valley a poppy like all the other pop-

pies in the rest of the world, which it has never seen as it has never known anything but the wind that occasionally stirs the folds of its lonely scarlet cloak. Even if this human kindness, paralysed by self-interest, is not put into practice, it exists none the less, and whenever there is no selfish motive to restrain it, for example when reading a novel or a newspaper, it will blossom, even in the heart of one who, cold-blooded in real life, has retained a tender heart as a lover of serial romances, and turn towards the weak, the just and the persecuted" (11, 303).

Dying in Proust is seen as a natural process to which we should become reconciled, especially to our own demise. It is even to be welcomed, since the griefs of the dead are at an end and the griefs of the living will in time inevitably fade and die, although grief like love is being constantly replaced by other loves, other griefs. Thus, towards the end of the novel he can say: "I realised that dying was not something new, but that on the contrary since my childhood I had died many times" (VI, 624). Reconciled to oblivion, finally he sees that even art – the art for which he has almost literally sacrificed his life, after years of exhaustive labour, refusing comforts and medication so that his brain-bright inspiration remains at its zenith, slaving night after night in his cork-lined study – is mortal: "No doubt my books, too, like my fleshly being, would in the end one day die. But death is a thing that we must resign ourselves to. We accept the thought that in ten years we ourselves, in a hundred years our books, will have ceased to exist. Eternal duration is promised no more to men's minds than to men" (VI, 630). For the reward of our work is found, if at all, on this earth rather than in heaven.

In his subtle analysis of Proust's visual imagery Roger Shattuck speaks of the author's need "to ridicule men's overwhelming aspirations to divinity and immortality."<sup>3</sup> While he surely does this he is less aggressive than this quote suggests, for Proust's irony is less militant than that of a Swift. He is essentially one who has loved unwisely, deceived and been deceptive, like ourselves. He sees folly and selfishness and vice but not only that of others; he is scrupulously honest enough to find folly parading in himself. Proust's massive work is a struggle against time, a work that urges us not to tarry, to shape and refine our sensitivity and thus make the most of our time on this planet, for, whatever deceptions or comforting illusions we may bring ourselves, the one indisputable fact is that we won't come this way again.

### Notes

1 Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, Collins and Harvilli, 1976, p 127. (MP in subsequent references).

2 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, The Folio Society, 2000, VI,445. (Subsequent references given in the text are to this edition).

3 Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars*, Vintage Books, 1967, p 129.

### Evangelist arrested for harassing tarot card readers

A CANADIAN evangelist in Alberta has been arrested on charges of "obstruction of justice, trespassing and disturbing the peace" during a theatre festival where he preached and spoke with tarot-card readers and other occult practitioners. Thirty-three-year-old Artur Pawlowski and his brother went to the festival, where they informed tarot-card readers and other practitioners of "sorcery" that the Bible condemns such practices.

Event organisers called police and Pawlowski and his brother David were warned not to talk to the vendors again. They agreed and left, but returned on August 16.

Pawlowski was handcuffed, made to walk backwards to a police vehicle, and eventually spent the night in jail. A trial is pending.



# Intelligent Thought: Science versus the Intelligent Design Movement

MOST people in Britain, when they come across the phrase "intelligent design", think of design (of human artifacts). The Intelligent Design (ID) movement has no equivalent in Britain, where religious teaching is compulsory. In the USA, religious teaching in publicly funded schools is prohibited by the Bill of Rights. ID is a conspiracy to get a religious doctrine taught in American schools, by pretending it is a scientific theory. *Intelligent Thought* is a useful and entertaining compilation of essays against ID, by 18 eminent authors.

The legal case against ID is presented in the Appendix. In 2005, the school board of Dover, Pennsylvania, ordered that ID be taught to schoolchildren as an alternative scientific theory. A group of concerned parents sued the Schoolboard, and in December 2005, Judge John E Jones III published his judgment. "We find that while ID arguments may be true, a proposition on which the court takes no position, ID is not science ... (1) ID violates the centuries-old ground rules of science by invoking and permitting supernatural causation; (2) the argument of irreducible complexity, central to ID, employs the same flawed and illogical contrived dualism that doomed creation science in the 1980s; and (3) ID's negative attacks on evolution have been refuted by the scientific community".

Judge Jones ruled "that Defendants' ID policy violates the Establishment clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States and Article 1 paragraph 3 of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania", and ordered them to discontinue the policy and pay the Plaintiffs' costs.

The first essay of the compilation, by Jerry A Coyne, would make a useful pamphlet on its own. Coyne provides a brief account of Darwin's theory for readers who are unfamiliar with it, and goes on to expose the dishonesty of ID, which was originated by the Discovery Institute, a right-wing think-tank. The "Wedge document", an internal memorandum of the Institute, leaked to the internet in 1999, compares ID to a small wedge, which can split the trunk of a giant tree. Its aim is "to reverse the stifling dominance of the materialistic world view, and to replace it with a science consonant with Christian and theistic convictions".

In 1999 William A Dembski, a prominent protagonist of ID, was

quite frank about the strategy in *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology*: "Any view of the sciences that leaves Christ out of the picture must be seen as fundamentally deficient ... the conceptual soundness of a scientific theory cannot be maintained apart from Christ".

Then in 2004 he wrote in pursuit of the strat-

**DONALD ROOUM reviews a compilation of essays edited by John Brockman, published by Vintage Books ISBN 03027722 \$14.00 (£14.00)**

egy (as distinct from being frank about it): "Intelligent design is not an evangelic Christian thing, or a generally Christian thing or even a generically theistic thing ... Intelligent design is an emerging scientific research program ... without appeal to religious authority".

The basic legal and scientific cases having been set out in the first chapter and the appendix, that leaves 15 eminent authors, all arguing on the same side, each required to say something of interest, which is different from what any other author says in the same book. Arranging this must have required a lot of patient work by the editor, and it is quite brilliantly done.

Richard Dawkins considers an ID conjec-

ture, that life on earth may have been created by beings which are not supernatural. If this were true, Dawkins argues, it would not be evidence against evolution as such, but evidence that evolution had happened at some place other than earth.

Scott Atran contributes a useful list of biological features of which it may be said that if they were deliberately designed, the designer must be potty.

Scott Sampson reminds us that in a 2004 American Gallup poll, only 35 percent of respondents agreed that "the theory of evolution is a scientific theory well supported by evidence", and 45 percent agreed that "God created humans pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years". We know from the 2001 census returns that Britain is not a particularly religious country. Evidently, religion in schools does not make people religious, and prohibiting the teaching of religion does not prevent people from believing poppycock.

All the essays are easy to read and well worth reading. My only criticism is that, as a source book for people arguing with ID protagonists or creationists, it lacks an index.

## Jesus: The Guantanamo Years

**KEVIN FERGUSON reports on a show that played to packed houses at this year's Edinburgh Fringe**

*JESUS Christ (Son of God and father of modern stand-up) returns to earth for His long awaited comeback tour. He doesn't get past US immigration. He's a bearded Middle-Eastern guy, prepared to die as a religious martyr.*

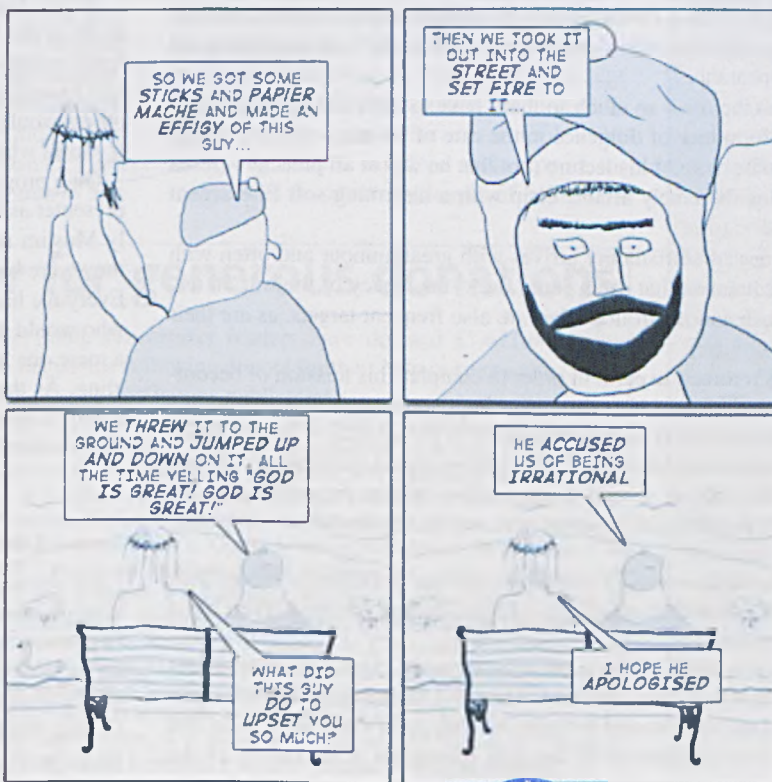
So the advertising blurb went – as irresistible as a foot to John Prescott's mouth.

With the air still warm from the damnation poured on the recent *Springer* tour, the greatest surprise on arriving at the cavernous Fringe venue was the absence of any protesters. Perhaps Abie (the writer and performer of this one-man assault) is not nearly high profile enough for those desperate to promote their own puffed-up piety and conceit.

Abie (declared atheist) takes the stage as the character of Jesus recently returned to this mortal coil for a "resurrection tour" to explain to his misguided followers and others his real mission: comedy and bringing laughter to the world. This he does very successfully while adorned in an electric orange boiler suit (the latest fashion from the House of Guantanamo – a subsidiary of Haliburton, apparently, and sponsored by State Terrorism Inc).

(Continued on p14)

## Jesus and Mo





### The functions of religion

PROFESSOR Radford's article in the *Freethinker* of August 2006 led me to think yet again about the nature of man's peculiar but persistent and widespread belief in an alleged "god", a belief for which objective (ie testable, verifiable) evidence is not and never can be produced. Rather, one is simply expected to accept the believer's faith in his belief! Yet these "believers" are apparently never prepared to leave it to their allegedly all-powerful, all-knowing god to arrive at his own decisions (if indeed an all-foreseeing god can be conceived of as arriving at a change of mind once he has exercised his original power of choice!) but are constantly pestering him to act as *they* see fit: nor indeed are they content to leave the Invincible One to fight, as we say, his own battles against the unbeliever but are ever ready, indeed often enough anxious, to make his decisions for him by launching themselves, tooth and nail as it were, upon those whom they consider to be denigrating the Almighty or trespassing on his domain.

Professor Radford makes the interesting suggestion that one of the functions of religion lies in conferring a sort of placebo effect upon its adherents whereby they are able to free themselves from the feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness such as life is liable to afflict

most of us with, especially with regard to the question of man's origin and place in the cosmos, as also to the question of pain, suffering and death (which they confidently assure us is mere illusion!). Religion provides the believer with the comfort of certainty and of a regulated life, provided only that he conforms to its prescriptions and prohibitions. This aspect of religion was well caught in the words of a Jewish writer in Tsarist Russia when he wrote, "The Torah (the Jewish book of Law and Conduct) wrapped its wings around us and the world (of pogroms and persecutions) went away." Moreover, a religious affiliation provides these adherents with membership of an acceptive and supportive community; no small benefits these, especially to any section of the community which feels that it is perhaps isolated, discriminated against, and disrespected.

Somewhat tentatively I would like to suggest that the rise of religion may be linked in particular to the establishment of settled agricultural communities when, for the first time, man experienced himself not only as a maker and shaper of things, an exerciser of skills, but now as the controller too of the general conditions of his life, far beyond what a nomadic hunter-gatherer community could have experienced. To my mind it would seem very natural for such village (and later town) communi-

ties, especially if under the influence of an established leadership, to develop the notion of a god who was like themselves but of course on a grander scale, and was essentially the creator of the earth and the controller of life: one, moreover, who was cast as the source of authority and power, and their protector – provided of course that he were propitiated by submission, prayer and offering.

Thus the god men created was a direct reflection of what they experienced, intuitively, in their everyday social existence, and which formed the core of their self-awareness as men, but of course with vastly greater powers attributed to what was imagined as a supernatural being responsible for not just each perhaps quite small community but the whole of their world as it impinged on their awareness, though of course each separate settled community had in the first place their own concept of how this god manifested himself.

ALBERT ADLER  
London

### Islamic terrorists

AM I the only person to find the situation with the Islamic terrorists risible. The Immigration tribunal found one asylum seeker ineligible to be in this country because he poses a threat to the security of the nation. He is to be deported to Algeria. This is the same man, who if given the chance, would blow up citizens of this country in order to be a martyr and go to paradise and be rewarded with 72 virgins.

He is appealing the decision because he claims he would be tortured if he were to be sent back. Such a brave man who would kill himself in order to bring about Sharia law in this country, and possibly the rest of Europe, is suddenly afraid to die.

Would Allah not make him a martyr were he to die at the hands of his countrymen? Does it really matter how you die in order to be a martyr? I would have felt that dying at the hands of others would qualify you for that high honour. It shows what hypocrites the lot of them are.

On a programme on Channel 4 recently, the presenter asked the audience comprising mainly Muslim men and women whether they felt they were being denied their rights in the UK. Everyone had their hands up. When she asked who would prefer to live in an Islamic country, a mere one hand went up. I find this very puzzling. As they do not like anything about this country, why don't they move to a country they *do* like?

MICHAEL JONES  
London

### Laughing at misfortune

I AM seriously beginning to wonder just what kind of mental world Daniel O'Hara inhabits. In presuming to castigate the *Freethinker* editor for his trenchant and appropriate comments on the bizarre death of the Rev Kyle Lake, Mr O'Hara emerges as little short of absurd and, in fact, he has actually covered himself in ridicule. However, his remarks to the effect

## Jesus: The Guantanamo Years

Abie's resemblance to the pictures of the Saviour that that bedecked the hallways of the Catholic schools and mass venues I was forced to attend is truly remarkable. Bearded and long haired, as in the first time round, Jesus sits on the bare stage to update us on his most recent adventures.

He gently explains that originally he started as a magician but moved into comedy, culminating in his seminal recording *Live on the Mount*. He is most clear about his eventual earthly demise and clearly hasn't forgiven the Romans for his untimely extinction at the height of his popularity, and one detects disappointment with his father for allowing it to happen.

Not turning the other cheek, coupled with a disrespect for his parents, doesn't seem a terribly Christian attitude but I daren't argue with one who should know. Perhaps he was misunderstood or misrepresented during his first appearance?

Geniality exudes from Our Lord on the run – so much so that I have to say I was almost moved to call social services to report God for a lack of diligence in the care of his son – albeit a couple of millennia ago. During the 50 minutes or so of his lecture (not that he was at all preachy – Jesus is miffed about being labelled so) this extremely affable chap with a disarming soft Eire accent delivers the goods.

The expected offensive on the idiocy of Christianity arrives with great humour and often with subtlety – and it's not just Islam and Judaism that catch some flack: the lunacy of the war on terror and the inbred, banjo-twanger Bush and his trollop Blair are also frequent targets, as are their pimps in the corporate world.

Jesus then goes on to reveal he has returned to earth in order to complete his mission of becoming the Messiah of Stand-Up. The revelation of his subsequent imprisonment at Guantanamo, his miraculous escape (and I mean *miraculous!*) and eventually settling in the suburbs of South Dublin is extraordinary. The themes that permeate the show raise great philosophical questions of life and the lack of morality in public life. He reserves special disapprobation of war in general, and the bloody hands of global corporations in particular in using war and lies to further its economic objectives.

But the show also takes to task the shallowness of celebrities and the fetishism of the gullible public. The smugness of Bono, Geldof, Bob Dylan and self-righteous lefties are cited. Their blind faithful, gormless followers are targeted too.

I would strongly suggest – as much as in your own interests as those of Our Lord's to re-establish himself in the comedy world – that you catch this show should it be restaged. The strongest theme of the show is to take life and do your utmost to enjoy it. With great satirical humour and intelligence, Abie's Jesus tells us: "you are likely to be the only generation in the history of the world to benefit from contraception, iPods and an ozone layer, so get out there and enjoy them!"



that the Rev Lake's death was greeted with editorial "glee" is a shocking disgrace, and such an outrageous slur should compel him to hang his head in shame.

It is overwhelmingly clear that Mr O'Hara does not understand that the Rev Lake's death was essentially a tragic-comedy, and the reason it can be thus described is because the young Minister was the author of his own misfortune in the sense that a 12-year-old school-boy could have told him that water and electrical equipment are always fatal bedfellows. The truly ironical and comical aspect of this bizarre incident lies in the fact that the woman who was about to be baptised was actually "saved" by virtue of the fact that she did not step into the baptismal pool.

I personally believe that what makes the whole incident even more comically ironic is the fact that the Rev Lake had beseeched his god only minutes before he was electrocuted to "surprise me!" His god did not merely "surprise" him, he *shocked* him!

I would strongly urge Mr O'Hara to do himself a favour and re-enter the world of everyday life where such tragic-comic incidents can often bring a smile of sheer irony to everyone's lips.

MARTIN O'BRIEN  
Gwent

A LONG time ago, when Holland was still religious, we were expecting a visit from an uncle of mine. He was late and we were getting worried. When he finally arrived he explained that he had been in a traffic accident and his car had ended up in a ditch. When he added that it had happened shortly after he had said a prayer for a safe journey we all fell about laughing. At another time we were watching the winter olympics as a family. Religious parents along with sceptical offspring. It was the ski jump. Before take-off one of the competitors crossed himself. The children predicted he would come a cropper. He duly did. We in stitches, parents extremely cross. Dan O' Hara doesn't get it. Lightning striking tree is not

funny. Lightning striking church steeple is. Why? Because the religious arrogate to themselves a special protective status which is asking for come-uppance. When retribution arrives, as chance dictates, the banana skin *schadenfreude* is particularly acute. The current *Freethinker* editor has a fine sense of humor and in these times of encroaching dour fundamentalism that is most welcome.

TONY AKKERMANS  
Shropshire

### Madonna

ON page 9 of the September issue it is stated that Madonna was "born and raised a Catholic". She might have been raised a Catholic, but nobody is born one. We are all born "Nothingarians". The label, if any, comes later.

HAYWARD LYNN MILLARD  
Lancs

### The power of non-prayer

MY friend Joe (not his real name) was diagnosed with cancer of the bladder about seven months ago. After three operations he has now been declared free of it, and is back at work. I didn't pray for him because I am an atheist, and he didn't pray for himself either for the same reason.

This is a miracle and shows the mysterious power of Non-Prayer.

FABIAN ACKER  
London

### Iranian dissidents

THE other evening a soft-spoken but earnest young Iranian called at my door, closely followed by an equally pleasant colleague. As they were not Mormons, Jews or energy company reps, I listened to their cause. Iran Liberty, Promoting Human Rights in Iran, opposes the terror regime and its fundamentalist mullahs, who "have turned Islam into a destructive weapon ... an instrument for extensive violations of human rights, brutal punishments, and export of terrorism..." Exiles like the young men at my door seek support for many other dissidents in danger of being sent

back to Iran from holding camps across the border. They invite signatures to an open letter to Margaret Beckett and would of course welcome donations. While I have no personal involvement with this campaign, I thought I should bring it to your attention. Iran Liberty is based at Trafalgar House, Grenville Place, Mill Hill, London NW7 3SA, and their website is [www.iranlibertyassociation.com](http://www.iranlibertyassociation.com)

JEFF DOORN  
London

### Cheats

MARTIN O'Brien (*Points of View*, September) is right: Cyril Joad *did* cheat on the railway. And Bertie Russell cheated on a series of women: but that is presumably OK, because he remained an atheist?

DAN O'HARA  
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

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## Events & Contacts

- Birmingham Humanists:** Friends Meeting House, George Road, Edgbaston. Friday, November 10, 7.45pm. *Remembrance: Why War?*
- 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, November 7, 7.30pm. Jim Herrick: *The Pain and Pleasure of Humanism*.
- 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. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, October 10, 8pm. Colin Cartwright: *The Fair Trade Movement*.
- Cornwall Humanists:** Information: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.
- Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.
- Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.
- Derbyshire Secularists:** Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website [www.secularderby.org](http://www.secularderby.org)
- Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: [info@devonhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk) Website: [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.devonhumanists.org.uk)
- Ealing Humanists:** Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.
- East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.
- East Kent Humanists:** Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.
- Essex Humanists:** Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.
- 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: NI Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: <http://hamstead.humanists.net>
- Harrow Humanist Society:** Meetings 2nd Wednesday of the month December to June (but not January) at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information: 0208 863 2977. Next meeting October 11. Speaker: Ines Metcalfe from Age Concern, Harrow. Subject: *A Question of Balance*.
- Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Lane, Gidea Park. Thursday, November 2, 8pm. *History of the Queen's Theatre*.
- 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, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, November 14, 7.30pm. Rob Murfin: *So Why Not Teach Intelligent Design?*
- 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, October 19, 8pm. Terry Liddle: *The Da Vinci Code*.
- 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. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, November 1, 8pm. Robert Spooner: Asylum Seekers. Wednesday, December 6, 8pm. Social evening with buffet and entertainment.
- 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: [rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk). Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.
- West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.
- Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: [brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com)
- website: [www.nirelandhumanists.net](http://www.nirelandhumanists.net)**

### Please send your listings and events notices to:

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