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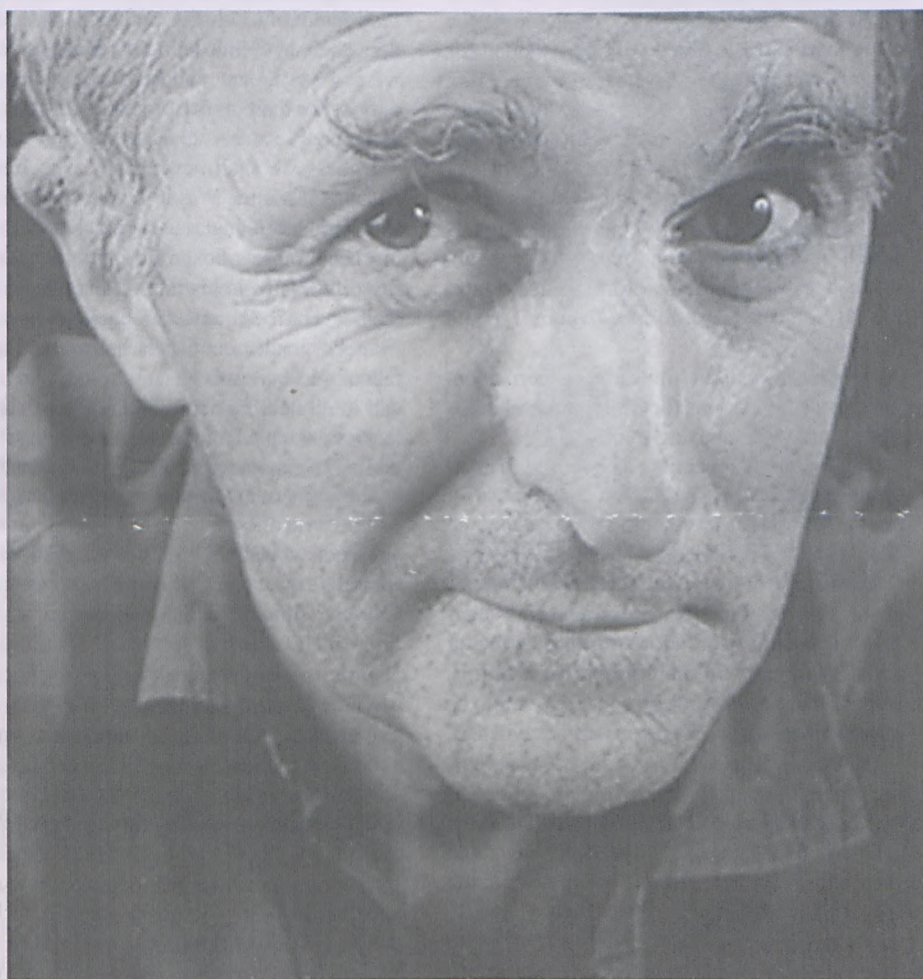
The

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Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

Prof Steve Jones is Britain's Top Secularist



Geneticist
Professor Steve Jones, who recently stepped up his his campaign against creationism and 'intelligent design', is this year's winner of the National Secular Society's Secularist of the Year award

— see page 3
report

Also in this issue

German opera dropped for fear of inciting Muslim violence – p3

Catholics attack BBC over abuse programme – p4

Rabbi prescribes sand as a cure for lesbianism – p5

Painting Islam pretty is like putting lipstick on an alligator – centre pages

First impressions of the holy Koran – p10

Darwin did not die a Christian – p13

201

IMAGINE wingeing to the authorities that you can't get a job because of the way you dress – then add that you have no intention of changing because your religion won't allow it.

I'd call such impertinence bare-faced cheek – but the term could hardly be less appropriate as the individuals in question have their faces hidden behind hideous and sinister garments.

Thankfully, the authorities in Utrecht, Holland, have decided that enough is enough, and decided to cut benefits for unemployed Muslim women whose refusal to take off their face curtains prevents them from getting jobs.

The City Council voted for the measure the day after the Dutch Government announced plans to ban women wearing the burqua in some public places as a security measure – and on the same day that Maria van der Hoeven, the Education Minister, urged a ban on burquas in schools. The sanctions also apply to women wearing a face-concealing veil, or *niqab*.

Utrecht made the decision after two Muslim women receiving £380 a month in unemployment benefits told the job-centre that they did not attend job interviews because no one would employ them because of their burquas, which they refused to remove.

A spokesman for the city said that the problem was not widespread, but added: "It is a point of principle which applies to all women who refuse to remove their burquas or other masks for job interviews. People get benefits when they are out of work but there is also an obligation to do everything to get a job. These women were educated, spoke good Dutch and had opportunities in the labour market." The city will cut the women's benefits by 10 per cent a month if they continue to refuse to reveal their faces for job interviews.

Utrecht based its decision on the Work and Social Security Act, which states that somebody receiving welfare must not do anything to avoid getting work. The city also noted that the Equality Commission, an official anti-discrimination body, backed employers who refused to give jobs to people wearing burquas, because being able to see someone's face was an essential part of many jobs.

Rita Verdonk, the Minister for Integration and Immigration Minister, said that wearing the burqua should be banned where it is a threat to security because it could be used by terrorists for concealment. She announced an investigation into when and where the burqua should be banned, and will give details in a month.

No country has banned the burqua in public, although several Flemish-speaking Belgian towns have done so.

There were, of course, squeals of "Islamophobia" over this decision, as indeed there were over an article written by Jack Straw, leader of the House of Commons, about the discomfort he feels when meeting Muslim women face-to-veil. In a disclosure that offended many Muslims, he says he now asks women to remove their veils when they attend weekly surgeries in his Blackburn constituency.

Mr Straw says that the veil can be regarded as a visible statement of "separation and difference". Some Muslim scholars do not believe it is obligatory.

In his weekly column in the *Lancashire*

**Freethinker Editor
BARRY DUKE on
'hoodies' for
Muslims, and daft
Christian fundies**



Telegraph he has expressed concern that "wearing the full veil was bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult".

Mr Straw said he had been mulling over the issue ever since a veiled woman attended his surgery and said she was pleased to meet him face to face at last.

He wrote: "The chance would be a fine thing, I thought to myself, but did not say aloud." The encounter led to thoughts about the "apparent incongruity between the signals which indicate common bonds. Above all, it was because I felt uncomfortable about talking to someone face-to-face whom I could not see".

He said this caused him some concern about the wider implications for community relations of "what is an increasing trend".

"The value of a meeting, as opposed to a letter or phone call, is so that you can, almost literally, see what the other person means, and not just hear what they say," said Mr Straw.

"So many of the judgments we all make about other people come from seeing their faces. I thought a lot before raising this matter a year ago, and still more before writing this. But if not me, who? My concerns could be misplaced. But I think there is an issue here."

Of course there is an issue here – the wearing of the burqua and other "religious" apparel by Muslims is, to my mind, a menacing act of intimidation. I feel exactly the same way about such dress as the elderly often feel about young men wearing "hoodies", and, if I walk into a shop and see any of the staff dressed in this fashion, I smartly turn around and march right out. I will not have my nose rubbed in some zealot's confrontational piety.

Could it be that Straw, who has a large Muslim constituency, and who has consistently made an idiot of himself singing the praises of Islam, be seeing sense at last? If so, I live in hope many others in power wake up too, and start taking concrete steps to confront this ghastly, and escalating menace in our midst.

IT'S fun, it's innocent and it's very professionally constructed. So why on earth are the fundies in America getting their knickers in knots over the official Barbie Doll website?

One has to go back to basics here. Christians, in essence, are people who believe in things that don't exist. Some of the things they believe in that don't exist they regard as

benign. Him Upstairs, for example, and Jesus and angels and heaven and all that crap. Other things that don't exist are seen as malign, like Beezlebub, hell, the satanic content of J K Rowling novels, and – I kid you not – "transgender propaganda" on Barbie.com.

I'll run that by you again. The Concerned Women for America – note the furrowed brows, the pursed lips, the tears at the corners of the eye – frothed themselves up from concern to outrage when the Barbie site, operated by toy manufacturer Mattel, "crossed the line" by introducing "very dangerous bisexuality gender confusion" to prepubescent youngsters.

Of course, it did no such thing. What the site's operator *did* do was accidentally cock-up the content of an on-line poll, which asked children their age and their sex. The age choices were 4 to 8, and children were given *three* options for their choice of gender: "I am a boy", "I am a girl", and – oh, dear – "I Don't Know".

I guess we shall never know who blew the whistle on Mattel. Was it the parents of a butch little girl, struggling to use a mouse while wearing her brother's boxercise mitts, or of a confused little boy, in his mum's sling-backs and a feather boa? At any rate, immediately after Mattel's gender confusion horror became the talk of the "interweb", as my friend John likes to call it, all hell broke loose, and Christian Right leaders entangled tongues in the ensuing fight to be first to express their outrage to the media.

Having got their message out that Mattel had a secret agenda to turn little boys into girls and vice versa, the fundies then discovered Mattel's American Girls dolls were wearing "I Can" wristbands, which support an organisation called Girls Inc.

Girls Inc is a national, non-profit body that promotes education and self-esteem programmes, as well as sex education, and supports abortion rights and the acceptance of gays. This was just too much. Outrage escalated into eyebulging, temple-throbbing fury, and even though the Mattel-Girls Inc partnership ended last December, the American Family Association and the Pro-Life Action League launched a national boycott of the dolls. Had the AFA and PLAL decided to take a leaf out of their Muslim brethren's book, Mattel's headquarters would now be a smouldering pile of ash.

But back to that poll – and the revelation that it was just a mistake anyone could have made. "This was an innocent oversight," explained a somewhat shell-shocked Lauren Bruksch, a spokeswoman for Mattel. As a rule of thumb, Bruksch said, the questionnaires at Barbie.com always incorporate neutral or non-response options. For gender, this third option should have been "I don't want to say," rather than "I don't know."

The error was immediately corrected, but the fall-out has yet to end. Because it is in the nature of Christians to believe in things that do not exist, I predict that the belief will endure for many years to come that Mattel will not rest until it finally turns Jesus into *Jessica* Christ.

Steve Jones is named Secularist of the Year

THE geneticist and anti-creationist Professor Steve Jones has been named Secularist of the Year by the National Secular Society. Professor Jones is the 2006 winner of the £5,000 annual Irwin Prize for his contribution to the promotion of secularism.

In his acceptance speech, Professor Jones spoke of the attack from groups and individuals determined to sneak creationism, and its deceitful equivalent "intelligent design", into British schools, even into science lessons.

"Normally I wouldn't engage with such people because it simply gives them legitimacy," Professor Jones said, but such has been the pressure from them recently that he had felt it necessary to actively campaign against them. He has recently been giving a lecture around the country entitled "Why science is right and creationism is wrong."

Professor Jones is to give the 2006 Conway Memorial Lecture at Conway Hall on ID on December 6.

Steve Jones is professor of genetics at University College London. He has broadcast widely on science and has won many scientific and literary prizes for his promotion of science.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, which presents the annual prize, said: "More and more students are being duped by the increasingly strident attacks on science by the forces of unreason. Professor Steve Jones has been highly effective in staving off these attacks. We salute him for this crucial work and are delighted to award him the Secularist of the Year Prize."

The prize was presented by Lord Dick Taverne who has himself recently published a well-received book *The March of Unreason* which comes to the defence of evidence-based

science, which he is convinced is also under pressure from irrational thinking.

The prize was awarded at a glittering luncheon at a central London hotel to which a number of the NSS's distinguished Honorary Associates (listed below) were also invited.

The Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year is sponsored by Dr Michael Irwin and is an annual event arranged by the National Secular Society.

The gathering was also the occasion for the a Lifetime Achievement Award given to veteran gay activist George Broadhead, Secretary of



George Broadhead, centre, photographed at a GALHA gathering at Brighton in 1985. He is pictured with a group of Dutch gay humanists who came to the UK to support their British counterparts.

the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) for the past twenty-five years.

Mr Broadhead, who helped found GALHA in 1979, and has served on its management committee ever since, was rewarded for his unstinting work in promoting the rational, gay-friendly humanist outlook within the LGBT community and combating homophobia – especially from religious sources.

George Broadhead administers GALHA from an office in Warwickshire, and he said: "I am very honoured to receive this award. It is a great pleasure to have the work I have done on behalf of GALHA over so many years recognised in this way. GALHA has provided a forum and voice for LGBT people who live their lives without religion and who often feel oppressed by religious teachings.

"The group's resistance to the sometimes vicious attacks on LGBT rights motivated by such teachings has never been more important."

George Broadhead was unable to receive the award in person, but issued this statement: "I am very sorry not to be here to receive this award due to ill health, and I have asked my fellow GALHA founder member and committee member, Jim Herrick, to read a short acceptance statement on my behalf.

"I am very pleased to follow in the footsteps of my good friend Bill McLroy who won the award at last year's lunch.

For the past 27 years of GALHA's existence I have done my best to help keep it alive and kicking – for the whole of that period as a committee member and for most of it dealing with its administration as honorary secretary. It is very gratifying, therefore, to have all the work I have put in recognised by the award. Many thanks to the NSS for making it."

Opera dropped for fear of inciting Muslim violence

A PRODUCTION of a Mozart opera in which the severed head of the prophet Mohammed is shown on stage was dropped last month by one of Berlin's main opera houses because of fears that the work might provoke a terrorist attack.

The decision by Berlin's Deutsche Oper to cancel *Idomeneo* provoked uproar among German politicians and directors, who said the opera house had allowed itself to be intimidated.

"This is mad," said Wolfgang Schaeuble, Germany's Interior Minister. Bernd Neumann, the Culture Minister, added: "If fears about possible protests result in self-censorship, then the democratic principles of free speech are in danger."

Kirstin Harms, Deutsche Oper's manager, said the company had received information from Berlin police which suggested that the work could provoke what she described as an "incalculable security risk".

Berlin police denied that they had received

any concrete threat of an attack, but said they had warned that "disruptions could not be ruled out".

In the opera house's production of the Mozart work that was first shown in 1871, the Cretan king, Idomeneo, holds up the severed heads of Poseidon, Jesus, Buddah and Mohamed. When the production by the director Hans Neuenfels was first shown in 2003, several religious groups said that they were offended.

The Berlin Deutsche Oper's controversial production of Mozart's *Idomeneo*, cancelled due to fears of violent reprisals by Islamic extremists, may go ahead after all. The production culminates with a scene invented by the opera's director, Hans Neuenfels, in which Idomeneo, king of Crete, enters carrying the severed heads of Poseidon, Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed.

But *Idomeneo* might be staged after all, either in Berlin or Austria. Alexander Busche, a

spokesman for the Deutsche Oper, confirmed that discussions were taking place, and hinted that it might be performed if the company had stronger guarantees of security from German police. Meanwhile, officials at the Volksoper in Vienna have offered to take the production if Deutsche Oper elects to uphold the ban.

A spokesman for Germany's Central Council of Muslims said the controversy was not helpful. "If it's not OK for Muslims, we can discuss it. But to cancel it and say 'We are frightened of bombs' is not OK. It shows a kind of German paranoia, because there was not really a danger." But the deputy secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain, Dr Daud Abdullah, said the opera house had done the right thing. "In the climate of tensions across Europe, after the controversy with the Pope, it would be in the best interests of all not to provoke sensitivities, whether it is those of Muslims, Christians or others."

Catholics attack BBC over abuse programme

THE Archbishop of Birmingham, the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, has reacted angrily to a BBC *Panorama* investigation last month of the RC's systematic cover-up of child abuse cases. He said the BBC documentary, which claimed Pope Benedict XVI supported the cover-up, was "false".

Panorama examined a document which allegedly encourages secrecy in dealing with cases of priests abusing children. It claimed this was enforced by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger before he became Pope.

Nichols said the claim was "entirely misleading" but the BBC insisted it was standing by the programme.

The document, *Crimen Sollicitationis*, was written in 1962 and apparently instructed bishops on how to handle claims of child sex abuse. Programme makers asked Father Tom Doyle, a former church lawyer who was sacked from the Vatican for criticising its handling of child abuse, to interpret the document.

Doyle said it was an explicit written policy to cover up cases of child abuse, which stressed the Vatican's control, and made no mention of the victims.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, explains that the document was not directly concerned with child sex abuse, but with the misuse of the confessional.

Nichols, speaking on behalf of the Catholic bishops of England and Wales, said the programme "is false because it misrepresents two Vatican documents and uses them quite misleadingly in order to connect the horrors of child abuse to the person of the Pope."

He added that the editing, which used old footage and undated interviews, was misleading, and said the BBC should be ashamed of the standard of its journalism.

Of its viewers, he said: "They will know that aspects of the programme amount to a deeply prejudiced attack on a revered world religious leader."

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, has written to the BBC's director general, Mark Thompson, to complain.

The National Secular Society responded to the church's complaints by saying it was "vital that the BBC stands firm against attempts by the Catholic Church to silence its investigations into child abuse."

NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood said that the Catholic Church was trying



to bully the BBC into stopping its criticism of the Church's cover-ups on child abuse.

He added: "It's a familiar technique that the Church is using – trying to make itself into the victim so as to deflect attention from the real victims, the children. What is noticeably absent from Archbishop Nichols' selectively-worded statement is humility by the Church for the huge scale of abuse it has facilitated and in most cases covered up. He has taken the same line that the Church so often does: stifling examination of the facts and any criticism of the Church or church leaders, however justified."

"*Panorama* is far from alone in blaming the extreme culture of secrecy typified by *Crimen Sollicitationis* for allowing clerical child abuse to escape punishment by secular authorities. Similar conclusions are drawn by, for example, the *Guardian* and an exhaustive examination *Sex, Priests and Secret Codes* by Father Doyle."

"For Archbishop Nichols to attack the BBC for broadcasting this measured programme adds yet further insult to injury of the tens of thousands of victims of sexual abuse at the hands of RC priests."

One instance of abuse would be too much, but in thousands of cases church officials other than the direct perpetrator have substantially compounded this abuse. They have facilitated further abuse by not reporting the cases to civil authorities, and moved abusive priests to other parishes without taking extra precautions. They have also mentally abused the victims and their families by branding them liars, and have almost always refused to give any financial recompense or provide medical treatment to victims unless forced to do so by the secular authorities.

Keith Porteous Wood added: "The Church can already claim some success in stifling criticism. The huge pressure put on the BBC's *Today* programme to desist from drawing attention to this issue in the UK and Cardinal Murphy O'Connor's role in this area, seems to have borne fruit. The *Panorama* programme concentrated almost exclusively on events abroad rather than the many problems in this

country. In August, for example, 'up to 140' men began an action against an East Yorkshire Catholic establishment for abuse which continued for decades.

Nor did it reveal that instead of reporting to the police allegations of abuse against Michael Hill, a priest in Murphy O'Connor's charge when he was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, O'Connor moved Hill to another position where he was later convicted for abusing nine children."

In *Sex, Priests and Secret Codes*, published in 2006, Doyle wrote: "Secrecy is an unwritten, but strict, code within the clerical system, and like any other

closed trade or professional group clerics tend to stand up for one another. However, the closeness of this brotherhood lends itself to creating a system with an aura of secrecy that withholds at all costs the knowledge of sexual violations by its members from the laity. This system acts as though rumours, hearsay, and even direct evidence of sexual violations by its members should be treated as though they were entitled to the confidentiality guaranteed by the seal of confession.

"This aura of secrecy is nurtured by the Church. The oath that cardinals take, for instance, never to divulge anything confided to them that 'might bring harm or dishonor to Holy Church' creates a template for everybody else to keep scandals under wraps."

Mixed bathing 'un-Islamic'

AN Islamic court has banned women from swimming at the main beach in Somali capital, Mogadishu. This latest step to impose strict religious rules is a further signal of the emergence of a Taliban-style regime in Somalia.

Sheikh Farah Ali Hussein, chairman of a northern Mogadishu Islamic court, said that the ban applies only to the northern Mogadishu Leedo beach, where families usually go on weekends to play and relax.

"We stopped women from swimming because it is against the teaching of Islam for women to mingle with men, especially while they are swimming," Hussein said.

Since sweeping to power over much of southern Somalia in June, the Islamists have banned movie viewing, publicly lashed drug users and broke up a wedding celebration because a band was playing and women and men were socialising together. They also have introduced public executions.

Somali women usually swim fully clothed, as swimsuits are generally frowned upon. Somali men, however, swim in trunks, at times bare-chested or wearing vests.

Quotable quote

Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived.

— Isaac Asimov

'No baptism, no school transport'

A HATFIELD woman who successfully helped petition the local council for a school bus was furious when her daughter was refused a place on the bus because she had not been baptised.

Sydney Jai, 11, had been facing travelling alone to Townsend Church of England School in St Albans. The situation worried single mum Frances Wood, 43, of Holme Road, who helped press for a school bus.

But Hertfordshire County Council said she must use public transport because she had not been baptised. A statement from the council said: "We provide free transport to all children attending their nearest maintained faith school if they have a place there in line with their parents' beliefs.

"This applies to children aged eight or over where the family lives more than three miles away. To qualify for free transport to a Church of England school the child must be baptised or have a parent on the parish electoral roll.

"We think it quite reasonable when offering transport to faith schools that parents show that the child is of that faith."

But after Sydney's mother told the London *Evening Standard* how furious she was at the council's inflexible attitude, the council backed down.

A spokeswoman for the children, schools and families department of Herts County Council said: "Because of the late confirmations from parents whose children are entitled to free places, we have been unable until now to assess whether there was any spare capacity on this route.

"Places have to be offered first of all to those who are entitled to free transport. If there are

spaces left over on the bus, we can offer them as assisted places to children like Sydney."

Shortly after the story broke, the *Times* reported that an asthmatic boy was refused a place on a school bus and told that he must walk six miles home because he was not a baptised Christian.

Thomas Rosevear, 13, a pupil at a Church of England comprehensive school, was stopped at the door of the bus as his friends got on. When his mother, Lin, complained she was told that if she wanted a pass she would have to pay £270 because her son was not a Christian.

Mrs Rosevear, a lapsed Baptist, said: "It is absolutely outrageous. My child is being discriminated against because I didn't have him baptised. How dare they play God with demands like this."

Her son, a pupil at St Mark's Church of England voluntary-aided school in Larkhall, Bath, had received a free bus pass for the previous two years.

Mrs Rosevear said: "My son's lack of religion has never been a problem before, so why now? They let him into the school, so why can't he get the bus just because he doesn't share their beliefs? If they let him go to the school, why are they demanding so much money to let him get the bus there? It is hardly the most Christian thing to do."

Cherril Pope, head teacher at St Mark's, said that Thomas should not have been turned away, adding: "We are obviously very sorry that any of our children had to walk home under any circumstances."

A spokesman for Bath and North East Somerset Council said: "Children at faith schools who are baptised into the faith of their

school and who live beyond the statutory distance from the school are entitled to free home-to-school transport."

He added: "Tom was previously issued with a free bus pass because of an error in the applications system. We are investigating how this happened." He said that Thomas would be given a temporary bus pass valid until Christmas.

The latest reported case of discrimination involves Reece Swain, 13, a pupil at St Modan's Roman Catholic High School in Stirling, Scotland. For a year, Reece enjoyed a free bus pass to transport him from his home in Fallin, Stirlingshire – until it was abruptly withdrawn after Stirling Council "discovered" he was not a Catholic. His mother said: "It's appalling. Stirling Council is living in the Dark Ages. They actually told me that if I got him baptised immediately, he'd have his free bus pass back within a week.

"I could almost understand it if they'd refused to let Reece into St Modan's in the first place because it is a Catholic school, but to withdraw his bus pass after he had been attending for a year is ridiculous.

"If we were discriminated against because we were black, the council wouldn't have a leg to stand on, but because we are white Protestants, apparently they can do what they like."

The Swains are now threatening the Labour-run council with legal action if Reece's bus pass is not immediately re-instated.

In 2004 there was a similar case involving Laura Abbott, a young atheist who was ineligible for free transport because she did not want to attend a faith-based school, opting instead for a secular one.

Rabbi prescribes sand as a cure for lesbianism

WHEN a Bnei Brak resident in Israel discovered that his wife had lesbian tendencies, and that she was cheating on him with another woman, he turned to a local rabbi for help.

According to a YNet News report, the rabbi gave him a heavy sack of sand. "Simply pour it on her lover's doorstep and when your wife steps on the sand, the curse will be lifted and she'll come running back."

Happy with the advice given by the rabbi, the man returned home. He immediately rented a car and gave the job of pouring the sand on the lover's doorstep to his 18-year-old son. On arriving at the lover's home in Kiriyat Malachi, the teenager carried the sack of sand on his shoulders, climbed the stairs to the apartment, poured the sand on the doorstep and returned to his car.

On his way out, he noticed several of the lover's dresses hanging on the washing line and, unable to resist the temptation, set the

dresses alight.

The raging fire that followed caused him to panic, and he tried putting out the flames. He failed and fled the scene. His victim noticed the fire, managed to write down the license plate of the escaping vehicle and immediately called the police.

The Kiryat Malachi police discovered who rented the car and summoned father and son to an investigation.

"I was desperate, my wife cheated on me with a lesbian. I didn't know what to do and I decided to ask the rabbi for his advice on how to lift the curse," he tearfully told the police.

Both father and son expressed their remorse; and the police released them without charge. But they also gave him some advice: "If you want your wife back, please do it lawfully."

PinkNews.co.uk reporter Nikki Sinclair, a lesbian who was previously married, cast doubts over whether "special sand" would

send her back to her ex-husband. She said: "I've heard some crazy notions in my time but I think this is the strangest.

"The rabbi has nothing to base this on. I think he needs to be committed."

But Michael, an Orthodox Jew from San Francisco, swears by the idea. In a message posted on the site, he said "I don't know about the particulars, but my story is very similar. My wife ran off with my ex-best friend back in 2003. At that time, as a result of my three tragedies – my brother dying in WTC tower on 9/11, losing my job and divorcing wife of 10 years – I returned to Judaism, and Orthodoxy.

"They lived about 30 minutes from my house for about a year. I went to their apartment and sprinkled dust on their doormat. Lo and behold, three years later she calls me and wants to re-marry me. Don't scoff at the rabbi, sometimes their wisdom is greater than your secular scientific bullshit."

First Impressions o

THOMAS Carlyle wrote: 'It is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook, a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite. Nothing but a sense of duty would carry a European through the Koran'.

Curiosity, rather, has led me to read it. The Koran is of course the holy text of Islam. It is in no way the whole of that religion, or even of its writings, which are voluminous. But it is the unique root, the final complete message of God to the human race. Many religions have sacred texts, but none, I think, is regarded with such reverence by the faithful. It was supposedly revealed to the Prophet Mohammed gradually over a period from 610 to 632 in Western (Common Era) chronology. The revelations came mostly through an intermediary, the angel Gabriel, though some direct from God, and seem to have been accompanied by acute physical reactions in Mohammed: he appeared "possessed". Some have suggested he was epileptic, but such reactions are quite common in religious contexts.

Mohammed is believed to have been illiterate, at least in early life, and the revelations were probably written down, or memorised, by others. At his death he left no authorised version, and no nominated successor. There were already many versions of the book in circulation, perhaps not varying by very much, and an agreed version was not settled on until the fourth Islamic century. It is thus impossible to say how far it is a complete and accurate record of what Mohammed said.

God chose to speak in Arabic, and Muslims maintain that no translation can fully convey either the meaning or the aesthetic qualities. Indeed the quality of the language is taken to be a proof of divine origin, given the Prophet's lack of education. (A similar argument holds that Shakespeare was not the author of the plays.) But it would appear that the main content comes across. The version I have is by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1934 (Wordsworth Editions, 2000).

The early editors settled on a set of 114 *surahs* or chapters, varying greatly in length. Some question whether these were in fact separate revelations or collections of them, as many appear to be. There is little indication of what order they appeared in. The editors put them

together in approximate order of length, the longest first. It is now thought likely that in general the shorter ones were earlier. There is no apparent order or structure to the whole or to individual *surahs*. Both switch from one topic to another without explanation. A minor oddity is that 29 *surahs* start with one or more Arabic letters which have no known meaning. Possibly they stand for an original source or sources. Although this is the word of God, it is not always clear who is speaking. Some *surahs* begin with the command "Say", presumably from Gabriel to Mohammed.

An arduous trudge through the Koran fails to convert JOHN RADFORD to Islam

In others God seems to speak directly. And in others it seems to be some third party, describing events.

What then is God's message? I have made a very rough estimate of the wordage devoted to various topics. About a quarter concerns God and his nature, another quarter the judgment he will make of the human race, and another the "signs" by which he is known. Then there are various other topics including what the faithful should do, the significance of the Koran and the role of the Prophet, and some legal considerations.

The existence of Allah, God, is taken as read. The important point is that he is unique. He has no "partners" as the pagans claimed, and as Arabs had traditionally worshipped, nor a son as the Christians believed. Denial of this is the greatest of sins. There are, however, other supernatural beings, angels, jinns and demons. God is the omnipotent creator of all things, a bountiful benefactor, and a stern judge. Human beings are brought into existence by God, both as a race and individually when he creates them from a drop of sperm. All must eventually and genuinely submit to

his will, not merely conform.

God is all-knowing, and is responsible for all that happens, though at the same time humans have free will. On a certain day, though when is unknown to us, the world will come to an end and God will judge all people. The dead will be resurrected. The righteous will go to paradise and the sinful to hell. Paradise is like a well-watered garden, full of flowers and fruit, with rich silks and jewels to wear, and flowing with rivers of milk and honey, where men will find beautiful companions and their rejuvenated wives. Hell is a place of burning heat, with nothing to drink but boiling water.

God has given signs by which we can know him. One sort is actions taken in the past to protect the righteous and punish wrongdoers in this life. Many of these come from the Old Testament, such as the stories of Pharaoh and the Children of Israel, and of Noah. God has also acted in the recent past, helping Mohammed and his followers to win battles. Then there is the fact of creation. God has created the world and its various species, particularly for the needs of human beings, and this demonstrates both his existence and his beneficence. And he has sent a long series of prophets to warn the human race, including Abraham, Moses, many other Old Testament figures, and Jesus. Mohammed is the last.

Like the others, he is only a man, simply a messenger, though his message is divine. But he is to be treated with respect. Most people have ignored the prophets of their time. As to what it means to be "righteous", detail is often lacking. The fundamental point is the acceptance of God's will. Following this, one should pray regularly, observe the fasting month of Ramadan, make the pilgrimage to Mecca, pay the alms tax and give to charity. All the rules are qualified in that they must be observed as far as one is reasonably able.

Then there are various rules concerning marriage, parents and children, some criminal acts and their punishments, inheritance, commerce, the treatment of slaves, food and drink, and warfare. This last seems sometimes to be allowed only for defence, but sometimes as necessary to promote God's rule. Some of these rules appear to be restatements of prevailing customs (as was the pilgrimage), others may be decisions made by Mohammed in particular circumstances, for example *surah* 2.194 allows fighting during Ramadan, provided the other fellow starts it.

There are also answers to various objections that were obviously raised, such as why God did not send an angel instead of a mere man, why he did not give his revelation all at once as a complete whole, how we can be resurrected when we have crumbled to dust, or that

Muslim-only hospital an example of 'apartheid'

PLANS for a Muslim-only hospital in Holland have sparked a heated debate over its separate all-male and all-female wings, halal food and roster of duty imams. A populist Dutch right-wing party described the plan for the clinic in south Rotterdam as "a step backwards to the Middle Ages".

A report in *The Telegraph* said that "Holland's once proud multi-cultural model, which promoted tolerance of a rapidly growing immigrant population, has been sharply questioned in recent years, especially after the murder of the film-maker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic radical."

The hospital is the brainchild of a health industry entrepreneur, Paul Sturkenboom, who plans to employ 45 doctors and 275 nurses. Staff will not have to be Muslims. Construction work on the clinic is about to start and it aims to open by 2008.

A prominent nationalist MP, Geert Wilders, said the hospital was an example of "apartheid".

of the Holy Koran

Mohammed himself was a charlatan or mad. The general answer seems to be that God is omnipotent and in any case a law unto himself.

Much of this is repeated, often many times, with usually fairly slight variations, to make a book of, in my edition, some 550 pages. We do not know how frequently Mohammed received revelations, or whether he received the same, or similar ones, on many occasions (perhaps likely); or whether what we have now includes many versions of the same revelations, from different traditions.

It is difficult, for an outsider, to see it as the final, complete message of an all-wise and beneficent supreme being, assuming such an

entity exists. It is more comprehensible as a mix of, first, personal "revelations", which are much like those of other religious innovators.

There is the experience of receiving messages from a supernatural source, a conviction of absolute rightness, a belief in returning to a earlier, purer way of life, a promise of rewards and punishments for right or wrong doing, and an attempt to make it all fit in with, and make sense of, existing beliefs.

Second, there are political judgements given in the process of trying to unify and control a set of traditionally warring tribes, and ameliorate their harsher laws and practices. In both roles Mohammed was remarkably successful.

We might note that a frequent feature of both is an appeal to a higher, invincible and unquestionable authority.

Whatever its nature, the book currently inspires and rules the lives and conduct of nearly a billion of the human race. It is revered, read, recited and studied by great numbers every day. Some memorise the entire work, earning the distinguished title *Haftiz*. Perhaps one should not criticize without extensive study.

But on first acquaintance, I prefer the robust Cockney common sense of Sam Weller on another occasion: *'Whether it was worth while going through so much to learn so little, as the charity boy said when he got to the end of the alphabet, is a matter o' taste. I rather think it ain't'*.

• **John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.**

Row looms over East London's mega mosque

"WHEN Abu Izzadeen, the firebrand Islamist militant, berated John Reid last week for "daring" to visit a Muslim area, the Home Secretary bridled, as did many others, at his suggestion that part of London was off limits for a British minister of the Crown," wrote Philip Johnston in the *Telegraph* in September.

"There was nowhere in this country from which anyone should be excluded, Mr Reid said; nowhere that could be called exclusively Muslim. He was speaking just a couple of tube stops from West Ham, close to the site for the 2012 Olympic stadium, where a huge row is about to erupt over plans to construct a mosque. However, this is not any old mosque built to serve the local community. It will be the largest place of worship in Europe, a gigantic three-storey Islamic centre, with schools and other facilities, able to hold at least 40,000 worshippers and up to 70,000 if necessary," Johnston reported.

The building will be called the London Markaz and, said Johnston, "it is intended to be a significant Islamic landmark whose prominence and stature will be enhanced by its proximity to the Olympic site. When television viewers around the world see aerial views of the stadium during the opening ceremony in six years' time, the most prominent religious building in the camera shot will not be one of the city's iconic churches that have shaped the nation's history, such as St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey, but the mega-mosque."

He pointed out that its arrival in London "will be a significant coup for Islam and a major event for the country as a whole. It will also make Abu Izzadeen's depiction of that part of east London as 'a Muslim area' seem remarkably prescient.

"For those of us who have no objections to people building places of worship in which to practise their faith, this is a difficult subject. Why should there not be, in a multi-faith soci-

ety, ashrams, temples and synagogues alongside mosques and churches? Indeed, unlike some Muslim countries, we welcome an eclectic mix of religions ...

"Now consider the east London mosque. Its backers are the Tablighi Jamaat, a missionary organisation that says it is non-political and peaceful. Yet a senior FBI anti-terrorism official has called it a recruiting ground for al-Qa'eda, and the French secret services described it as 'an antechamber for fundamentalism'. Its current European headquarters are in Dewsbury, home town of Mohammed Siddique Khan, leader of the July 7 suicide bombers, who attended the local mosque. Much of the funding for the Markaz, which will cost about £100 million, is expected to come from Saudi Arabia."

Newham councillor

Alan Craig, who lives about a mile from the 16-acre site on which it is to be built, is a Newham councillor representing the Christian People's Alliance. Notwithstanding his own faith, he does not object to mosques or any other place of worship. But he raises some important questions about this particular proposal, Johnston reported.

"I am concerned about the community and security impact of the mosque," Craig said. "Although permission has not yet been given, Muslims are moving into the area in preparation. The Savile Town area of Dewsbury where Tablighi Jamaat is currently based is now more than 90 per cent Muslim. This part of London has always been a very diverse community and that is how it should be kept. We can't have one group taking over."

Mr Craig, who has inevitably been castigat-ed as "anti-Muslim" by those who want to shut down any discussion, told Johnston he believed the local community would be denied a say. "They [the council] have not consulted

local people at all but when the mosque master-plan is submitted, they intend to give it their formal approval. It is an undemocratic stitch-up."

Johnston continued: "It is suggested that the Markaz complex will become the 'Muslim quarter' for the Olympics, acting as a hub for Islamic competitors and spectators, something that is surely contrary to the spirit of the Games, which are meant to bring people together, not keep them apart. Furthermore, in an irony not lost on Mr Craig, just a mile or so from where the mosque is due to go up, the Kingsway International Christian Centre, the biggest evangelical church in Europe with 12,000 worshippers on a Sunday, is coming down to make way for the Olympic stadium.

"Mr Craig wants an independent inquiry into the mosque, something that Newham council has not exactly fallen over itself to endorse. Somewhere along the way, there will be a role for Ken Livingstone, the mayor, whose London Development Agency has already signalled that he thinks it is a good thing for London to have an Islamic landmark.

"Eventually, the plans may end up on the desk of Ruth Kelly at the Department for Communities and Local Government. She recently called for a 'new and honest' debate on diversity and announced the formation of a 'Commission on Integration and Cohesion' which is to tour the country, before reporting next summer, looking at social or economic divisions between different ethnic groups.

"If this really means anything, then its first port of call should be Newham, where it can ask some searching questions about the proposed Markaz and its potential impact on the local community there. The sceptical among you might suspect that this commission is just a gimmick. If it fails to take this issue seriously, then you will know it for certain."

Glancing idly through the *Radio Times* the other day, which, let's face it, is the only way you can glance at the *Radio Times*, I was struck by something odd. On some pages, you could be forgiven for thinking that the BBC was the most pioneering secular organisation in Britain. (Unlike on their website, they haven't started writing 'pbuh' all the time – yet.) Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks's programme *With Great Pleasure* was described thus: "Imagine you're listening to the *Today* programme and it gets to the point at 7.48 am when you know you can safely boil the kettle or dry your hair. Multiply this *Pause for Thought* moment by ten and you'll understand what listening to this is like." The piece, supposedly promoting the programme, went on to describe it as "irritatingly worthy".

On the next page, a Radio 4 play called *Angelophany* was recommended on the grounds that "Christian fundamentalists will definitely not find any succour" in it, but "those with more open minds will... take pleasure... in having traditional religious beliefs prodded."

Which would be fine, if Radio 4 was not simultaneously subjecting its listeners to "Iran Fortnight", a sequence of plays, readings and documentaries aiming "to tackle some of the commonly held perceptions about Iran and turn them on their heads." The magazine tells us "the revolutionary spirit of the country stems from centuries of having to stand up to foreign invaders, of whom Britain has been the one the people of Iran felt bore the closest resemblance to themselves – although not quite so smart!" (What a world of meaning can be conveyed in one simpering, sub-moronic exclamation mark.)

A programme called *From Tehran with Laughter* is described as "a gag-packed documentary that does more in 28 minutes to break down ludicrous misconceptions about the Iranian people than a United Nations commission could hope to achieve in a decade." It only quotes one of the gags that are packed into the



Muslim women demonstrating in London over the French hijab ban

28 minutes. It comes courtesy of Shappi Khorsandi ("a 31-year-old British-born Iranian comedian") and it's a riot. It goes like this: "(Shappi has) noticed a change in how her friends deal with her since the July 7 terrorist attacks in London; now when she tells them that her biological clock is ticking they hit the floor."

As well as the unfunniest joke ever cracked in the history of human existence, the show promises "fellow stand-up comedian Omid Djalli", who has a "take on the London bombings" that "might not be to everyone's taste." It doesn't say who those killjoys are, possibly non-BBC employees, those whose friends and families were killed, or some other minority of civilised humans.

Not that the BBC thinks it's all gag-packed in Iran. *Iran Awakening* tells of "a devoted Islamic and proud Iranian woman", naive enough to have "welcomed with all her heart" the Iranian revolution, only to be "thrown in jail" for "defending the basic human rights of women and children." So pitiless misogynistic injustice, it would seem, is not a "ludicrous misconception about the Iranian people", nor a "commonly held perception" that needs "turning on its head". Yet neither, it must follow, does it say something sufficiently fundamental about the sheer awfulness of life under Islamist oppression as to turn the whole notion of a BBC Iran fortnight on its head.

Uncovering Iran is a whole week's worth of Iranian short stories which "it would be disingenuous to claim ... are great examples of the art" – translation: they're rubbish – but are "definitely worth checking out because they are all by Iranian writers". I misquote you not. Plus, "concepts such as arranged marriages not being such an oppressive practice as we Western women might believe ... make for a thought-provoking listen." It's best not to ask if burying adulteresses up to their waists and stoning them to death is not such an oppressive practice as we (even those of us with the misfortune to be men) might believe, too. (I suppose it's shooting fish in a barrel to add that, a page or two later, a programme called *Letters from Guantanamo*, about alleged injustices against terrorism suspects, "does a fine job of upholding the BBC's reputation for impartiality.") Incredibly, every single quote I have given you, each and every example of cant, cowardice, vile appeasement and total betrayal of common human decency, are the work of one woman. Her name is Jane Anderson, and you can contact her at radio.times@bbc.co.uk.

Such is the power of Islam. And such is the arrogance, fear and self-loathing of our media. But it is not just adults, with the power (theoretically at least) to know when they are being lied to, that are targeted in this way.

In an earlier *Freethinker* I reviewed Barbara Smoker's textbook *Humanism* and noted the irony that there are virtually no books explaining the truth of Darwinian evolution to children, but hundreds of works of propaganda on behalf of each of the world's religions. If you

Painting Islam putting lipstick on

were silly enough to think that this deluge may have dwindled to a cautious trickle in the light of recent world events, go and stand in the corner. The only effect the rise and rise of state-sanctioned worldwide religious murder has had on the classroom is that the propaganda machine has been cranked up several notches. Every month some new book on Islam for kids seems to hit the shelves, not for any practical reason – since they are basically interchangeable – yet each seemingly more creepy and evasive than the last. (The only obvious way to

MATTHEW CONIAM is driven to despair by books on Islam written for youngsters

tell them apart is that the new ones are bespattered on almost every page with squiggles and "peace be upon him" after all the names, and even after the word "prophet".)

These books are nothing if not unequivocal in their claims. *Muhammad and Islam* by Kerena Marchant (who works, guess where, "in BBC Education broadcasting") has no truck with those of us who think that the evidence for religion is a little shaky, stating outright that "Muhammad's teaching was not his own: it was God's, because it came direct from God." As for the thorny issue of Islam adapting to the modern world, Marchant sees no thorns and is happy to tell your children this:

"Many non-Muslims argue that, as the Koran was written hundreds of years ago, many of its laws are out of date ... Most Muslims would argue that this is not the case and that the Koran, God's way of life, will always be up to date and must never be changed. There is much to be said for this.

"The Muslim world is usually united and there have been few wars between Muslims throughout history. (...) There are low crime figures in Muslim countries. (...) Women in Muslim countries... are respected. (...) Non-Muslim countries cannot always boast of these values. (...) Western countries have high crime rates and family values are not as important there as they used to be – proof, perhaps, that the message of God, as revealed by Muhammad, is a message for all times and all places." Something there, I hope, to offend just about everybody.

For slightly older children, after some rather more in-depth propaganda, there's *Islam* by Trevor Barnes. Trevor is a "religious affairs author and presenter." I'm sure you don't need me to tell you the three-letter name of his

m pretty is like k on an alligator

employers. His book "encourages cultural awareness, tolerance and understanding." Here's how: "Islam is sometimes misunderstood in the West and the term 'Muslim fundamentalist' is frequently used as an insult. It is also misleading – all Muslims take their faith very seriously, so it is natural for them to follow fundamental principles. An increasingly secular West finds such devotion hard to understand."

Not our Trev, though – even though a few pages later he, too, is using the phrase Muslim fundamentalism, defining it as "an attempt to revive what (is seen) as the authentic faith of Islam." Never before has so much euphemism and evasion crowded the pages of a single book. What are these "fundamental principles"? What is this "authentic faith"? It is *these* things, and the refusal of people like Trevor Barnes to come clean about them, that an increasingly secular West finds hard to understand, not devotion.

So let's play a Trevor Barnes guessing game. What do you think are the kinds of negative consequences that "can arise when teachers and religious leaders (imams) are imported from abroad"? Any ideas? Wrong – it's "cultural misunderstandings".

And here's Trevor's official glossary definition of *jihad*: "The personal and internal struggle with oneself to be godly. Also a holy war in defence of Islam." (A bit like defining Hitler as "an Austrian artist who loved chocolate and Hollywood movies. Also a fascist dictator.")

These authors get especially touchy when they have to define *jihad*. Sue Penney (in *Islam*, a book for primary schools published this year) tells us:

"(Islam's) leaders had to fight to defend Islam and make it stronger. Fighting to defend Islam is called *jihad* ... battles must be fought without damaging crops or trees." Islam's leaders *had to fight*, and for both Sue and Trevor it's *always to defend* Islam. As for the cute bit about crops and trees, well it's news to me, but how very sinister to focus on such an irrelevant bit of nonsense when so much is left unsaid.

And here she is setting our minds at rest on the subject of women's rights: "At the time when Muhammad was alive, women were often treated badly." (How is it for them in Iran these days, then? But I digress.) "Muhammad said that this was not right. He said women should have certain rights that they had not had before. Islam allows women to own things."

Incredibly, Islamic tolerance doesn't stop there. Not only are women allowed to own things, "Muslim law says that a woman should not be made to marry if she does not want to."

So what is the truth about arranged marriages, then? Sue knows:

"An arranged marriage is one where relations of a man or woman help them to find a suitable person to marry ... Many young Muslims feel that this is a good idea, because their parents have had more experience of life."

Kerena Marchant informs us that "Muslim women are respected both in the home, where they are the centre of family life, and at work. Many women ... hold professional jobs." Just imagine. It's also Kerena who defends Islamic women's rights with what is surely the most knockdown *weird* sentence I have ever read: "Women in Muslim countries often wear long robes and veils but they are rarely attacked in the streets." If that was designed to reassure us...

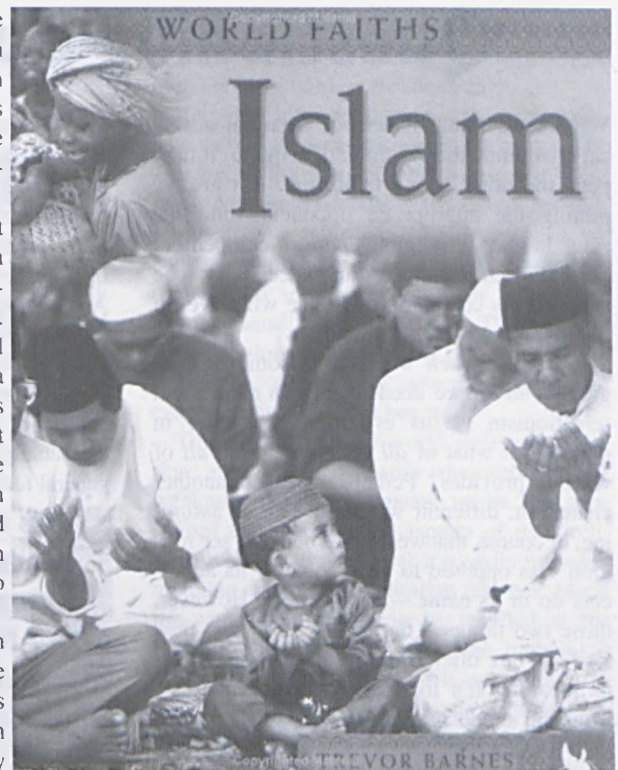
Presumably on the assumption that the word "decently" has one universal meaning, Sue Penney tells us that "Muslims think that women should dress decently", but luckily Muslim women "choose" to cover their bodies with black cloth "once they have reached the age of about 12"; many also "choose to cover their faces."

If there is one thing that these books are unanimously agreed upon above all else, it is that the *hijab* is basically a lifestyle choice, entered into freely by the young girls in question. Separately, independently, without coercion, at roughly the same age, they all "choose". There is even a novel for teenage girls wackily entitled *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, written in the first person voice of a young girl who has decided she too wants to cover herself through sheer, unforced love of misogynistic subjugation. (But actually written by Randa Abdel-Fattah, "a 26-year-old lawyer".) The blurb on the back tells you all you need to know: "Amal's decision to wear the *hijab* full-time takes a lot of guts. Can she cope with the prejudice, keep her friends and still attract the cutest boy in school?"

Sue Penney does however concede that this custom can have its negative side: "Women who wear long clothes and veils over their heads are sometimes laughed at by people who do not understand." This is a woman, writing for children.

And here's another. It's Ann Jungman, a popular author and creator of the *Vlad the Drac* books. Ann's just written the text for a lavishly illustrated picture book for pre- and early-school children called *The Most Magnificent Mosque*. Here's the blurb:

"When a new Christian king decides to pull down the beautiful Mosque of Cordoba, three old friends decide something must be done on behalf of all the citizens, whether Moslem, Jew or Christian." Beneath it is a quote from somewhere – presumably a magazine of some sort –



The cover of Trevor Barnes' *Islam*

called *School Librarian*: "Based on a true story, this vibrantly illustrated picture book is timely in showing tolerance and mutual respect between members of different communities." Timely? Ironic, more like. And by the way, making use of the names of real places and buildings does not make it "based on a true story".

The book tells us "In the early 8th century AD, the Arabs conquered Southern Spain and transformed Cordoba into a centre of wealth and learning. They pulled down the church and began building their great mosque." (Let's just hear that again: They *conquered* Southern Spain and they *pulled down the church*. This uncharacteristic slip may come back to haunt Ann as her charming story unfolds.)

Anyway, here is the story; the one that *School Librarian* reckons is based on true events. There are three naughty little boys, one a Moslem, one a Christian and one a Jew. They are, of course, great friends, and they all play happily in the mosque under the benevolent gaze of the loveable old imams. It is a beautiful mosque: "much more magnificent than our church", says the Christian; "Or my synagogue", adds the Jew. But then a horrid Christian turns up and threatens to pull it down. Thanks to the efforts of the three boys, perhaps the most unlikely multi-faith collective in "literary" history, the king is shown the error of his ways:

"Three communities with one voice. I can see that I will have no friends here if I pull down your mosque ... I will build a church in a small part of the mosque, but the rest of the building and the gardens shall belong to all you good people of Cordoba."

Ann tells us that "cheers echoed throughout the square" but I was close to weeping. I sincerely hope you are too.

Questioning our alliance with science

WHEN we think of science's natural adversary, we immediately think of religion. It happens the other way around, too. But are we putting the appropriate opponents into the ring? Is science religion's *natural* competitor? Should science – always and necessarily – be the atheist's champion of choice when we set two opponents to slug it out?

Certainly, when we look at some of religion's *claims*, we need science to rebut them (creationism versus evolution is a case in point). But what of *all* of religion, and *all* of what it provides? Perhaps we need another champion, different weapons. This is assuming, of course, that we feel we ought to see religion – as opposed to what some of its adherents do in its name – as an enemy. However, those two things – the beliefs and what they lead to – are often difficult, if not impossible, to separate. It's like trying to detach music from the sound it makes or the sun from the light it sheds.

Religion won't go away in a hurry, much as we'd like some of its adherents to fall through holes in the ground. And why is that? It's because religion plays such a fundamental part in many people's lives. It's because it addresses some of its adherents' basic emotional yearnings for love, friendship, ritual and morality. It tells them what to do when they face loneliness, uncertainty, guilt, tragedy and

grief. For them, it answers questions.

Such emotional merchandise is to be found elsewhere, of course: love and friendship can be had in families, the workplace and social situations; ritual can be laid on by non-religious organisations such as the British Humanist Association and the Pink Triangle Trust; morality is a personal and relative thing, based on our ideas of what is "good" and "bad", how we should treat our neighbour and our environment and so on; and, when we need help with the less definable problems that beset the mind or our general feelings of well-being, we seek the help

Is science the natural adversary of religion? Or is something else required? ANDY ARMITAGE poses some questions.

of "life coaches", counsellors or, for more serious problems, psychologists and psychiatrists.

But you have to go looking for them. Each is in a different part of the telephone directory; they are scattered about the city. Religion has them in one convenient place – mostly with a branch right in your neighbourhood. It's your one-stop shop for all your human needs. Some people don't even go along with the metaphysics elements of religion, but get a great kick out of being a member of the club.

Queen gives her blessing to an Islamic prayer room in Windsor Castle

ANOTHER step towards the Islamisation of Britain took place during the "holy" month of Ramadan when the Queen set aside a room in Windsor Castle for Muslim prayer.

She took the step after a part-time sales assistant who works weekends in the castle's gift shop – Nagina Chaudhry, 19 – requested space to pray during Ramadan. A spokeswoman for Buckingham Palace, where such a facility already exists for Muslims, said: "We are an equal opportunities employer and we do our best to facilitate any requests made by our employees."

And a spokesman at Windsor Castle said: "We have staff from all walks of life. So when people request facilities for their beliefs we try to provide them."

Within days, an office in the castle's Saxon Tower, a stone's throw from the royal family's private St George's Chapel, had been converted. Portraits were removed from the walls and a small marker indicating *qiblah* (the direction of Mecca) was set. Also copies of the Koran and prayer mats were provided.

Chaudhry hailed the Queen as "an example to the world. "I can't believe the Queen went

to so much effort. She pulled out the stops to create a prayer room for me and other Muslim staff.

"It was an incredible act of kindness within her own home. The Queen is the head of the Church of England so it's great to know she respects other people's faith.

"I was worried that I might not get it because there are so many misconceptions about Islam. I've only worked there for two months, so I was surprised when everybody went out of their way to help me.

"It feels amazing to be the first Muslim to read *namaz* (prayers) at Windsor Castle. I was reciting the prayer with more power than usual because I knew I was making history."

Less enamoured with the idea were dozens of Britons who rushed to the internet to post comments about Miss Chaudhry.

Typical of the sentiments expressed was this comment on the Dhimmi Watch website: "How are we supposed to defend Western civilisation and cultural values against the encroaching Muslim hordes when our head of state engages in such blatant acts of appeasement?"

A friendly leader (parson, imam, shaman) is there to talk to, confess to, get comfort and advice from; fellow club members are on hand at times of severe trial.

Science provides answers to many things, and some interesting, stimulating and challenging questions about things it hasn't explained or perhaps will never explain. We laud it in these pages, because it works rationally (with the proviso that it is being conducted fairly, with no axes to grind or political paymasters to satisfy); it works to strict rules concerning the replicability of its experiments; it has to be able to make testable predictions; it allows itself to be scrutinised via the process of peer review; it revises itself (or should do so) when it is found wanting. It also recognises (or should recognise) where it *is* wanting, and seeks ways of arriving at useful conclusions – though too many so-called humanists tend to be rather dogmatic about science and think it holds all the answers and, if there's a claimed phenomenon for which there is no scientific explanation at the moment, it doesn't exist!

We say science is the natural adversary of religion, because science does these things and religion doesn't. This is true. But does it make science religion's natural foe, and vice versa? After all, to science, I am nothing, you are nothing and your mother is nothing. As for your gerbil ...

We are just an incidental product of what happens in the mechanical, impersonal universe, awe-inspiring though that is, along with many other incidental products. The universe would get on quite well without us, and in parts it indeed does thrive with no self-aware life forms to be a part of its structure and continuing development.

So is setting science up as an alternative to religion a bit like giving someone the choice between a cough lozenge and a monocycle? Both may be desired, but they do very different things, and one will not substitute for the other.

Do we need, then, something else that caters to human desires for emotional support and answers to questions, and at the same time is as convenient as the corner shop? Will it ever be possible for non-theists and rationalists to create a movement – or a loose knit of kindred movements – to do for ordinary people what religion does? I deliberately haven't attempted any answers in this short article. I am asking questions that may spark debate.

But perhaps one day religion will shake off its less believable – and, may we hope, less desirable? – components; and science, in the guise of psychology, anyway, will claim it, or something like it, as an essential part of what it is to be human.

The "something like it", of course, opens up another tin of the wriggly things – and could be the subject of much further discussion.

FOR me the classic example of the sheer stupidity of the American President was in his speech when he said that those who were not for his policy were against the USA. Probably he was appealing only to the most stupid of Americans. His most vociferous opponents seem to be the equivalent Muslims in such places as Indonesia, and even India – and India is not usually seen as a stronghold of Islam.

Presumably the same mentality brought out the London dockers after Enoch Powell's "Rivers of blood" speech. The latest example of stupidity among Muslims was the response to the Pope's lecture in which he quoted words of a 14th-century emperor at the fag-end of the Eastern Roman Empire whose opinion of Muslims was very likely to have been influenced by the spread of Islam that resulted from conquest and forced conversion of the conquered. One assumes the Pope quoted these words to educated people who knew their history.

The success of Islam at that time, as reliable historical evidence supports, was due to conquest by well organised and well commanded armies. In Europe they reached Vienna before being stopped. Their much earlier conquest of Spain brought great advances in science, medicine, agriculture and, as can still be seen, in architecture. When driven out of Spain the Christian monarchy, strongly supported by the Christian Church, committed some of the most appalling crimes ever seen in Europe – anyway, until the Nazis, and the same Church seems to have done little to oppose Nazism – but these ideas and opinions are never clear, never black and white, never "us" versus "them", never for us or against us.

When Muslim mobs go on the rampage, Islamic leaders do not seem to be sufficiently aware of the impression that the demonstrations make on non-Muslims. This may be partly due to the teachings of Islam that are liable to encourage the view that all non-Muslims are non-people and, as some of them like to say, are due to roast in hell, whatever that is. It is puzzling, to say the least, that many Christians share these irrational beliefs of heaven and hell, even to the extent of agreeing that martyrs go straight to heaven.

Has it never occurred to the intelligent followers of these religions that there is an obvious political purpose behind such beliefs, just as there was behind the undoubted heroism of Japanese suicide pilots and the fanatical Nazi SS?

Followers of religions have produced great works in all the arts and scholarship. These great works were not the product of the religions, indeed they were often produced at times when there was also great religious

Not for or against

and political unrest, such as the seemingly endless European wars of the 18th and early 19th centuries, when Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven created their great works. Some of the wonderful works of the Tudor and early Stuart composers in England were composed at a time of a combined political and civil war in England.

Reduce ignorance and stupidity, and tyranny will be defeated, argues PETER ARNOLD

In Renaissance Italy great works of art seem to have appeared despite endless disputes between their city states or wealthy families. Science was quickly identified in the Vatican as a threat to religious doctrine, and it still is, but science is based on evidence whereas religious and political doctrines are based on the idea that the masses have to be controlled by carrot and stick. If the masses are asses it works. Political and religious tyrannies encourage anxiety and even create terror and then offer their leadership to defeat "the enemy", so the best way to defeat tyranny is to find ways of reducing ignorance and stupidity.

Of course this is not achieved by telling peo-

ple they are stupid but by attempting to convince them that they can be intelligent. The first to be murdered in a tyranny are the thinkers.

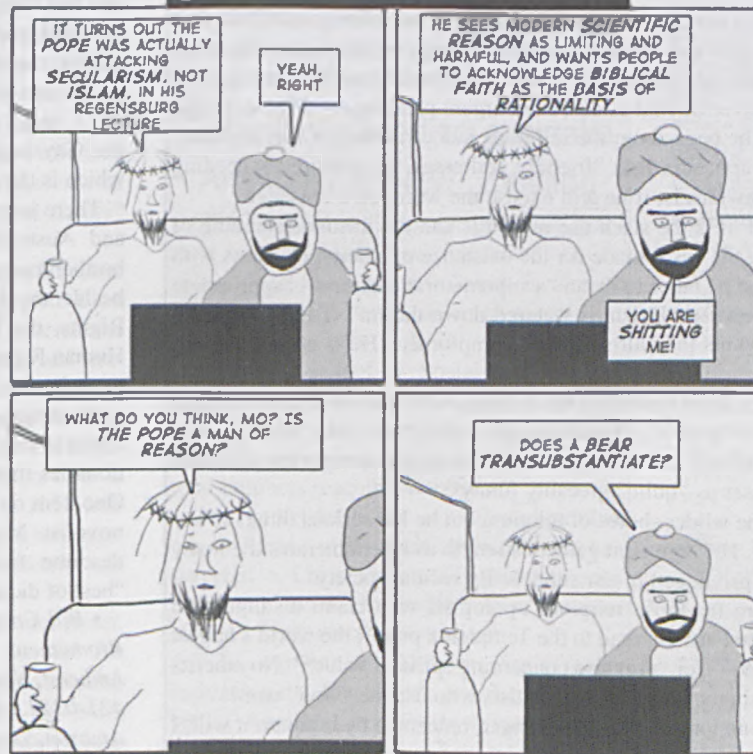
Religions invented the idea of sin and created a web of laws covering every aspect of life, as if a good life was one guided by a rule-book. Jews, Muslims, Catholics and others are surrounded by a multitude of petty regulations backed by myths of heaven and hell, whereas every child soon discovers how words and actions cause harm or benefit. They do not need religions or ideologies to tell them the difference, particularly when religions can cause as much harm as benefit.

Thinking people the world over will question authorities to justify themselves. The weakness of Islam appears to be the total refusal to allow various aspects of their religion to be questioned, so that it easily becomes the main support of totalitarian regimes. Much the same accusation can be levelled at the Catholic Church, and just at the moment it looks as if the UK Cabinet is up against the same kind of accusation, though fortunately a democracy can find solutions. It needs to be the type of democracy where the people have access to reliable evidence, and that depends on having information systems that are not strongly influenced by powerful businesses, political parties or religious organisations, and that appears to be almost as difficult in present-day USA as it was in the USSR.

We should be critical of both ideology and religion. We are a long way from the barbarities of mediaeval Europe, so political ideologies have changed and are continuing to change. Not so religions. Religions are all stuck in the past, even in a mythical and in some cases an almost pre-historic past. We can learn a great deal about human nature by reading the fictions in their

holy books, just as we can from all fiction, but we can choose to discuss how to interpret them. The imposition of an interpretation has led every religion to internal conflict – Islam just as much as Christianity. Atheism imposes no interpretation because it looks for evidence before accepting any kind of belief, and it is unlikely that any two atheists will agree on how to live a good life other than by refusing to be brainwashed by propaganda and advertising.

Jesus and Mo



Quotable quote

RELIGION is the yeast of death cakes. It is the most awful agent on a vulnerable mind. It is the refuge of alienated and lonely people. It's what people had before television. It yokes people together into an imaginary world. It is just people talking to their imaginary friends, at length. I would not mind but some of the people are world leaders.

– Comedian Dylan Moran

Bill Cooke's latest offering is informative and a joy to read

HOW often have you wondered what is the difference between humanism and secularism, what was the difference between Bradlaugh and Holyoake, what are the religious origins of Al Qaeda, what did Nietzsche really believe, what does Richard Dawkins' term "meme" really mean? This list could go on for ever. And that is why this dictionary is such a valuable volume. Not only does it answer that myriad of questions – but also it is extremely valuable and enjoyable to dip into.

In a way this book is a homage to Joseph McCabe's *Rationalist Encyclopaedia*, a tome whose influence Cooke acknowledges. Indeed, his admiration for McCabe is already known to those who admire his biography *A Rebel to his Last Breath: Joseph McCabe and Rationalism* (2001). Cooke also acknowledges the influence of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, though he does not attempt the wit and irony of Voltaire. There's only one Voltaire, after all. Cooke's skill at presenting the history and philosophy of rationalism is known to those who have read his key work: *The Blasphemy*

Depot: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association.

Cooke admits that in a capacious book like this written by one person individual preferences and interests will dominate. In that case his interests are very wide – I find a few people and ideas that might have been squeezed in, but to complain over so generous a book would be pedantic.

JIM HERRICK reviews *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, & Humanism* by Bill Cooke. Prometheus Books, US, 606 pp \$70

He explains that there are basically four kinds of entry: ideas and concepts; people; events and organisations; buzzwords. The latter are words like "brights" and "metrosexual", which probably will have faded away once the next edition comes out, but add a touch of lightness to the fact- and idea-filled book.

A number of substantial entries relating to humanism are very valuable. 'Humanism' sets out basic principles. "Humanism, affirmations

of' puts forward Paul Kurtz's summary of what humanism is about; 'Humanism as a religion' – clearly not, but there may be more room for dialogue with religion than we suppose; "Humanism, books about"; "Humanism, the foundations"; "Humanism, in the ancient world", "Humanism, planetary" "Humanism, weaknesses of" – which will appeal to those readers who find humanism woolly and difficult to grasp. The Humanist Manifesto I (1933), Humanist Manifesto II (1973), and Humanist Manifesto III (2003) are all given, if not in full, with much of the detail. For those of you who prefer the word "secularism" there is a full entry and a clear item which distinguishes "secularisation" from "secularism".

Naturally, I checked the entries relating to people I know. As far as I can tell they are accurate and judicious. Harold Blackham and Barbara Smoker, two of the major British humanists of the second half of the twentieth century, are well covered. Other people and events of which I have knowledge are without mistakes. This is a reliable book. Of course, events may overtake the writer while the publishing process takes place – Saraswati Gora the co-founder with Gora of the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, India, has died in recent weeks.

Ideas and philosophy are important to this work. I am impressed with Cooke's ability to cover in a short space the philosophy of Hume, Kant and Nietzsche. People from the arts are well represented: freethinking musicians include Beethoven, Delius, Debussy and Verdi – I would have included Ralph Vaughan Williams, but that perhaps is the response of an English reader. Writers such as Thomas Hardy and Iris Murdoch are included. Rushdie is not included, unfortunately, though Rohin Misty is rightly mentioned. In writing of blasphemy Cooke omits to mention the *Gay News* case of 1977, and I would have included an entry on the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, which is the only such group in the world.

There is good space given to Nigeria, Asia, and Australasia. Articles about the Muslim brotherhood and Al Qaeda are very useful. Put beside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights demonstrates how far Islam has to go in this field.

An impressive aspect of the dictionary is that it is very readable. There are very few dictionaries that you would sit and read through. One item on "the best of causes" refers to the novelist Meredith's use of the phrase to describe freethought. Cooke's work is the "best of dictionaries".

• *Bill Cooke's latest book is available from Prometheus Books, 59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst, New York 14228-2197 Phone: 1-800-421-0351. It can also be purchased at Amazon.co.uk*

Richard Dawkins 'is on a crusade'

RICHARD Dawkins touches raw nerves once again with his latest book, *The God Delusion* (Bantam, 416pp. £20). But it has received many glowing reviews, not least one from Joan Bakewell in the *Guardian*. Here is an extract: "In September 1997 Richard Dawkins allowed an Australian film crew into his Oxford home, only to realise in the course of a particularly inept interview that they were creationists trying to trap him. Tumbling to this, he paused some moments while deciding whether to throw them out or attempt a long and thoughtful explanation that they didn't want to hear. In their resulting film his hesitation is dishonestly edited to look like intellectual doubt on his part. Creationists and believers in God are right to see him as their arch-enemy. In *The God Delusion* he displays what a formidable adversary he is. It is a spirited read, exhilarating and, in the current climate, timely too.

"There is no hesitancy or doubt here. Dawkins comes roaring forth in the full vigour of his powerful arguments, laying into fallacies and false doctrines with the energy of the polemicist at his most fiery. "My earlier books did not set out to convert anyone ... this book does," he declares. Its tone is chattier than usual, given to conversational asides, even urgent pleadings – "Please, please raise your consciousness about this!" he begs about the religious indoctrination of tiny children. And should you doubt his intent, an appendix lists "friendly addresses for individuals needing support in escaping from religion". Dawkins is, if he will excuse the word, on a crusade.

"Perhaps he won't excuse the word. It is the slack use of words and the misunderstanding of metaphor that he sees as underpinning the cases made for the existence of a deity. He starts with some sharp definitions of his own: God he takes to mean "a supernatural creator it is appropriate to worship"; pantheism "is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism". There are plenty of "isms" to choose from, but to Dawkins they all smack of compromise. He is an out-and-out atheist and this is his testimony.

"With his usual rational skills he sets about dissecting the arguments for the existence of a God. He takes on all comers: Aquinas's five "proofs", Pascal's wager (meant as a joke, surely), even Stephen Unwin's probability of God, whose use of Bayes's theorem to demonstrate the probability of God Dawkins scathingly dismisses as "quite agreeably funny".

"Dawkins has a lot of easy fun on the wilder shores of religion, but he has serious things to say about why morality doesn't need faith. His argument gathers strength as he enumerates the many ways in which religion is excessively privileged in our supposedly secular society.

"Dawkins reserves particular venom for those religious apologists who claim distinguished scientists as their own. He sneers at "the Faustian road to the Templeton prize", the world's largest single financial prize — \$1.4m in 2006 — for "progress concerning spiritual values". No atheists sit on the jury and winners are increasingly likely to be scientists who use the "God" word.

This book is a clarion call to cower no longer. Primed by anger, redeemed by humour, it will, I trust, offend many."

"The first thing which I should like to add is that Darwin died a believing Christian."

— Antony Flew, letter to *The Skeptic*,
Summer 2006¹

DARWIN'S own last account of his religious belief "written in 1879 – copied out Ap 22 1881"² (he died April 19, 1882) says he was an agnostic. So do his letters to enquirers³, and the recollections of those who witnessed his death⁴.

There are tracts announcing that not only Darwin, but also Spinoza, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Bradlaugh, and Bertrand Russell were subject to deathbed conversions, and it seems safe to dismiss nearly all as preposterous. But Professor Antony Flew is a distinguished philosopher and student of Darwin's ideas⁵, and when he writes that Darwin died a believing Christian, the statement deserves serious investigation.

I wrote to Antony Flew asking for further information.

Professor Flew courteously replied by return, enclosing a photocopy of his source, a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* from Prebendary Dr Victor Pearce⁶, with the comment "I was myself astonished by Dr Pearce's letter when I first read it. But I can see no reason to doubt his authority"⁷. I wrote to Dr Pearce asking for further information.

Dr Pearce courteously replied, enclosing photocopies of some pages in a book of his own⁸, marking for my attention some passages concerning Darwin's abhorrence of alcohol⁹, which is not in doubt. On the question of whether Darwin died a Christian, Dr Pearce's book cites Dr Croft of Salford University.

Dr Croft's book is called *The Life and Death of Charles Darwin*¹⁰. James Moore, one of the authors of the definitive biography, *Darwin*, has also written about Darwin's reputed conversion, in a book called *The Darwin Legend*¹¹. Croft and Moore cite the same sources, but differ in their conclusions.

The story was published in an American Baptist periodical the *Watchman-Examiner*, on August 17, 1915, as "Darwin and Christianity" by Lady Hope.

Lady Hope was a real person, aged 72 when the *Watchman-Examiner* piece appeared. Born Elizabeth Cotton, the daughter of a general, she was an enthusiastic and able evangelist and temperance campaigner from her teens onward. In 1877 she married 69-year-old Admiral Sir John Hope, who died in 1881. In 1893 she married T A Denny, a millionaire aged 75, who died in 1909. She was declared bankrupt in 1911 with liabilities of £14,000, discharged from bankruptcy in 1912 when her stepsons paid £4,000, and moved to New York in 1913.

Dr Croft quotes the Reverend Ishmael Jones, who wrote in the *Christian Herald* for December 21, 1881: "I once attended a meeting at Dorking which was addressed by Miss Cotton (now Lady Hope) ... She said that [she commenced her temperance work with] an old

Darwin did not die a Christian

drunken shoemaker who had signed the pledge-book twenty times and broken it on each occasion ... Lady Hope visited him day after day to encourage him, and for years he has been a steadfast Christian in the town of Dorking."

Dr Croft asks "Who would dare question the word of such a woman?" Answer: many would, and without questioning her honesty of purpose.

DONALD ROOUM on claims that Charles Darwin embraced Christianity

The meeting at which Reverend Jones heard Miss Cotton speak was probably a temperance meeting. No doubt she wanted to reassure any despairing alcoholics in the audience that there is always hope, and to this end she told the picturesque anecdote of the drunken shoemaker, which may or may not have been pedantically accurate.

Another of Dr Croft's questions is "Had not Darwin's entire life been one long struggle to regain the faith of his youth?" Answer: certainly not. Dr Croft also seems to suppose that Darwin's death-bed remark, "I am not in the least afraid to die", indicates belief in eternal life.

Lady Hope's account of her conversation with Darwin is quite implausible: "I have a summer house in the garden which holds about thirty people" (the summer house is still there

Catholics poised to overtake Anglicans in New Zealand

CATHOLICISM will become the most practised denomination in New Zealand within five years – and the Catholic Church is already wielding political power, an expert says.

Peter Lineham, head of Massey University's School of Social and Cultural Studies, says current trends show Catholics will overtake Anglicans as New Zealand's most dominant religious group by 2011, with total numbers reaching 489,000.

The prediction, based on a 20-year trend in census figures, shows the Catholic Church has survived a Christianity crisis that has seen other religions bleeding adherents at a rate of almost 12,000 worshippers a year.

"The number of Catholics isn't really increasing much at all, it's just that the number of Anglicans and Presbyterians is dropping so dramatically," Lineham said.

and big enough for about three). "I want you very much to speak there." "What shall I speak about?" "CHRIST JESUS!" (etc).

But there is a certain plausibility in her description of the circumstances of their meeting. Darwin's daughter Henrietta (Litchfield) wrote furiously that "Lady Hope was not present during his last illness, or any illness", but that is not what Lady Hope claims. She says she met him some months before he died, propped up in bed wearing a dark purple dressing gown, gazing out over woods and cornfields glowing in the marvellous autumn sunset. Darwin was in the habit of being read to in bed before his afternoon nap. His dressing gown was dark purple, his bedroom window looked out over woods and cornfields, and the autumn sunsets at Downe were marvellous.

Lady Hope knew James Fegan, a preacher and temperance campaigner who lived in Downe and enjoyed excellent relations with the Darwin family. When he preached in Downe the Darwins altered their mealtimes so that their servants could attend his meetings, and when the weather was too cold for tent meetings, Darwin allowed him the use of an old schoolroom in the village (which Lady Hope may have confused with the summer house). Although the Darwins were vehement that she never visited Down House, it is just possible that she went there, once, in the company of Mr Fegan or one of the servants.

In 1925, S J Pratt of the Protestant Truth Society wrote to ask Mr Fegan about Lady Hope's story. Mr Fegan replied with a long letter, in which he said: "I have been appealed to over and over again as to the probability of this story, and have had no hesitation in pronouncing it to be a fabrication on the part of poor Lady Hope. You are quite right that Mr Darwin never poured scorn on the Christian faith. He was one of the last men in the world to stoop to pouring scorn upon anybody's conscientious belief. He was an honourable, courteous, benevolent gentleman; but you may be sure that Sir Francis Darwin is right in saying that his father died as he had lived – an agnostic".

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- 1 Flew A "Flew's conversion" *The Skeptic* (2006) 19:2 p. 26.
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- 5 See Flew A *Darwinian Evolution* Paladin Books 1984.
- 6 Pearce V letter published in *Daily Telegraph* 21 August 1999.
- 7 Flew A personal communication 24 August 2006.
- 8 Pearce V *Science*, Eagle Publishing (Evidence for Truth series) 2003, pp 152-157.
- 9 Pearce V personal communication 13 September 2006.
- 10 Croft L R *The Life and Death of Charles Darwin* Elmwood Books 1989, especially chapter 8, "Eventide and rebirth".
- 11 Moore J *The Darwin Legend* (Grand Rapids Michigan) Baker Books 1994 especially chapter 5 "Lady Hope's story" and appendix D "Mr Fegan protests". Thanks to the libraries of the Natural History Museum and South Place Ethical Society.

Blinded by bigotry

DIESEL Balaam will find that, like religion, endlessly repeating a falsehood doesn't make it true. GALHA has certainly not maintained a "butt-clenching" silence on Islam, as he asserted in his article in the October *Freethinker*.

Its two most-recently appointed vice-presidents – Maryam Namazie and Taslima Nasreen – are both noted for their brave opposition to Islamist oppression. GALHA hosted a public meeting on the persecution of gay people, women and secularists in Iraq in August and launched a fund-raising appeal to help Iraqi activists after "Grand Ayatollah" Sistani issued a death fatwa against gay Iraqis. GALHA supported the March for Free Expression in London in the wake of the MoToon saga and gave it wide coverage in its magazine GHQ, which has also run a series of hard-hitting articles by Middle-Eastern dissidents. In the space of a letter I cannot list all the points of information that rebut Balaam's false claims. Who are the "lefties" GALHA is unwilling to upset, I wonder?

Furthermore, his ill-informed rant about the GPA advert is so illogical it would shame anyone claiming to be a rationalist.

For a start, he seems to confuse an advert designed to spark debate – which it did – with a peer-reviewed academic paper, which an advert doesn't pretend to be. He makes contradictory demands, first rubbishing the idea that religious queer-bashers can be identified

at all but then later – bizarrely, given this earlier assertion – he recommends a pie-chart giving a breakdown of offenders by religion.

He says that rival groups reporting each other to the police is juvenile (incidentally, GALHA agrees, which is why we opposed the suggestion that Iqbal Sacranie and Stephen Green be prosecuted) but then goes on to lament that Sacranie "got away with it" following his remarks about homosexuality.

But what is most unforgivable is his apologetics for Christianity. People motivated by Christian-based religious fervour, he informs us, are more likely to "turn the other cheek", offer "forgiveness" and "love their enemies". What planet does Balaam inhabit? Almost every fanatically antigay lobby group in the UK is run by Christians: The Christian Institute, CARE, the Evangelical Alliance, Christian Voice, to name just a few. Add to this the increasingly strident attacks on gay people coming from the Vatican and sections of the Anglican Communion, it is absurd to suggest that the major discourse on homophobia in the UK should focus on Islam while romanticising Christianity the way Balaam suggests. Christians are lower than gays on the pecking order? Utter rubbish! Why do we have civil partnerships instead of full marriage equality if not to appease the Church? Why are there religious exemptions in equalities legislation if not to appease the Church? In fact, can Balaam give a single example of where gays have trumped Christians? Indeed, isn't the mere fact of the brouhaha over the GPA advert concrete proof that Balaam's suggested pecking order has no basis in reality? "White working class heterosexual men" are being unfairly treated because they're an easy target? Really?

Who blew up the Admiral Duncan pub? A Muslim? Who murdered Jodie Debrowski? David Morley? Was it Muslims? Indeed, which religion pickets Gay Pride events every year? Muslims? No, so why in this instance does Balaam want the focus to be on them?

Balaam concludes that the GPA is guilty of cowardice and double-standards. On what does he base this charge other than his own bigoted belief that it must be Muslims responsible for all the homophobic crime, not "cheek-turning, loving, forgiving" Christians?

There is no doubt that Islam is responsible for a great deal of homophobia in the UK, but that does not mean Muslims should be scapegoated. It is the Christians who have the numbers, the institutional power, the money and the organisation to do the most damage. They are by no means the "soft" target.

BRETT LOCK
GALHA

The Death of Kyle Lake

IT IS astonishing that Martin O'Brien (*Points of View*, October) should so uncritically have

accepted your earlier suggestion that an educated 33-year-old would be ignorant of something any 12-year-old schoolboy could have told him: that "water and electrical equipment are always fatal bedfellows".

When Kyle Lake, standing in a baptismal pool, asked for a microphone, did he even know it would be attached to the mains? Most modern PA systems (including that in the Parish Church at the end of my road) use battery-operated radio-mikes: no danger of electrocution from them, of course. Even if he did have reason to know the mike was 'live', many people – including unbelievers – do things at times of heightened emotion that in more sober moments they would recognise as risky. We do not think it appropriate to laugh or scold when a prominent gay humanist, who could also be considered "the author of his own misfortune", dies of AIDS following equally risky behaviour: so why should Kyle Lake be fair game? And was he really as bumptious as *Freethinker* readers like to imagine? Kyle was in fact a member of the Emergent Church, which is undogmatic and gay-friendly. He left a wife, three young children, and many friends whose testimonies to his inspirational life can still be found online. But his death was cruelly welcomed by right-wing fundamentalists who saw it as divine judgement on his "liberal" views.

As to *schadenfreude*, this might be excusable when a pompous individual merely slips on a banana skin; but not, I suggest, if he breaks his neck. None of Tony Akkermans' examples of justifiable *schadenfreude* resulted in fatalities. I do, however, recall television pictures of Muslims jumping for joy when the twin towers collapsed on 9/11, delighted that "the great Satan" was getting his comeuppance. I assume Tony was not sympathetic to their viewpoint.

DAN O'HARA
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

Affirming in court

IT seems to me that the whole situation of oath swearing is mad, as no one can know who feels constrained to tell the truth when they swear on the Bible, and who doesn't. Of course, most believers who are intending to lie will already have said a little prayer in explanation before they enter court!

It just brings into our judicial system, religious prejudices that should not be there. The affirmer may be looked on with suspicion by some for seeking to avoid divine retribution.

Marcel Proust's atheism

AN article in last month's *Freethinker*, "The Atheism of Marcel Proust", was wrongly attributed to David Jones. It was in fact written by David James. We apologise to David James for this error

Your support is greatly appreciated

IN the months September and October 2006, *Freethinker* readers have donated £478.00 to the *Freethinker* fund.

We would like to thank the following donors for their help in keeping the magazine going in what is now its 126th year of continuous publication:

P H Albrecht, G L Angel, R Bairstow, P Baxter, D M Bennet, E Carim, J Claydon, O Croombe, R Dall, R Dennick, N Divall, E Durbridge, S Eadie, G Edwards, F N Fish, B J Forbes, M Fox, G Hall, R C Harrison, M Johnson, I Kirkland, D A Langdown, W H Lightbown, K Papas, G Robbins, D Still, A Suddaby, D N Towers and G Tuck.

The subscription fees for the *Freethinker* fall far short of the actual cost of production and distribution of each issue. The main reason that the magazine has been able to continue year after year is due to generous donations to the *Freethinker* fund, and a number of generous legacies we have received in the past, and we appeal to readers to remember the *Freethinker* in their wills so that a new generation of readers might be enlightened by this unique publication.



or as a non-believer, consequently immoral and likely to tell lies anyway!

In reality a non-believer who wishes to feel free to lie might see in the Bible the finest examples of that genre, and will happily take on its cloak of respectability! So as the act of affirming has no practical benefit, but can produce negative prejudice against one's testimony, it seems obvious to me, and no doubt many others, that it is a foolish thing to do.

CLIVE GREEDUS
Ilford

Mohammed's penis

IN all 70 of my heterosexual years – apart from some minor curiosity I had as a prepubescent youth with other boys' appendages – I have never really thought about other men's penises. That is, until I read a report in the October *Freethinker* about the young Saudi man who faces a death sentence for making a quip about the Prophet Mohammed's penis.

This got me wondering whether Saudi sensitivity about the prophet's organ might revolve around its size – or lack of. It's common knowledge that a small penis can give rise to all sorts of insecurities, and I got to thinking that this sensitivity might have arisen from the fact that Mohammed could have been less than impressive in the package department.

In an attempt to find out more, I Googled "Prophet Mohammed's penis" and immediately came across an article called *Mohammed's Little Penis* on a blog called The Muslim Question.

In it, a writer called Shlomo Muslim PhD, observes: "Even if you thought there was scant evidence upon which to describe that part of Mohammed's body, you'd be wrong. My favorite hadith that seems to tell us all we have to know is found in *sahih Bukhari* Volume 7, Book 62, Number 64. Here it tells us about Aisha: 'the prophet married her when she was six years old and he consummated his marriage when she was nine years old.'

"We know from Koran verses 33:37, 44:54, and 52:20 that *Bukhari* used *zawaj* and *nikah* to mean marriage. We also know, according to the hadith, that the important word is not *nikah*, but *udkhalath*.

"In Arabic the meaning of the word *dakhala* is clear. The root of the verb *udkhalath* is *dakhala* which means to enter (insert, enter, pierce, penetrate, drive into, thrust, to consummate a marriage: "There is no question whatsoever, based on all the best scholars' work, that Mohammed had sexual intercourse with Aisha when she was nine years old.

"We know Aisha was made his bride when she was still a virgin. Thus, Mohammed married her when she was but a little girl, and then he consummated the marriage when she got big enough for him to fit his erect member inside her.

"Because Aisha's 9-year-old vagina was so narrow, we know the only way Mohammed could have had sex with her was because his penis was also very narrow. Hence, Mohammed is known to have had a 'pencil dick'. However, when referring to Mohammed, many have argued that the more appropriate term is 'needle dick'."

I know that this useless piece of information will not be welcomed by the Sons of the Prophet. But I make no apologies for turning it up. We in the West are constantly being told that we are lamentably ignorant when it comes to Islam, so I see no reason for anyone chiding me for doing a basic bit of research. However, I can assure devout Muslims that, as an atheist, I have no further interest in Islam, and will not attempt to unearth any other bits of embarrassing information.

PHILLIP DELDERFIELD
Manchester

Freethinker strapline change

THE cover of the October 2006 issue of the *Freethinker* describes it as "the voice of atheism". I always thought it was the voice of freethought. Why the change?

As Aldous Huxley stated, atheism is a religion. If the *Freethinker* is its voice, then it is a religious publication!

E GOODMAN
Surrey

Editor's note: Acting on a suggestion I put forward earlier this year that the strapline "secular humanist monthly" should be changed to something more appropriate, given that both the terms "secular" and "humanist" are so widely misunderstood, the board of G W Foote agreed on a change to "the voice of atheism" which far better describes the nature of the journal.

I have often felt that the word "atheism" – which simply means without religious belief – has far too long been demonised by those who *do* have religious beliefs, and that the time had come to reclaim the word, and use it with pride.

The claim that "atheism is a religion/cult" is mostly made by the religious, and is patently ridiculous. Virtually all dictionaries will define religion as "a belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers that have to be obeyed, and that the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe need to be worshipped." Clearly this definition cannot in any way be applied to atheism, which is without dogma of any sort. There cannot be an atheist "church", or an atheist "priest" anymore than there could be an atheist "god."

There are, of course, many atheists who would describe themselves as "secular humanists", "freethinkers", or "rationalists" This is sometimes understandable, considering the opprobrium atheists have been subjected to throughout history. There have been times when atheists who described them-

selves by using the "A-word" faced public condemnation, even violence for their convictions.

It seems ironic to me that in the United States, where there is far greater religious belief, there exists an organisation called American Atheists, while we, in the far more secular UK, do not have a British Atheists equivalent. This is not to say that British atheists are without representative bodies. The National Secular Society (of which I am a member) and the British Humanist Association both do an admirable job in representing the needs of those without religious belief.

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Sheffield

Events & Contacts

- Birmingham Humanists:** Friends Meeting House, George Road, Edgbaston. Monday, Nov 20, 7.45 pm *The Value of Being a Humanist* (meeting for inquirers)
- 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. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, December 5, 7.30pm. Greg Marshall: *Plagiarising Paganism – Christianity and Christmas Origins*.
- Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 904 9490.
- Bromley Humanists:** Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com
- Central London Humanist Group:** Contact Jemma Hooper, 75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX. E-mail: rupert@clarity4words.co.uk Tel: 02075804564.
- Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 01494 771851.
- Cornwall Humanists:** Information: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.
- Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.
- Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.
- Derbyshire Secularists:** Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website www.secularderby.org
- Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: info@devonhumanists.org.uk Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk
- Faling Humanists:** Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599
- East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.
- East Kent Humanists:** Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.
- Essex Humanists:** Programme available. Details: 01268 785295.
- Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450.
- Greater Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: June Kamel 01925 824844. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.
- Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: <http://hampstead.humanists.net>
- Harrow Humanist Society:** Meetings 2nd Wednesday of the month (except July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information from the secretary on 0208 863 2977. Next meeting Nov 8. Speaker: Andrew Copson, BHA Education & Research Officer. Subject: *Campaigning for Humanism at Parliamentary Level*.
- Hasving & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.
- Humanist Association Dorset:** Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.
- Humanist Society of Scotland:** 272 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk. Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
- Local Scottish Groups:**
- Aberdeen Group:** 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
- Dundee Group:** 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
- Edinburgh Group:** 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk
- Glasgow Group:** 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
- Highland Group:** 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
- Perth Group:** 07017 404776, perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk
- Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, Nov 14, 7.30pm. Rob Murfin: *So Why Not Teach Intelligent Design?* Tuesday, Dec 12, 7.30pm. Gerald Jackman: **Jesus – Fact and Fiction**.
- Isle of Man Freethinkers:** Information: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: murielgarland@clara.co.uk. Website: www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk
- Isle of Wight Humanist Group:** Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail davidb67@clara.co.uk
- Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Full programme of events on website: www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk
- Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford. Thursday, November 16, 8pm. Hyman Frankel: *Does Modern Physics Prove God?*
- 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, December 6, 8pm. Social evening with buffet and entertainment. Tickets £11.00. Bookings: Jennie Street. Tel 0114 2362302. Email: jennie@hadish.f9.co.uk.
- South Hampshire Humanists:** Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120.
- South Place Ethical Society.** Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8037/4. E-mail: library@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.
- Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.
- Suffolk Humanists:** 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk. 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. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.
- Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. E-mail: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.
- West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.
- Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Listings, the *Freethinker*, PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD

Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication.