

# Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

## National Secular Society has a new President



Journalist and author Terry Sanderson, left, is the new President of the National Secular Society. He is pictured with the NSS's Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, centre, and outgoing President Denis Cobell at the NSS AGM last November

– See pages 2, 3, 8 and 9

### Also in this issue:



Late, but unlamented: two devout Christian dictators – General Augusto Pinochet of Chile, left, and P W Botha, of South Africa – died late last year. Both fascists escaped prosecution for crimes against humanity

– see pages 10 & 11



LET'S be honest, very few people in this country celebrate Christmas as a religious festival anymore. It is much-vaunted that 72 percent of people in this country say they are Christians, but only something like 15 percent will show their face in a church over the Christmas season. And most of them are only doing it because "it's a nice thing to do".

Last month I was running from one radio studio to another, from one TV station to the next, commenting on various bits of propaganda that have absolutely no basis in reality. Take the supposed survey of companies that "revealed" that 74 percent of them intended to "ban" Christmas decorations from their premises. The survey was allegedly conducted among more than 2,300 firms, but regrettably in all my contact with various parts of the country through their local radio stations, no one was able to find even one of those companies. There was no indication from anybody that they intended to "ban" anything to do with Christmas (except perhaps the drunken orgy otherwise known as the office party).

Peter Done, the managing director of Peninsula, the firm that produced these highly contentious figures, commented: "Christmas trees and decorations may well be a thing of the past in many workplaces this Christmas as political correctness culture has spread to the workplace. Although employers who are enforcing the ban are sceptical and dismayed by this trend, they feel that they have little choice in the matter due to the threat of litigation, as they have to protect themselves, their reputation and their livelihood."

He went on to suggest that much of the alleged reticence of commercial firms to put up decorations was a fear of offending "religious minorities". So, it turns out that it's the poor old Muslims and Hindus who are to blame again.

The Hindu Council was forced to issue a rather pleading don't-blame-us statement, reading: "Hindu Council UK is concerned that a report claims that 3 out of 4 employers have banned Christmas decorations from their offices for fear of offending other faiths. Hindu Council UK would like to stress that they have no objection whatsoever if employers were to put up Christmas decorations. We live in a Christian country and respect Christian faith and traditions as we respect other faiths and traditions. Hindu Council UK would be disappointed if some employers were to use faith as an excuse not to decorate their offices for Christmas."

The fear from these minority communities is almost palpable. One of my radio stints was an hour-long programme on the BBC Asian Network which included a phone-in. Everybody from a Muslim background who rang in said quite clearly that they had no problem with Christmas – they liked it, in fact, and would join in all the celebrations except the religious bit.

Rather like the vast majority of the supposed 72 percent of "Christians", then..

Peninsula's survey was quoted quite uncriti-

cally by the media, because it fits with their agenda. The fact that it is unsupported by evidence and completely out of step with everyone's lived experience was disregarded by most newspapers and broadcasters who presented it as gospel. Did anybody think to ask Peninsula for some evidence to back up its claims? Of course they didn't – what a lot of spoilsports we'd be to do that.

## Guest writer NSS President TERRY SANDERSON on the War Against Christmas

So now the spotlight is turned on "the fundamentalist secularists" who, according to the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, are the real villains of this piece. Sentamu put out a ludicrously overblown and opportunistic statement hysterically pointing the finger at "illiberal atheists".

"There is a worrying trend to be seen where illiberal atheists have combined with aggressive secularists to create a ludicrous situation where those who don't believe in God have decided that a Christian festival is offending other faiths. Aggressive secularists are trying to pretend that it is possible to enter into the true meaning of Christmas by leaving out Jesus Christ. The person who is at the heart of the celebration is totally excluded. This really is a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, or in this case throwing out the crib at Christmas. Aggressive secularists are behaving like the inn keeper on the first Christmas Eve and saying there is no room at the inn – no room for Christ at Christmas! It is like having a birthday party, the guests turning up and giving each other presents, forgetting why they came and totally excluding the birthday child.

### Violent Christian video game slammed

A VIOLENT video game designed to appeal to conservative Christians is causing controversy in the US. Critics say *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* glorifies violence against non-Christians. And some liberal groups have urged a boycott of the game in which gun-toting combatants on the side of Jesus pause for prayer, and their favoured interjection is "Praise the Lord". The game's story line is set after the "rapture", when most Christians are transported to heaven. Those remaining – the "left-behinds" are faced with a choice of joining or combating the Antichrist.

But one games reviewer wrote: "Don't mock *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* because it's a Christian game. Mock it because it's a very bad game." He claimed it was riddled with annoying bugs.

Have you ever known such self-adulation and hypocrisy?"

"This aggressive brand of secularism is trying to undermine the cultural traditions of this country by using flawed arguments about 'multi-faith, multi-culturalism' whilst at the same time trying to negate faith groups all together."

Is the man fully in control of his faculties? Who are these "aggressive secularists" who want to rob Christians of Christmas? Come on, Johnny, name names. And don't trot out Richard Dawkins, because he has never said any such thing. Nor has anyone at the National Secular Society. We're all for people celebrating the season – usurped, as it was by the Christians from its pagan origins – in whatever way they want, whether that's in the church or the shopping mall, in the Cathedral or in front of the telly pigging out on selection boxes.

The Christian push to incite resentment against non-Christians is dishonest and dangerous. I was in conversation with the Bishop of Lichfield on Radio Northern Ireland when he made one ridiculous claim after another. First he said that 50 percent of the population would be in church at Christmas. In fact it is much more likely – according to Christian Research – to be 5 percent at the Church of England and little more than 15 percent for all denominations put together. A few glamorous cathedrals might be overflowing, but the parish churches will be struggling, as usual, to fill their pews.

After explaining that he had just come back from a procession through the centre of Stafford after which he blessed a nativity scene in the town centre (all paid for by the taxpayer), he then had the cheek to berate other (unnamed) councils which he claimed were putting up "secular decorations" which were a "mish-mash". He urged Christians to be more upfront about their religion, and presumably ram it down everyone else's unwilling throats along with the mince-pies.

Perhaps this was all best summarised in an article in the *Daily Mirror* by Brian Reade, who wrote: "The real affront to Christ is the tiny group of agitators running grotesquely aggressive campaigns to turn Christmas into an annual whingefest for all who worship the religion of 'PC Gone Mad'. Fanatics who see anti-patriotic conspiracies in everything which doesn't conform to their mythical world view. Bigots who believe if an immigrant doesn't know the date of the Magna Carta, he's a sponger, unworthy of working and living here ... They know we've always had a mid-winter festival since pagan days and that a Pope invented Christ's birthday as December 25 out of convenience. That Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, scientologists and atheists also like a joyous escape from the shortest days of the year. They know that's why America has always called it Happy Holidays. It makes it more inclusive. Makes you think of others at this giving time. Where's the offence here?"

# NSS President Denis Cobell steps down after a decade of dedicated campaigning

THE National Secular Society's Denis Cobell stepped down from the post of President at the end of 2006. His successor, Terry Sanderson, was voted by an overwhelming majority as his successor at last year's NSS AGM (*see centre page report*).

In his final presidential address, Denis wrote: "Until about five years ago the concept of Secularism was not widely understood, and it was barely mentioned in the media. Yet, today, it has almost become an everyday term. Religious leaders are queuing up to denounce secularism as the primary 'evil' of our time. In doing so, they are really bemoaning the decline of their influence over the population at large, or venting their frustration at secularists' attempts to constrain increasingly strident religious power-seeking.

"Religion is important to many people, indeed for some it is the driving force of their lives. There are now so many different cultures and creeds in Britain that serious thought has to be given to how we can live together in peace, united despite our differences.

"Yet when Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly called for an 'open and honest' debate on community cohesion, she predictably ruled off limits perhaps the most crucial single theme in relation to cohesion: the issue of 'faith schools'. The Government seems to be so wedded to these institutions that, in order to open more of them, it is even prepared to embark on an apartheid education system. There are signs of a dawning realisation by the public, and a growing number of politicians, of just how calamitous this policy will turn out to be in decades to come.

"Religion has become increasingly politicised in this country over the past few years, in no small measure as a result of Government encouragement.

"This politicisation presents a more immediate threat to community relations. The Government has increasingly addressed people in minority ethnic groups by their religion, whether or not they wished to be identified in that way. Religious organisations, including the smallest minority ones, have been singled out by the Government and their views on all aspects of public policy have been canvassed, for reasons that have never satisfactorily been made clear. This deference also serves to make the non-religious feel yet further alienated, especially as they number at the very least three times the total of all the minority religious groups put together. We have quizzed officials for years as to how emphasising this divisive factor aids cohesion, as the Government has claimed until now.

"Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly sig-

nalled a sea change when she told a meeting of Muslims in October 2006 that it was time for a 'fundamental rebalancing of our relations with Muslim organisations', which would now be funded only if they fought extremism and defended 'our shared values.' We can only hope that she will see similar sense and reverse the next self-imposed policy disaster: faith-based welfare. It will inevitably enrich some religious groups from public funds. Far worse, it will force those in minority communities, whether religious or not, back under the thumbs of their (unelected, male and hyper-conservative) religious leaders.

"Religious voices are increasingly stifling freedom of expression, through both Parliament and direct action. Christian bodies are learning to play hardball from their minority faith brethren. Meanwhile, the Government has stood by passively, or even acquiesced. It has given the clear signal that the erosion of our basic freedoms is a price well worth paying if the alternative is to incur the displeasure of any section of the religious.

"Some religious groups demand privileged

participation in the process of governance, by-passing the democratic checks and balances. The Government is starting to realise that their continuing to favour some religions with privileges means others will become resentful. The eventual – and inevitable – outcome will be inter-religious conflict. There is even a battle within the Church of England about the extent to which it should concede its unique privileges to other faiths, for example in a coronation.

"The mood has changed in recent months and Secularism is heading for centre stage. As religious voices continue to become more strident, they provoke an increasingly strong reaction in people in Britain. A growing number now realise that the only hope we have of living together as a cohesive society is to become more secular. A secular democracy is of course the primary objective of the NSS.

"Although I am stepping down as President, my commitment to the aims and objectives of the NSS are as firm as ever. I hope that we can all continue to work together to make the NSS stronger, so that it is equipped to face the challenges that face us."

## Anglican Communion dealt another blow

THE future of the 77 million-strong worldwide Anglican Communion was complicated last month with the announcement that two large evangelical congregations in the US have voted to break away from the Episcopal Church, primarily because of its decision three years ago to consecrate a gay bishop, Gene Robinson of New Hampshire.

The Truro Church and the Falls Church voted to place themselves instead under the authority of the Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria, Peter Akinola – who has called for the Episcopal Church to be ostracised by the rest of the Communion.

Akinola has also lent support to a new law in Nigeria which criminalises homosexual behaviour, which civil rights activists have described as "degrading and inhuman".

The parishes of Truro and Falls in Virginia were founded in the British colonial era and have been well-known wealthy and conservative congregations for many years. They were once part of the Church of England.

Speaking to the BBC, missionary Bishop Martyn Minns said that the split was not about homosexuality alone, but about a whole range of issues of Christian doctrine. But he distanced himself from Akinola's use of "biblical language" in denouncing gay priests as constituting a "satanic" division of the church, saying that this was not a term he would use himself.

Akinola is no stranger to controversy. In

February 2006, after Muslims rioting over the Danish cartoon targeted Christians and their property – resulting in a reported 43 deaths, 30 burned churches, and 250 destroyed shops and houses – Akinola issued a statement in his capacity as President of the Christian Association of Nigeria that some interpreted as a veiled threat of violence against Muslims:

"May we at this stage remind our Muslim brothers that they do not have the monopoly of violence in this nation."

This was criticised by Bishop Cyril Okorocho of the Owerri diocese in Nigeria as "inflammatory" and "not the view of the whole Church". In the wake of his statement, Christian mobs in Onitsha retaliated against Muslims in the city. They killed at least 80 Muslims, burned a Muslim district with 100 homes, defaced mosques with Christian slogans, and burned the corpses of those they had killed in the streets. Hundreds of Muslims were forced to flee the city.



The Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria, Peter Akinola



## CV Director Green prays for a plague of evangelists at Cardiff gay event

GAY pride events in the UK are like honey to a bear where Stephen Green is concerned. The head of Christian Voice simply can't stay away from them, despite all the derision he and his crackpot followers attract at such occasions.

Last year his addiction to all things gay landed him in hot water – and a police cell – in Cardiff, following his arrest for Public Order Act violations at the city's Mardi Gras event.

But when he appeared late last year at Cardiff Magistrates Court, Green, notorious for orchestrating a campaign against *Jerry Springer, The Opera*, was told that the Crown Prosecution Service was withdrawing charges against him.

According to a statement on CV's website, "The outcome was not totally unexpected. At an earlier hearing, at which Mr Green entered a plea of 'Not Guilty', the Prosecutor himself voiced grave reservations over the human rights implications of the high-profile case. In the end, the Prosecutor claimed there was 'not enough evidence' to proceed."

Stephen Green said "I am pleased the charges have been dropped, although I was prepared to fight the case all the way. But the CPS decision raises the question of why the police arrested me in the first place. I shall be taking legal advice over bringing an action against South Wales Police for unlawful arrest, false imprisonment and malicious prosecution.

Green was arrested by South Wales Police on Saturday, September 2. According to Green, an Inspector Alexander Chadd, wearing a fluorescent vest with 'Minorities Support Unit' on the back, detained him when he refused to stop giving out the leaflets to people entering Bute Park in Cardiff, where the Mardi Gras event was being held.

Green was kept in the cells at Cardiff Police Station for over four hours before being charged with using "threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress thereby, contrary to section 5(1) and (6) of the Public Order Act 1986".

Green said: "The last thing on my mind that Saturday morning was that I was going to be arrested. We gave out leaflets without a problem last year and chatted with people in a low-key and friendly way. So would we this year, had not the police acted beyond their lawful power. I am constantly hearing stories of Christian preachers being told to shut up by bullying police officers with personal issues or axes to grind. In most cases they simply comply. But if we are to safeguard our historic freedoms, someone has to make a stand.

"I am astonished that South Wales Police have a special unit dedicated to silencing those who might ruffle the feathers of a certain contentious minority. Stonewall, the homosexual rights organisation, say the South Wales Police 'Minorities Support Unit' 'works closely with the LGBT communities'. Maybe they work a bit too closely when an evangelist can be victimised simply because he is giving out leaflets quoting verses from the same Bible police officers swear on in court.

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

"This year the Cardiff Mardi Gras is on September 1. I am praying for the place to be flooded with Christian evangelists, taking out the good news of Jesus Christ to sinners in need of salvation. And unless the Lord intervenes with a better idea, I expect the yellow Gospel leaflets [crude, homophobic propaganda distilled from the *Sex Haters' Handbook*, aka the bible] which so offended the South Wales Police Minorities Support Unit to be given out by the thousand."

## Serial killer Dahmer was poised to become a promising faith-spreader, says minister

HE murdered 17 young men and boys in a sexually-driven orgy of necrophilia and cannibalism. Then, in prison, Jeffrey Dahmer "found God". Now the minister who presided over Dahmer's jailhouse baptism and conversion says his death in 1994 at the hands of a fellow inmate cut short a faith-spreading mission that he would have carried to others behind bars had he lived.

"Dahmer was growing (in faith) and he would have been a great influence on other inmates. He would have had a tremendous impact," said the Rev Roy Ratcliff, a Church of Christ minister who baptised Dahmer in a prison whirlpool tub in May 1994.

The baptism took place about five months before Dahmer, serving multiple life sentences, and another inmate were killed at the Columbia Correctional Institution in Wisconsin by a third prisoner who clubbed them to death while they were on a bathroom cleaning detail.

Ratcliff, who has recounted his months with Dahmer in a newly released book, *Dark Journey, Deep Grace*, says the 34-year-old serial killer who killed 17 people between 1978 and 1991 was not the target of the kind of hate frequently aimed in prison at sex offenders.

"I asked him and he said he got along fine," Ratcliff said in an interview. He didn't see himself as being hated by other inmates the way he was hated in the world."

The man who killed Dahmer, Christopher Scarver, was a convicted murderer and diagnosed psychopath who later said God had told him to carry out Dahmer's slaying.

Asked if Dahmer, who was stone-faced and seemed devoid of emotion at his trial, had ever cried or shown deep feelings in his presence, Ratcliff said that while he never saw tears, Dahmer was not a cold individual.

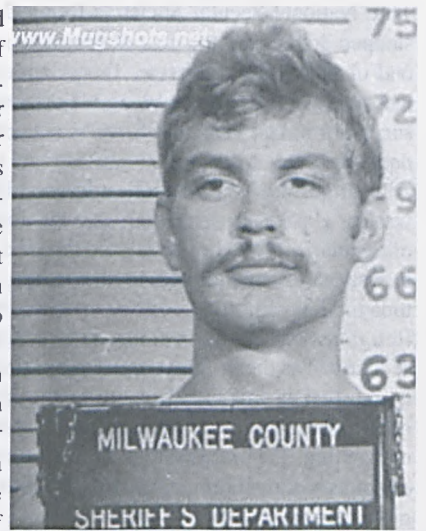
"I saw emotion, saw how he felt about his mother and father, and his anger toward a lawyer representing his victims' families. But we didn't spend a lot of time talking about his crimes," Ratcliff said.

"We were focusing mainly on how to live a Christian life. There were times when he laughed, or was depressed. At the trial he was basically an object of hatred. He probably had to be quiet ... I think he was being defensive."

Asked why he waited so long to record his experiences with Dahmer, Ratcliff said his duties as pastor of Mandrake Road Church of Christ in Madison, Wisconsin, and his prison ministry which now involves seven inmates, had kept him too busy.

"A number of people were urging me strongly (to write it) but I was resisting it at first. An awful lot of people felt very strongly that it needed to be told ... as a story of faith that could reach across lines," he said, adding that the book took seven years to write.

Ratcliff did not initiate his encounter with Dahmer. It was Dahmer who inquired about baptism after completing a Bible correspondence course. Ratcliff was approached because of his proximity to the prison. The book, Ratcliff said, shows people that "if God can reach Jeffrey Dahmer, God can reach you too. It is primarily a book of hope."



**Serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer: He found God shortly before being murdered by a fellow inmate, who claimed God ordered Dahmer's killing**

# Anwar Shaikh: The enemy of the Prophet

AS early as 1995 Anwar Shaikh warned of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Britain's inner cities. In an interview, he said "ordinary Muslims are good people. But the so-called mullahs and Muslim scholars in the mosques want the people ignorant because that is where they get their power. They are ruining the modern generation of Muslims who were born and bred here, telling them they should feel no loyalty to this country. I love Pakistan, but Britain is my home, and unless you do something about Muslim fundamentalism, there is going to be a fifth column in our midst. England must wake up. You spent hundreds of years getting Christian fundamentalism out of this country. Don't let fundamentalism come back"

Anwar Shaikh certainly knew about the mentality of fundamentalists, having been one himself. He was born in 1928 to a deeply religious family. Many of his close relatives were scholars of Islam, as was his mother who played a signif-

## ASAD ABBAS pays tribute to a prominent Muslim apostate who died late last year aged 78

icant role in his early religious education. Along with his secular education he received instruction in all branches of Islamic knowledge.

In August, 1947, India gained independence, and was divided. Anwar lived in the part which had become Pakistan, and was greatly troubled by the violence between Hindus and Muslims which followed the partition.

From early childhood he was taught to love Muslims and, with equal fervour, hate infidels. One day, when he was working as a clerk in the railway office in Lahore, he noticed a train pull in from India which was full of mutilated bodies of Muslims. When he went home he prayed, then took up a club and a long knife and went in search of non-Muslims. He killed a man and his young son. The next day he did not go to work; he felt nauseated, but wanted to kill more non-Muslims. He encountered another man and killed him too. For the rest of his life he was haunted by those terrible memories, and was full of shame and remorse.

Soon after, on reading certain verses, it dawned on him that Mohammed used the Koran as a device for coercing Muslims into obeying him as a command from God. He later extended this thesis to demonstrate that the purpose of Islam was to enable the Arabs to dominate the rest of the world. Mohammed loved Arabia and its culture, and his one desire was to create a strong, conquering Arab nation that would believe in him and propagate his name. Anwar very cogently developed this thesis about Islam, entitled *Islam: The Arab*

## whose prophecy came true

*National Movement.*

Anwar migrated to Britain in 1956, and settled in Cardiff. After working as a bus conductor for three years, he saved enough to own houses which he rented out, and eventually became a property developer.

**Islam has caused more damage to the national dignity and honour of non-Arab Muslims than any other calamity that may have affected them; yet they believe that this faith is the ambassador of equality and human love. This is a fiction which has been presented as a fact with an unparalleled skill. The Islamic love of mankind is a myth; hatred of non-Muslims is the pivot of the Islamic existence. It not only declares all dissidents as the denizens of hell but also seeks to ignite a permanent fire of tension between the Muslims and non-Muslims; it is far more lethal than Karl Marx's idea of social conflict, which he had hatched to keep his theory alive.**

— Anwar Sheikh, in *Islam: The Arab National Movement*

He retired early to pursue his interests. Having espoused a humanist philosophy, he wrote his first book, *Eternity*, which was savagely criticised by representatives of the three monotheistic religions. It was followed by *Faith & Deception*, in which he took up the challenge thrown down by the Koran itself. The Koran claims that, were it not a book from God, it would have inconsistencies. He went through the Koran and noted all its major precepts. He found that each one of them was contradicted by another. In his third book, *Islam and Sexuality*, he traced the roots of the low status of women to Koranic and Hadith injunctions.

Anwar was a great admirer of ancient Indian philosophy and culture, and wrote a book entitled *Vedic Civilisation*. He berated Indian Muslims for defining their identity in terms of their religion, the roots of which were in Arabia, and for not acknowledging and taking pride in their Indian inheritance. His views endeared him to some Hindu zealots who have claimed that he converted to Hinduism, and even changed his name. This assertion is totally groundless.

For many years he published a journal called *Liberty* which appeared intermittently. It had both English and Urdu contents. The English section contained articles relevant to human-

ism, and the Urdu part comprised poetry and short stories. With occasional exceptions, all material was written by Anwar Shaikh himself. He also wrote many volumes of Urdu criticism and verse.

When one considers the range of his interests and publications, the only word that comes to mind to describe him is polymath.

He was not as well-known as he should have been, because he was something of a recluse. He repeatedly received death threats, but that was not the reason why he did not make public appearances. He was a fearless and courageous man. The main reason was that, for many years, he suffered from heart and other conditions, and had undergone many operations. It was only by dint of great effort and endurance that he managed to write as much as he did. With time, his fame is bound to grow among humanists of Muslim descent, and his contemporaries will sorely miss his presence. Those who knew him even slightly could not but be impressed by this affable, gregarious man of great warmth, humour and obvious defiance.

He is survived by his wife and two daughters.

## Malaysian state bans sexy outfits

SEXY outfits have been banned in a Malaysian state ruled by a conservative Islamic party, which has introduced fines for women working in shops and restaurants who dress "indecently," according to an Agence France-Presse report.

Mini skirts, see-through blouses and tight trousers are now off-limits for women of all religions in Kelantan state, after authorities said they would "no longer tolerate indecent dressing". Kelantan's local government committee chairman Takiyuddin Hassan said "eye-popping" outfits invited undesirable attention from men.

"We apologise to non-Muslims if this comes across as harsh, but we must respect our Asian culture and religion in public," he said.

Enforcement officers will step up checks to enforce the regulation, which is punishable with a 500 ringgit (£72) fine, officials said, citing mounting complaints from the public over skimpy outfits.

Malaysia's population is dominated by Muslim Malays, who live alongside large ethnic Chinese and Indian communities.

Race relations are generally peaceful, but in recent years there has been growing unease over the "Islamisation" of the country.

Kelantan is the only state to be ruled by the fundamentalist Islamic opposition party, PAS, which has lost ground to the United Malays National Organisation, which rules nationally in a multi-ethnic coalition.

# Liberals must wake up to the

TWO YEARS AGO I published a book highly critical of religion, *The End of Faith*. In it, I argued that the world's major religions are genuinely incompatible, inevitably cause conflict, and now prevent the emergence of a viable, global civilization.

In response, I have received many thousands of letters and e-mails from priests, journalists, scientists, politicians, soldiers, rabbis, actors, aid workers, students – from people young and old who occupy every point on the spectrum of belief and non-belief.

This has offered me a special opportunity to see how people of all creeds and political persuasions react when religion is criticized. I am here to report that liberals and conservatives respond very differently to the notion that religion can be a direct cause of human conflict.

This difference does not bode well for the future of liberalism.

Perhaps I should establish my liberal *bone fides* at the outset. I'd like to see taxes raised on the wealthy, drugs decriminalized and homosexuals free to marry. I also think that the Bush administration deserves most of the criticism it has received in the last six years – especially with respect to its waging of the war in Iraq, its scuttling of science and its fiscal irresponsibility.

But my correspondence with liberals has convinced me that liberalism has grown dangerously out of touch with the realities of our world – specifically with what devout Muslims actually believe about the West, about paradise and about the ultimate ascendance of their faith.

On questions of national security, I am now as wary of my fellow liberals as I am of the religious demagogues on the Christian right.

This may seem like frank acquiescence to the charge that “liberals are soft on terrorism.” It is, and they are.

A cult of death is forming in the Muslim world – for reasons that are perfectly explicable in terms of the Islamic doctrines of martyrdom and jihad. The truth is that we are not fighting a “war on terror.” We are fighting a pestilential theology and a longing for paradise.

This is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims. But we are *absolutely* at war with those who believe that death in defense of the faith is the highest possible good, that cartoonists should be killed for caricaturing the prophet and that any Muslim who loses his faith should be butchered for apostasy.

Unfortunately, such religious extremism is not as fringe a phenomenon as we might hope. Numerous studies have found that the most radicalized Muslims tend to have better-than-average educations and economic opportunities.

Given the degree to which religious ideas are still sheltered from criticism in every society, it is actually possible for a person to have the economic and intellectual resources to build a nuclear bomb – and to believe that he will get 72 virgins in paradise. And yet, despite abundant evidence to the contrary, liberals

continue to imagine that Muslim terrorism springs from economic despair, lack of education and American militarism.

At its most extreme, liberal denial has found expression in a growing subculture of conspiracy theorists who believe that the atrocities of 9/11 were orchestrated by our own [US] government. A nationwide poll conducted by the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University found that more than a third of Americans suspect that the federal government “assisted in the 9/11 terrorist attacks or took no action to stop them so the United States could go to war in the Middle East.” 16 percent believe that the twin towers collapsed not because fully-fueled passenger jets smashed into them but because agents of the Bush administration had secretly rigged them to explode.

**Best-selling  
US author  
SAM HARRIS  
says that  
liberalism is  
dangerously  
out of touch with the  
realities of our world**



Such an astonishing eruption of masochistic unreason could well mark the decline of liberalism, if not the decline of Western civilization. There are books, films and conferences organized around this phantasmagoria, and they offer an unusually clear view of the debilitating dogma that lurks at the heart of liberalism: Western power is utterly malevolent, while the powerless people of the Earth can be counted on to embrace reason and tolerance, if only given sufficient economic opportunities.

I don't know how many more engineers and architects need to blow themselves up, fly planes into buildings or saw the heads off of journalists before this fantasy will dissipate. The truth is that there is every reason to believe that a terrifying number of the world's Muslims now view all political and moral questions in terms of their affiliation with Islam.

This leads them to rally to the cause of other Muslims no matter how sociopathic their behavior. This benighted religious solidarity may be the greatest problem facing civilization and yet it is regularly misconstrued, ignored or obfuscated by liberals.

Given the mendacity and shocking incompetence of the Bush administration – especially its mishandling of the war in Iraq – liberals can

find much to lament in the conservative approach to fighting the war on terror. Unfortunately, liberals hate the current administration with such fury that they regularly fail to acknowledge just how dangerous and depraved our enemies in the Muslim world are.

Recent condemnations of the Bush administration's use of the phrase “Islamic fascism” are a case in point. There is no question that the phrase is imprecise – Islamists are not technically fascists, and the term ignores a variety of schisms that exist even among Islamists – but it is by no means an example of wartime propaganda, as has been repeatedly alleged by liberals.

In their analyses of US and Israeli foreign policy, liberals can be relied on to overlook the most basic moral distinctions. For instance, they ignore the fact that Muslims intentionally murder noncombatants, while we and the Israelis (as a rule) seek to avoid doing so. Muslims routinely use human shields, and this accounts for much of the collateral damage we and the Israelis cause; the political discourse throughout much of the Muslim world, especially with respect to Jews, is explicitly and unabashedly genocidal.

Given these distinctions, there is no question that the Israelis now hold the moral high ground in their conflict with Hamas and Hezbollah. And yet liberals in the United States and Europe often speak as though the truth were otherwise.

We are entering an age of unchecked nuclear proliferation and, it seems likely, nuclear terrorism. There is, therefore, no future in which aspiring martyrs will make good neighbors for us. Unless liberals realize that there are tens of millions of people in the Muslim world who are far scarier than Dick Cheney, they will be unable to protect civilization from its genuine enemies.

Increasingly, Americans will come to believe that the only people hard-headed enough to fight the religious lunatics of the Muslim world are the religious lunatics of the West. Indeed, it is telling that the people who speak with the greatest moral clarity about the current wars in the Middle East are members of the Christian right, whose infatuation with biblical prophecy is nearly as troubling as the ideology of our enemies. Religious dogmatism is now playing both sides of the board in a very dangerous game.

While liberals should be the ones pointing the way beyond this Iron Age madness, they are rendering themselves increasingly irrelevant. Being generally reasonable and tolerant of diversity, liberals should be especially sensitive to the dangers of religious literalism. But they aren't.

The same failure of liberalism is evident in

# The threat of Islamic extremism

Western Europe, where the dogma of multiculturalism has left a secular Europe very slow to address the looming problem of religious extremism among its immigrants. The people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists.

To say that this does not bode well for liber-

alism is an understatement: It does not bode well for the future of civilization.

Sam Harris is the author of the New York Times bestsellers, *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*.

He is a graduate in philosophy from Stanford University and has studied both

Eastern and Western religious traditions, along with a variety of contemplative disciplines, for twenty years. Mr. Harris is now completing a doctorate in neuroscience. He and his work have been discussed in many journals in various countries.

*The End of Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. Several foreign editions are in press. Mr. Harris makes regular appearances on television and radio to discuss the danger that religion now poses to modern societies.

## Muslim pupils in Australia expelled for urinating on Bible

THE head of a Muslim school in Australia expressed shock when it was discovered that three of his pupils had urinated on a Bible and set it on fire. But it later emerged that the library of the East Preston Islamic College in Melbourne contained a video of a banned cleric calling Australian Christians "evil" and non-Muslim schools "sewers".

The Bible desecration took place last December at a school camp held near Bacchus Marsh, about 50km west of Melbourne, attended by 33 teenage Muslim boys ranging in age from Year 7 to Year 10.

The explosive incident has forced the College to call in a senior imam to tell its 650 Muslim students that the Bible and Christianity must be respected.

Anxious teachers at the school have also petitioned principal Shaheem Doutie, expressing "grave concern" about an "inculcation of hatred and radical attitudes towards non-Muslims" at the school, including towards non-Muslim teachers.

A school report of the incident, obtained by *The Australian*, says it happened late at night and involved three students and another two watching.

"The main perpetrator (a year 7 student) urinated on the Holy Bible, tore some pages from the holy book and burnt them then finally spat on the holy book," the report says.

The second boy, from year 9, "tore pages from the holy book and burnt them", while a third student, from Year 7, "tore pages from the holy Bible and then he rolled it up like a cigarette and pretended to smoke it".

The boys come from a variety of ethnic Muslim backgrounds – one is believed to be an Albanian/Malaysian, another Lebanese and another Indonesian.

Doutie, whose school receives about \$3.9 million (£1.5 million) in state and federal government funding each year, told *The Australian* yesterday that both he and the school community were appalled by the Bible desecration and that he had expelled the first two boys and suspended the third.

In a letter to all staff on Monday, Mr Doutie wrote: "The school unconditionally apologises for this horrible act as conducted by some illiterate and ignorant students while under the care of our teachers.

"We regard the desecration of the Bible in a very serious light and therefore we have taken serious action against the offenders.

"The Bible is an important book both for non-Muslims and Muslims and should be treated as a holy book by all religions."

Mr Doutie said he did not believe that the boys realised the significance of their act.

But to ensure it did not happen again he had called in the assistant imam of the Newport Mosque, Oman Haouli, to tell the students that the Bible was a sacred book. "My lesson to them was to respect their neighbours and respect all religions," Mr Haouli said.

But the desecration incident has shaken the nerves of the school's teachers, about half of whom are non-Muslim.

A petition signed by 22 teachers expressed "anguish and dismay at the grave incident of the desecration of the Holy Bible. This whole incident implies a deep hatred inculcated in the students towards the Christian/non-Muslim teachers," it says.

The petition said there had been "previous incidents of students misbehaving towards non-Muslim teachers and it called on the school to "take steps to rectify this explosive situation" and to ensure the safety of teachers. EPIC, founded eight years ago, is a primary and secondary school in Melbourne's north that caters mostly to the children of

working-class immigrant Somali and Lebanese families.

The Bible desecration comes at a time of heightened tension among Australia's 300,000-member Islamic community, many of whom believe their religion is being unfairly discriminated against because of terrorism fears.

Many Muslims remain angry about the public humiliation suffered by their spiritual leader, the mufti Taj Din al-Hilali, after the Sheik likened female rape victims to pieces of meat who brought the attacks on themselves.

One of the boys expelled was 13-year-old Ibrahim Cukovic. He claimed after his expulsion that, although the hatred-inciting tape featuring Abdur Raheem Green had been shown to some students, he had not seen it himself.

Abdur Raheem Green, a radical Muslim convert who claimed that Muslims and Westerners "cannot live peaceably together", was blocked in 2005 from coming to Australia.

Green, a British citizen named Ashley Green before his conversion, said conflict between Islam and the West is "ordered in the Koran", and "dying while fighting jihad is one of the surest ways to paradise and Allah's good pleasure".

When asked why he and the other boys chose to desecrate the Bible, Ibrahim simply shrugged his shoulders and said he did not know.

### 'Caring' Taliban sets new quality standards

THE Taliban in Afghanistan has tightened up its rules and regulations, in what is seen by some as a bid to improve its image.

The dos and don'ts of a good Islamic Taliban fighter were agreed by its ruling council during the Eid religious holiday last year.

Rule 18 urges mujahideen to quit smoking, while rule 19 declares that "mujahideen are not allowed to take young boys with no facial hair on to the battlefield or into their private quarters". Fighters must be on their best behaviour with civilians – theft, unauthorised house searches and murder are forbidden, but traitors and government employees must be treated without mercy and killed.

There are also some helpful guidelines for trials. Suspected spies must be tried before being killed, witnesses must have a "good psychological condition and possess an untarnished religious reputation". And a last word for a beheading: "The punishment may take place only after the conclusion of the trial."

Schools that ignore warnings to close must be burned, "but all religious books must be secured", while the teachers working there must be warned, then beaten, and only after that, if they continue to work, killed.

# National Secular Society goes

The National Secular Society ended last year on an extraordinarily upbeat note. At its AGM at the Conway Hall at the end of November, it reported an all-time membership high and a heartening raising of its media profile. Its activities on behalf of non-believers in the UK was something members could reflect upon with considerable satisfaction.

According to the NSS's annual report, the society's most notable victory last year, and indeed for many years, was to emasculate the Government's draconian religious hatred laws. In the House of Lords the Government was forced by 149 votes to concede amendments introducing significant safeguards to free speech and dramatically raising the threshold of prosecution. Senior figures from all parties thanked the NSS for its pivotal role in this.

"These changes would not become law, however, until also passed by the Commons, where the Government holds much more sway. Even some of our most enthusiastic supporters were convinced this would be impossible. Undeterred, Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP and Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood worked, often into the small hours, to drum up support – because they realised that every single vote would count. Honorary Associate Baroness Turner of Camden helped greatly by kindly writing a persuasive letter to Labour colleagues in the Commons.," said the report.

The Government was equally determined to reverse these amendments in the House of Commons, so the debate was highly charged. But it failed to do so by just one vote. There was uproar in the Chamber as the vote was announced and our version became law. The Home Secretary was furious when he was forced to concede defeat. The uproar reached a new crescendo when, minutes later, it emerged that the one missing vote had been that of the Prime Minister himself. (It is thought that the chief whip had told him that the vote would almost certainly be lost and there was no need for him to stay in the House.)

Evan Harris sprinted from the Chamber to the TV cameras in front of Big Ben to tell of the historic victory. It was one of the very few Commons defeats suffered by the Government.

"We thank Evan warmly for his decisive role.," the NSS said.

The Government had made repeated attempts over the last five years to introduce this legislation, which would have seriously eroded freedom of expression.

The NSS was also prominent in a rally for free expression in Trafalgar Square in March. The rally was organised to counter the demonstrations that had taken place over the Danish cartoons. Calls for restrictions on freedom of expression were opposed by speakers at the rally, who included Keith Porteous Wood and Honorary Associates Evan Harris and Maryam Namazie.

The Society has also been successful at raising its profile within the EU. NSS Honorary

Associate Sophie in 't Veld is chair of the Separation of Religion and State Working Party at the European Parliament, on which the NSS sits. Honorary Associate Michael Cashman is a key member.

A primary function of the Working Party is to monitor, and, wherever possible, limit the religious influence on the European Commission. The Vatican is, of course, the greatest single influence, and the NSS believes that the Commission listens to it sympathetically in view of the fact that the majority of the EU population is Catholic, nominally at least. What happens in Brussels increasingly influences UK laws and regulations, such as the anti-discrimination Employment Regulations.

One of the Working Party's most effective projects recently was to initiate the commissioning of an independent group of lawyers to examine a draft concordat between the Slovak government and the Vatican which allowed "conscience clauses" which only applied to priests and religious people. They excused them military service, for example, or covered medical matters such as the performance of abortions. The lawyers concluded the draft concordat violated women's rights to proper health care and was discriminatory against the non-religious. The ensuing row precipitated the fall of the Slovakian government and the Concordat has still not been ratified.

The NSS has called for the lawyers to be commissioned to also examine the large number of extant concordats with other member states.

Keith Porteous Wood plays a prominent role in the Working Party which includes the provision of research and information to the secretariat. Council member Dr Anna Behan frequently alternates with Keith in their one-day visits to the Parliament in Brussels.

The NSS grabbed the headlines last year when it got the Government to admit that it potentially breaches the human rights of young people at school who are 16 and over by forcing them to attend Collective Worship (CW). After pressure from the NSS, education minister Lord Adonis announced in the House of Lords that he would seek to introduce an amendment to the Education and Inspections Bill to remedy this.

The NSS's campaign was prompted by a demand from the Joint Churches Education Committee that the Government crack down on those schools failing to carry out their statutory obligation to provide a daily act of worship of a mainly Christian character.

The NSS case was bolstered by drawing public attention to events at a Catholic Sixth Form College in Sidcup, Kent. Pupils there had been forced to attend gruesome lectures by anti-abortion extremists and compelled to process around the school playing field, while carrying aloft a statue of the Virgin Mary.

It also emerged that some pupils at the school were excluded from classes just days before important examinations, simply for refusing to attend Mass.

The more determined of them had even jumped over a wall to escape attendance. Students felt so strongly they drew up a petition to complain about the amount of religion in the school and the way it was eating into education time.

At present, only parents can opt their children out of Collective Worship or Religious Education, whatever their age.

## Delegates at the NSS AGM told of a year of intense activity

The NSS wrote to Education Secretary Alan Johnson to assert that forcing pupils of 16 and over to attend collective worship breached their human rights. Johnson originally turned down the NSS request out of hand, probably under religious pressure.

The NSS sent copies of the letter to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights. The Committee agreed it would breach Human Rights for those pupils who were competent enough to make such decisions (probably 14 or 15+) to be compelled to attend collective worship – or even to attend religious education lessons. The Executive Director then asked LibDem Education spokesperson Baroness Walmsley to introduce in the House of Lords an amendment we had drafted along these lines to the Education and Inspections Bill. She did this so convincingly that the moment she sat down, peers were demanding the minister's response. Education Minister Lord Adonis conceded in principle the NSS proposal for pupils aged 16 and over to be able to withdraw themselves from Collective Worship. He said he did so "after much ministerial deliberation and reflection".

Mr Johnson then set in train a hastily arranged consultation with what he called "our partners in the faith community". This appeared to ask religious groups for their opinion on whether something should be retained in law that was, in all probability, a violation of Human Rights. The NSS complained about the failure to even to mention Human Rights in the consultation, let alone to spell out the implications.

"It has been quite shocking that, even after the publication of the JCHR report, neither the Government nor the churches have specifically acknowledged the human rights of older pupils. Both the Roman Catholics and the RE Council implied strongly that pupils' very attendance at a religious school obliges them to attend collective worship as some sort of a package. This 'package' is one that expects



# es from strength to strength

them to leave their Human Rights behind at the school gate. Those senior figures seeking to impose such obligations have conveniently forgotten (or simply don't care) that some pupils attend at their parents' behest, may have changed their mind about whether they wish to attend, or may even simply have enrolled because there was no other suitable school," said the NSS.

"Whatever the Government proposes, the NSS will endeavour to maximise the scope for older pupils to follow their own consciences in these areas," the NSS vowed.

The NSS also presented a comprehensive paper on Separation of Church and State at a high-level meeting under the aegis of the University College London's prestigious Constitution Unit. Most of the participants represented a religious perspective, so our well-argued case for disestablishment caused a flurry among those with a vested interest in maintaining the Anglican church's favoured position.

Leading academics, Lord Hurd and a representative of Number 10 also attended.

The NSS argued that Establishment – and the power, influence and privileges that come with it – is undemocratic and unjustifiable. The Church of England was dying on its feet, and projected to become much weaker still in coming decades. It could no longer regard itself as "the national church", and seemed to be controlled by events abroad.

The NSS recommended a speedy start to disestablishment while acknowledging that it would be a major undertaking, perhaps taking decades to complete. The Government has said that it will not even consider the prospect unless the C of E initiates it, which it is unlikely to do.

"In a country with adherents of so many religions, it is iniquitous for a single denomination of one of those religions to have such a status. Such iniquity will eventually and inevitably lead to resentment and conflict," the NSS said.

"We argued strongly against a 'multi-faith establishment', which would involve bringing other religions into the political sphere rather than pushing the C of E out. Such an arrangement would be uncontrollable and would inevitably lead to religious conflicts being played out in a parliamentary setting. It would also further alienate the non-religious."

Keith Porteous Wood gave evidence to a hearing by a Council of Europe committee which was examining whether further laws were needed to ensure respect for religion. The hearing came hot on the heels of riots over the publication of supposedly anti-Islamic cartoons in a Danish paper. At the hearing, held in the French Senate in Paris, Keith presented the NSS case and led a session making the case against further laws on the grounds of freedom of expression. Other sessions gave the floor to those espousing the opposite view.

When the Council's ministers eventually published their findings, it was clear that the NSS's evidence had been influential. The report recommended that free speech should be protected and no further restrictions should be introduced that would curtail it in any way.

Keith also presented the NSS argument to the Council of Europe at the French Senate in Paris.

The Equality Act will soon outlaw discrimination in respect of goods, services and facilities on the grounds of Religion and Belief (as well as Sexual Orientation). Keith Porteous Wood led a full-scale damage limitation exercise to curb the many excessive religious exemptions in these provisions.

Dr Evan Harris was by far its most effective representative in the Commons, while Lord Lester of Herne Hill and Baroness Turner of Camden did sterling work in the Lords. "We thank them all for this demanding work, carried out in the face of a very determined and well-organised religious lobby," said the NSS, which pointed out that the Government has granted "massive exemptions on all recent anti-discrimination legislation to the religious, the very people most likely to discriminate, to the point that it is arguable whether such legislation serves any purpose."

The NSS was represented at a major conference at Windsor Castle with the theme Religious Education in a Multi-faith Society. The conference was addressed by David Bell, the new permanent secretary – or chief civil servant – at the Department for Education and Skills, and also by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord (George) Carey. A very high proportion of the participants were religious. The NSS was invited to provide a contrary stance, and did not disappoint.

The NSS delegation had the highest profile, partly because it was the most controversial. Dr Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood volunteered to put themselves in the firing line. George Carey's final salvo was lobbed in the direction of NSS when he blamed the chronic decline in religious observance on secularism.

Keith complained to David Bell, formerly Chief Inspector of Schools, about the latest framework for R E. He maintained it gave only passing mention to the needs of the non-religious, despite their probably constituting the majority of secondary pupils. Another concern was the framework's distorted "all things bright and beautiful" take on religion, ignoring religion's darker sides and the many disagreements within and between religions.

Many of the delegates also accepted that these negative aspects could no longer be ducked if R E was to play the role they thought it should in the fight against terrorism, or indeed if it wished to lay any claim to be a credible academic discipline. They also railed

against the thinly veiled call for proselytising behind Carey's plea for pupils to get a grounding in their "own religion" before being exposed to the teachings of other faiths. Oddly, he claimed he didn't want faith schools to be too religious – but maybe this was an oblique reference to Islamic schools.

Anna Behan practically had the final word at the conference's closing plenary session when she called for a much greater awareness of the non-religious and their needs. As well as challenging delegates and opening them up to a greater awareness of the non-religious, the NSS's attendance at the conference also provided useful contacts and alerted it to some potentially fruitful lines of action for campaigning.

Anna Behan has been working on the Religion and Belief Consultative Group. This has liaised with the transition team for the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights on the implementation of the religion and belief strand in the new body.

"Our religious counterparts will confirm, perhaps wearily, that the NSS has made a unique contribution in forcing the religious to work hard to justify their stances objectively. This time-consuming, demanding and important work has been led by Anna Behan, aided by Keith Porteous Wood and Peter Vlachos.

The Society has had "a truly astonishing year in terms of media coverage for our campaigns. We are now recognised as the first stop for journalists looking for informed comment on matters to do with religious conflict and secular alternatives."

As well as literally hundreds of radio and TV appearances, NSS spokespeople have helped journalists with background information for all kinds of projects. Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson – who do most of the NSS's media work – are on duty 24/7. There are now, on average, three or four journalistic enquiries per day: when there's controversy raging that can increase to dozens. NSS spokespeople have been interviewed by journalists from all over the world, and have taken part in debates (and sometimes confrontations) with religious representatives.

Details of these appear in the NSS weekly *Newsline* and are summarised in its quarterly *Bulletins*.

Important matters of concern to secularists were always tackled head-on by the society. Last year issues such as the continuing protests around *Jerry Springer, the Opera*, the Danish cartoon saga and other instances of attacks on freedom of expression brought forthright responses from the NSS, and helped raise its profile even further.

It has also been much in demand for comment on the fault lines that have developed over "faith schools". Other popular topics have included Muslim veils and special privileges for religious believers – including opt-outs from equality legislation.

# Few tears shed for dead Christian

Those who expressed regrets last month over the passing of ex-Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet, 91, and former South African President P W Botha, 90, did so only because they thought that death had robbed the world of the opportunity to bring these two godly tyrants to justice.

The one notable exception was former Tory Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher, 81, who was reportedly "greatly saddened" by the news of Pinochet's death. A firm and loyal supporter of the one-time ruthless right-wing dictator of Chile, Thatcher gave him succour, especially in the last stormy years of his life when a series of legal attempts were made in Chile to charge him with crimes relating to the disappearance of thousands of dissidents during his years of power.

Thatcher always maintained that Pinochet had offered the British invaluable help during the Falklands conflict of 1982.

Pinochet was detained and placed under house arrest when he came to Britain on a private visit in 1998. Thatcher made a point of having tea with him, and she expressed her opposition to attempts by the Spanish government to extradite him to Madrid to face charges concerning the disappearance of Spanish citizens in Chile during his presidency.



Pinochet and Thatcher, pictured in London when he was under house arrest

The extradition proceedings collapsed when the then Home Secretary Jack Straw said he should not be extradited because of his state of health. This created a huge political storm among Labour MPs.

At the Tory conference in 1999, Thatcher accused the UK Government of acting like a police state in detaining Pinochet. She said Pinochet had admitted that abuses had occurred during and after his military coup. "But it is an affront to common sense as well as a caricature of justice to maintain that a head of government must automatically accept criminal responsibility for everything that is done while he is in power."

She added that Pinochet's enemies hated him because of his success in transforming Chile's economy under a free-market model.

Although it was claimed that Pinochet was released by the British for "health reasons", it is far more likely that the Labour Government buckled under pressure from the Vatican. Under the headline, "Pinochet's men in the Vatican" in the influential Spanish newspaper *El País* in 1999, theologian Juan-José Tamayo-

Acosta, pointed out that "since seizing power in Chile with the *coup d'état* against President Salvador Allende, General Pinochet has tirelessly sought the support of the Vatican for his military regime, claiming as credentials his Catholic faith and his crusade against Marxism, in complete harmony with John Paul II, who is also an anti-Marxist. Whilst the Archbishop of Santiago (Chile), Cardinal Silva Enríquez, was denouncing Pinochet's attack on human rights – including the right to life – through the *Vicaría de Solidaridad* (Vicariate of Solidarity), the Vatican legitimated the dictator's actions, above all through the Nunciature (Vatican's Embassy).

## BARRY DUKE reports on the death late last year of two devout dictators

"After the setback with the plebiscite of October 1988, which forced him to give up power, Pinochet doubled his efforts in order to ensure the backing of the Vatican, confident that it would speak out in his defence should he be prosecuted. And his shadow extended to the Roman Curia, where some of the positions of highest responsibility are occupied by ecclesiastical personalities that are sympathetic to him.

"We can look first at Cardinal Angello Sodano, Papal Nuncio (Vatican's Ambassador) in Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship, with whom he maintained a close friendship. He arranged the visit of John Paul II to Chile in 1987, and was behind each of the Pope's gestures of legitimisation towards the dictator. Years later, Sodano replaced Cardinal Casaroli as Vatican's secretary of state.

"To mark Pinochet's golden wedding anniversary, he sent the couple a personal letter of congratulation, full of praise. After meeting in Castelgandolfo with the Chilean Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, in November 1998, Sodano wrote to the British government, asking that mercy be shown towards his friend the general, citing humanitarian reasons, reconciliation between Chileans, and, ultimately, the sovereignty of the Chilean State.

"At the head of the Roman Congregation for the Divine Cult and the Sacraments is another admirer of Pinochet: the Chilean Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez, who was Archbishop of Valparaíso, Chile's chief port and the birthplace of Salvador Allende. He is a bitter and self-confessed enemy of Liberation Theology, which he has persecuted with exceptional harshness. He has been quite prepared to admit publicly that the Vatican has been working to avert Pinochet's prosecution and for his prompt return to Chile. Proof enough of his complete disregard for democracy and his (at least indirect) legitimisation of the dictatorship is his dec-

laration of August 3, 1990: "Democracy does not automatically mean that God would want it to be put into practice."

Another powerful man in the Vatican is the Colombian cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, who was secretary and then president, of the Latin-American Episcopal Conference (LEC) during the 70s and 80s, a staunch enemy, like Medina, of Liberation Theology, and a persecutor of its main proponents. In this regard I will use, if I may, a personal anecdote. Whilst López Trujillo was Archbishop of Medellín, he banned the distribution and sale of my book *Understanding Liberation Theology* in all the Catholic libraries of the archdiocese.

This Who's Who of the Vatican should not lose sight of another character who has played a key role in the religious legitimisation of dictatorships: the Italian Cardinal Pio Laghi [a friend of the Bush family in the United States] who was absolutely committed to helping the Argentinian military regime when he was the head of the Apostolic Nunciature in Buenos Aires. Neither he nor the Argentinian bishops spoke out for the murdered and missing, or denounced the horrendous crimes against the children who were literally torn away from their parents.

"It is possible that these and other court counsellors convinced the Pope that Pinochet is an exemplary Christian: his family, a model 'blessed family', his crusade against Communism, a service to the Catholic church; and his *coup d'état*, an act of God's will in order to re-establish the 'Christian social order' which had been upset by the Marxist Salvador Allende. Or, maybe it has not been necessary to convince him of the merits of the dictator, because the Pope knew them well, as he showed with his unequivocal gestures of praise for the General during his visit to Chile. One such gesture was personally administering communion to Pinochet in acknowledgement of his complete religious rectitude. Another was stepping out onto the balcony of the Moneda Palace with the General to greet a crowd that mixed 'hoorays' for the Pope with shouts of acclaim for the dictator."

In Argentina there is ample evidence of equally close and sinister ties between the church and the dictatorship. In the aftermath of the 1976 coup in that country, Monsignor Tortolo, president of the Catholic Episcopate, went so far as to compare the military junta with the Easter Resurrection and its chief, General Jorge Videla, with Jesus Christ.

Some of the ex-military torturers who came forward to testify about the horrors of that period recounted that the church played an instrumental role in keeping the machinery of repression working. Catholic priests were assigned as chaplains to the military units that ran the torture centers and concentration

# Christian tyrants Pinochet and Botha

camps where prisoners were subjected to unspeakable tortures.

In places where pregnant women were sexually assaulted with electric prods and small children had their bones broken one by one in front of their mothers to force confessions and extract information, these chaplains took confessions from Catholic prisoners about to die while reassuring the torturers that their work was both necessary and moral.

**Democracy does not automatically mean that God would want it to be put into practice** – Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez, former Bishop of Valparaíso and a cardinal of the Catholic Church

Adolfo Francisco Scilingo is an ex-naval officer who confessed to his role in the so-called “transfers” from the torture centres, in which political prisoners were injected with sedatives and then thrown from helicopters into the Rio de la Plata. He related confiding to a priest his feelings of guilt over these missions. “He was telling me that it was a Christian death because they didn’t suffer, because it wasn’t traumatic, that they had to be eliminated, that war was war and even the Bible provided for eliminating the weeds from the wheat field,” he recalled.

**F**ifteen years earlier Thatcher drew considerable fire when she announced her intention of hosting a visit to the UK by the then Prime Minister of South Africa, P W Botha – another tyrant who had “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ”. The announcement stirred opposition protests and warnings of mass demonstrations by opponents of apartheid.

Thatcher, responding to the furor, said in a radio interview that she was not endorsing South Africa’s apartheid policies. “It is not a condoning of the policies of the South African Government any more than talking to the Soviet Union indicates that we agree with their Communist system,” she said.

Asked if she would condemn apartheid when she met with Mr. Botha, she replied, “Of course.”

The Botha visit was the first official trip to London by a South African leader since South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1961 over the issue of its racial policies.

Neil Kinnock, then leader of the Labour Party, said a Botha visit would give “aid and comfort” to the white South African regime. “Nobody can regard the visit as a formal matter of state business,” he said. “There is no need for it or conceivable advantage from it for the British people.”

He added that such a visit would be interpreted by the world as a British Prime Minister “batting for South Africa, no more, no less.”

David Steel, the then Liberal leader, called the

visit “an insult to Britain’s black community”.

Botha’s death was not commented upon by Thatcher, but among the few who eulogised him was US Christian fundamentalist Ron Fraser. Writing in the evangelical on-line publication, *The Trumpet*, Fraser, in a piece entitled ‘P W Botha: Last of South Africa’s Statesmen’ recalled meeting Botha at his home in the Cape in 1995. “There we sat and chatted over tea served in fine English bone China. Though aged, the ex-president was still commanding in his presence. Our discussions on his methods of political leadership revealed a man who was at base a pragmatist, yet a godly man, a great friend of the tiny nation of Israel. We talked of a world entering a new age of disorder, of the inevitability of all global events eventually centring on one ancient city: Jerusalem.

“P W declared, as our discussion closed, that he thought he could foresee a time in the not-too-distant future when Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies. We both shared the thought that then would come the war to end all wars and the great dawning of a new age of peace. It seemed that P W may have had an eye to Bible prophecy.”

While it is true that Botha was once “a great friend of the tiny nation of Israel” he certainly would not have been when this conversation took place. Nor was he partial to Jews. His Nationalist administration, and those that immediately preceded it, were notoriously anti-semitic.

The close ties that existed between South Africa and Israel disintegrated without warning in 1987 when Israel decided to join the rest of the world in imposing sanctions on South Africa. This left the apartheid regime totally dumbstruck. Botha, who was the architect of the Pretoria-Jerusalem alliance during the dark years of apartheid, felt so personally hurt by the Israeli sanctions that he wrote directly to the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, accusing him of stabbing him in the back. “How could you do this to us, after so many years of friendship and alliance?”

“They [the apartheid regime] were totally confounded, taken by surprise, and really, really hurt,” said Alon Liel, head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s South Africa desk from October 1986 until 1990, and ambassador to South Africa from 1992 to 1995.

“They never believed we would go that far and join the Europeans in their form of sanctions. They thought we would just make some public declaration and quietly let things go on as they were.” Liel told the *Jerusalem Post* shortly after Botha died. He referred to Botha as “the last of the apartheid dictators”.

“We sent the South African Government a letter saying that we were imposing ‘measures’ – we didn’t call them sanctions. These mea-



The front page of the South African newspaper, *The Star*, announcing the death of P W Botha, ‘the Great Crocodile’

asures went pretty far, and they included sanctions on everything from trade, tourism, culture and sports.

“What really got to the South Africans, however, was a clause in the ‘measures’ package stating that effective immediately, only coloured, Indian and black students would be allowed to attend leadership courses held in Israel. Botha was furious. He threatened Israel to the effect that if we went ahead and implemented this, then he would not allow South African Jews to take money out of the country. He wrote to Shamir saying that what Israel was doing with these leadership courses was the real apartheid, the real racism, because they were excluding whites.”

Anti-apartheid activist and Jewish parliamentarian Helen Suzman told the *Post* that, although their views differed radically, she thought Botha had made some important reforms during his term as President.

“We had a very bad relationship,” she said. He didn’t like me because of my politics, but I don’t imagine he was very fond of Jews either. None of the National Party people at that time were very fond of Jews.”

Suzman was known for her strong public criticism of the governing National Party’s policies of apartheid at a time when that was rare amongst whites. She found herself even more of an outsider by being an English-speaking Jewish woman in a parliament dominated by Calvinist Afrikaner men.

“He accused me of having arranged the assassination of H F Verwoerd in 1966,” Suzman said. “He stood up in Parliament and said in Afrikaans that I and my fellow Liberals ‘arranged this, it’s all your fault.’ He was made to apologise to me in private in the Speaker’s office afterwards,” she added.

(Continued on page 12)

# Riling the religious: Few do it

"THE God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (*The God Delusion*, p 31). Anyone who does not know that already either has never read a bible or is as rationally challenged as a great white shark with rabies. Anyone who disagrees *after actually reading a bible* should give serious consideration to a brain exchange with a cabbage.

In January 2006 Richard Dawkins presented a documentary about religion on British televi-

sion titled *Root of All Evil?* He writes (p. 1), "I was delighted with the advertisement that Channel Four put in the national newspapers. It was a picture of the Manhattan skyline with the caption 'Imagine a world without religion.' What was the connection? The twin towers of the World Trade Center were conspicuously present." If the connection between religion and 9/11 were less self-evident, that television program and this book would have aroused far less insane hatred among the self-inflicted brain amputees of the Christian Taliban.

Dawkins writes (p. 5), "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down." But he recognizes the insurmountable difference between intention and expectation: "Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to arguments," due to "years of childhood indoctrination." But the impossibility of opening the eyes of those who choose not to see does not keep Dawkins from trying. If the human race still exists 300 years from now, despite religion's depraved adherence to policies certain to exterminate it (p. 288: Ronald Reagan's Interior Secretary based his policies on his belief that, "We don't have to protect the environment; the Second Coming is at hand"), he will be entitled to much of the credit.

## Augusto Pinochet and P W Botha (Continued from p 11)

Suzman called Botha a bully and characterised him as irritable, saying he "was not known as the 'Great Crocodile' for nothing."

The Botha family was offered a state funeral by the South African Government, but this caused considerable outrage.

Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) MP Motsoko Pheko spoke for thousands when he said that "the offer of a state funeral is naked appeasement to the forces of apartheid. It is bordering on docility and is an insult to the African people. Botha butchered so many Africans in this country and neighbouring African states."

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) said in a statement that Botha will be remembered "with hatred and disgust" as a brutal dictator who presided over a system that denied the majority all their basic human rights. "His hands were stained with the blood of hundreds who were murdered during the struggle for democracy and liberation under his presidency," Cosatu spokesperson Patrick Craven said.

Cosatu rejected the notion that Botha had positively contributed to South Africa's democratic transformation. "On the contrary, he remained to the very last a staunch defender of apartheid, racism, dictatorship and inequality, for which he refused to make the slightest apology."

Any reforms during Botha's presidency had taken place "in spite of rather than because of his intentions" and were meant to buy time for the apartheid regime under an illusion of change. Botha was responsible for the misery of the millions he had condemned to poverty and the pain inflicted on the thousands who were jailed, assaulted and tortured by apartheid state thugs, Craven said.

In the end, Botha's wife, Barbara, turned down President Thabo Mbeki's offer of a state funeral, and a private burial, attended only by members of his family, followed a funeral service in which some 800 people packed the Dutch Reformed Mother Church in George.

Among the few black people in the sea of white faces were President Thabo Mbeki and his wife Zanele, who sat alongside former president F W de Klerk and his wife Elita.

He declined to speak to the media, saying: "Let's leave these interviews. I've spoken so many times." But another black funeral-goer, Mvuyisi Mawaba, was more than ready to speak out. Arriving with a group of friends after the service had already begun, he said he was "very, very happy" that Botha was dead. "There are people that are heartbroken because of him," he said. "So we are here to witness that he really is dead. That is why most of the black people are here."

Nomamsi Dlepu, standing on the pavement outside the gates of the church premises, said she was only there to see Mbeki. "I don't care for Botha. He doesn't deserve any flowers. He deserves stones. He was a Satan... I don't have a family today because of him."

Inside the church, minister Johan Botha told the congregation that Botha had had a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ".

"One outstanding characteristic of PW Botha was that the truth mattered to him," Rev Botha said. "I knew him as someone who sought the truth."

If truth mattered that much to him, Botha would have been happy to testify at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up to probe apartheid abuses. Instead, he steadfastly refused to appear before the commission. As a consequence he was convicted of contempt, and was ordered to pay a fine of around £800 or face a year's imprisonment. He successfully appealed against his conviction, and won on a technicality.

The appeals court ruling effectively put him out of reach of any punishment either for the killings and bombings conducted by his Government, or for refusing to say whether he had directly ordered any of them.

**WILLIAM HARWOOD**  
reviews *The God Delusion*,  
Richard Dawkins, Houghton  
Mifflin, 215 Park Avenue  
South, NY 10003, 2006, ISBN  
0-618-68000-4, 416 pages.

It is axiomatic among disinformation peddlers: When you have no defence, attack. It was therefore not unforeseeable that theologians, persons who claim expertise in the thing that is not, and prelates, administrators of the thing that is not, would denounce Dawkins' *The God Delusion* with unreasoned vitriol. Analogous denigrations of reality were papal denunciations of Copernicus's claim that the earth orbits the sun, and episcopal denunciations of Darwin's claim that humans and other apes evolved from a common ancestor. Popes saw Galileo's endorsement of Copernicus as a threat to their bread and butter. Bishop Wilberforce and his fellow mythologists saw Darwin's findings as a threat to their bread and butter. And the parasite caste currently exploiting the masses' belief in an imaginary Sky Führer see Dawkins as a threat to their bread and butter. Since religion pushers classify going with the evidence, instead of starting from predetermined conclusions and distorting the evidence to make it fit, as the ultimate heresy, they hate and fear Dawkins for the same reason Al Capone hated and feared Elliot Ness. And so they should. Dawkins is the parasites' worst nightmare.

Dawkins quotes a letter to Albert Einstein from an incurable god addict alleging that, "You do not seem to have learned that God is a spirit and cannot be found through the telescope or microscope.... There is a mean streak in anyone who will destroy another's faith" and urging him to "say something more pleasing to the vast number of the American people who delight to do you honor." Dawkins comments, "What a devastatingly revealing letter!

# it better than Richard Dawkins

Every sentence drips with intellectual and moral cowardice" (p 17).

Since the publication of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins is now in a position to make the same statement about his own detractors, including a physicist who wrote in *Midwest Book Review*, November 2006, "Dawkins is an atheist because he places too much confidence in the methods and ideas of science," and accused him of belonging to "a sect in the religion of science." That is the same as saying, "Dawkins is sane, intelligent and educated because he places too much confidence in the methods and ideas of reality." And while all godworshippers are by definition scientifically illiterate ignoramuses, anyone who can argue that science is a religion is clearly not sparking on all neurons.

Equally inane is an accusation by a Catholic apologist (*London Review of Books*, October 19, 2006) that Dawkins is "theologically illiterate." In other words, Dawkins knows nothing about the inner workings of something that does not exist. Theologians, in the apologist's view, do have expert knowledge of the inner workings of something that does not exist. No doubt the apologist could write a treatise on the metaphysical properties of a bunghole without a barrel.

The truly sad element of such assaults on reason is that it shows that the persons Dawkins is trying to cure of the mind-crippling virus of religion simply cannot be cured, because they are moral cowards who need the mind-deadening opiate of an afterlife belief to overcome their terror of death and get them through the day without losing control of their bodily functions.

I was somewhat disconcerted when, early in his book, Dawkins quoted without comment the Big Lie that Adolf Hitler was an atheist, as if that explained why he was evil. Fortunately, he later devoted several pages to that unpleasant gentleman, citing the evidence that he lived and died a believing Catholic. As far as I am aware, no one has ever attributed Hitler's atrocities to his being a Catholic. And I was delighted when Dawkins mentioned "Ann Coulter who, American colleagues have persuaded me, is not a spoof invented by *The Onion*" (p. 288). I reviewed a book by Coulter for *Humani*, and suggested that she was exactly that.

Dawkins gladly accepts the designation "atheist," provided it is defined as, "any person who does not believe in a god," rather than in the pejorative way the ignoranti habitually use the word to mean someone lacking the allegedly positive quality of "faith." He writes (p. 53), "I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon, Ra, Mithras, Baal,

Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further."

Dawkins is a biologist, not a biblical scholar. Nonetheless, his extensive bibliography includes books by G A Wells, G Vermes, and Bart Ehrman.

There are however, some notable omissions, such as Arnheim, Crossan, Harwood, Helms, Hoffman, Larue, Lüdemann, and Price, all of whom refute religion by demonstrating the fictional status of biblical fairy tales. Since Dawkins' approach is to contrast the benevolent-god hypothesis with observable reality, and show that religion is inconsistent with either known facts or any acceptable concept of morality, those omissions are perhaps excusable. And he cites sufficient biblical absurdities and self-contradictions to establish that he is not uninformed on the Bible's status as its own best debunker, as well as being the most obscene paean to evil ever written, with *The Koran* a close second and *Mein Kampf* a far distant third, with the Marquis de Sade's masturbation fantasies and Ann Coulter's verbal diarrhea fighting it out for fourth place.

Dawkins does not adhere to the politically correct practice of treating believers in superstitious hogwash as if their preference for fantasy over reality were analogous to preferring the Yankees to the Mets.

He informed a mixed audience of theists and nontheists at the John Templeton Foundation that "I am utterly fed up with the respect that we ... are brainwashed into bestowing on religion," and described religious education as "brainwashing and child abuse" (*International Herald Tribune*, November 22, 2006). And his satirical essay on "geriniol" (anagram of *religion*) stated unequivocally that the 9/11 hijackers' actions can only be attributed to their

being opiated by the deadly poison of geriniol.

If more educated persons would emulate Dawkins and acknowledge that religion is a contagious form of insanity, and devote as much attention to searching for an antidote as they are putting into finding an antidote for the less deadly virus of AIDS, the disease might be eliminated before it eliminates the human race. Unfortunately, that is not likely to happen. Victims of AIDS would gladly allow themselves to be cured. Victims of the mind-AIDS of religion think it is the uninfected who are mentally crippled.

There are basically two ways of falsifying religion. Historians prove that religion is *not* true by tracing all claims of a god revealing its existence to the same Tanakh, Gospels and Koran that assure their readers that the earth is flat, and showing that, if the nativity tales in Matthew and Luke are both non-fiction, then Jesus was born ten years before he was conceived.

Philosophers prove that religion *cannot* be true, by showing that, if the universe was produced and directed by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent overlord, then such evils as the 2005 tsunami and the AIDS virus could not exist. Dawkins shows that, for religion to be true, then humans and other animals could not have similar DNA inherited from common ancestors, the universe could not be old enough for the light from the most distant quasars to take a further fifteen billion years to reach us, and the wasp that lays its eggs in the abdomen of living spiders (à la *Alien*) could not exist.

Since religious dogma on such matters is observably wrong, it follows that religion's Big Daddy in the Sky is as imaginary as Mother Goose, and continued belief in his existence can be attributed to professional pushers who are either economically motivated or intellectually challenged.

## Australian pastors will keep "telling truth" about Islam

TWO Christian pastors in Australia have successfully appealed against a ruling that they had breached Victoria's controversial religious hatred laws by vilifying Muslims at a Catch the Fire Ministries seminar on *jihad* held in 2002.

At the original hearing, Judge Michael Higgins ordered Pastors Daniel Scot and Danny Nalliah to apologise in newspaper advertisements and not to repeat their teachings anywhere in Australia.

But late last year the Court of Appeal overturned Judge Higgins' finding, ordered the case to be reheard at the original tribunal before a different judge with no further evidence, and set aside the orders.

Justice Geoffrey Nettle said Judge Higgins equated hating Muslims' religious beliefs with hating Muslims because of their beliefs. This was not so — many people might despise Pastor Scot's perception of Christianity, yet not dream of hating him. "No doubt the purpose of the act is to promote religious tolerance. But the act cannot and does not purport to mandate religious tolerance," he said in his judgment.

After the appeal hearing, Scot, who conducted the 2002 seminar said: "Some Muslims have got the idea they have to hide the truth, and that's very sad."

Insisting that he would continue his seminars on the Koran and Hadiths (Islam's sacred texts), he said: "People should know it (Islam) from its primary sources, and not be misled by politically correct teachers who don't know the reality of Islam and want to glorify it with false pretensions and assumptions."

## Defining Atheism

DAN O'Hara (*Freethinker*, December 2006) does not sound like a person who is open to reason. He set up his "straw man" atheist and proceeds to knock him down.

I am an atheist but I do not tell other people that there is no god or that life has no purpose or death, hell, afterlife and so on do not exist, but that they no longer mean anything to me.

Atheism is an absence of belief in these things – not a denial. I may think that letters from someone such as Dan O'Hara do not sound as though they are written by a God-fearing Christian, judging by the standards they usually require, but that is just my personal judgement from that letter.

What seems to me a common factor shared by the best of believers and non-believers is their self-discipline and awareness of their interdependence with neighbours and with the natural environment. The "ligio" part of the word religion probably comes from the Latin word to bind, and may refer to the requirement of binding oneself to certain standards of behaviour. Dan's bindings seem to be rather loose.

PETER ARNOLD  
Alderney

DAN O'Hara's December letter is one of the more startling examples of proctophony on this side (or has he changed sides again?) of the belief/unbelief divide.

His friend E Goodman in the previous issue had asserted that atheism was a religion. He backed it up only by an appeal to authority – Aldous Huxley. So he's obviously right, then.

O'Hara next falls into the fallacy of comparing unlikes. Dogma in the ordinary sense of the word in this context is the authoritative teaching of an organised religion, usually based on holy writ. Atheism is merely the absence of belief in gods; it is not an organised belief system with unquestioned scriptures.

As for his list of atheist dogmas: atheists who have really thought about these things would not dream of making bald and arrogant statements such as these; they have reviewed the evidence and accepted these ideas provisionally, as in all true scientific enquiry.

To pick up one or two of the "dogmas":

Science is the only route to truth – consistent description of the universe – that has proved its worth since we began to think scientifically. What other routes to truth have a similar record – and what is truth? It is very easy to fling about accusations of this kind without defining your terms.

Morality may not be a human invention so much as a conscious elaboration of what we already have in our genes. The latest work in this field looks to be very interesting – an example of an "atheist dogma" being modified by new facts (if the research turns out as expected), certainly not a typical characteristic of a religion.

No doubt there are some atheists who express themselves in the manner O'Hara dislikes, but in many cases I suspect it is because extreme attitudes on the other side now being more prominently aired provoke an equal and opposite reaction. Atheists should take care not to be so easily baited.

As for Stalinism supposedly being a militant form of atheism, didn't Stalin have a totalitarian upbringing in an Orthodox seminary, and were not the writings of Communism's founders elevated to the status of holy writ?

Finally, O'Hara shows that his own grasp on moderation is slipping when he seizes on a passing mention of American Atheists by the editor in the November issue to go ranting on about Madalyn O'Hair, as though she were typical of atheists everywhere. People who reject the idea of gods are not therefore immune from human frailty or criminality, but O'Hara seems to think that atheism leads directly to wholesale immorality (O'Hair) and mass slaughter (Stalin).

BARRY THORPE  
Cheadle

DAN O'Hara strikes again. I am almost beginning to suspect that the editor, in a low conspiracy, has hired him to act the resident devil's advocate. But just in case he has not, let me rise to the bait.

Atheism can't be a religion because of its restricted definition. An atheist merely states that s/he is not a theist, similar to an affairist asserting that s/he doesn't believe in fairies. If Dan addressed the equation to humanism he would be on slightly firmer ground because unlike atheism, humanism, like religion, is an all encompassing life-stance. But even then the term religion is inappropriate. As any dictionary will show the main definition of religion describes a belief in some superhuman, controlling power entitled to obedience, reverence and worship. Call ardent humanists or atheists zealots if you must, but don't paint us with the religious tar brush. Also bear in mind that unlike religion, atheism/humanism is not inherently evangelical. It is merely reactive to the excesses heaped upon our heads by religious bully boys.

If you are being bombed in the name of Allah or if your taxes finance God in state schools it is kind of provocative.

TONY AKKERMANS  
Shropshire

IT would seem from the letters that Dan O'Hara has written to the *Freethinker* in recent months that he confuses superstition with morality. Belief in a creator is not a moral stance. However, Christians, and followers of other religions, that claim a higher morality because of their faith will be judged on their moral behaviour. Atheism – which states that a creator does not exist – makes no such claim and to state that it is an alternative religion is absurd. Besides not believing in God, I don't believe in Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy, Martians or the Man in the Moon. According to Dan O'Hara that would make me the follower of a number of religions.

I accept that a number of atheists are villains and would be surprised if it were otherwise. Being an atheist has not made me a better person, richer or better looking. But then, not believing that the moon is made of cheese has done nothing to influence my behaviour either.

CARL PINEL  
Derbyshire

DAN O'Hara's letters seem to be getting more offbeat with every month that goes by – bolstered by many fine quotations, but let down by a convoluted logic that shows he is frantically searching to justify an emotionally held conviction. It reminds me of the kind of arguments that use to be put forward by annoying kids at school who wanted to "outclever" their chums! His latest assertion that atheism is a religion that is full of the dogma of not believing in things that (other) religions do, is a case in point.

Some while back I was wondering about what help and counselling was available for genuine folks trying to break away from the tyranny of religious dogma, and so I approached the Charity Commissioners for information. I had in mind the title "Escape from Religion", but I was unable to find any other charity that had this kind of objective. I thought it was because the spreading of religion was listed as one of the main criteria to be eligible for charitable status, so any group trying to oppose this might not be welcome. However, I guess that even if Dan's logic were accepted, and atheism categorised as a religion, it would still not guarantee charitable status because the subject could then be deemed misleading, as no escape from religion would ever be possible!

As for his implicating atheism in the criminal activity of certain individuals, this is irrational unless he explains what role these beliefs had in making them behave that way. I can only think it is his preoccupation with atheism being a religion that is making him blind to this point. The evil of religion, throughout mankind's history, is that its authors have deliberately distorted knowledge, prostituted truth and language, and used every psychological trick to deceive and control. In doing so they have produced a blueprint for taking advantage of the goodness in people, that is no doubt copied by criminals, politicians, and religious leaders the world over. Whether many of the latter actually become closet atheists is another matter, but it doesn't make atheism a religion, any more than being healthy is a medical condition!

CLIVE GREEDUS  
Ilford

I READ with astonishment Dan O'Hara's letter. Mr O'Hara makes quite a number of contemptible statements.

Religious people would say that I am an atheist because I do not bother to deny the existence of imaginary fantasies such the existence of some imaginary power named God, just as I do not bother to deny the existence of fairies or of alien green men. It is up to those who believe in fairies or in alien green men, or God, to prove their existence. If I had to deny all fantasies imagined by humankind, I would have little time left for anything of value.

The problem is that when humans believe they know the Truth, as revealed by their whatever religion, they cannot accept the possibility that their Truth is not true and become extreme fanatics in order to "safeguard" their religious Truth from non-believers.

Century upon century, believers in whatever religion have tried to impose their Truth on soci-



ety with what we call Stalinist methods showing, with respect for Mr O'Hara, a "virus in their mind".

DAVID IBRY  
London

DAN O'Hara is incorrect: the assertion "there is no god" is not dogma but a statement of fact based on the evidence of history; or are we to accept irrational belief as factual evidence? That would seem to be the genesis of the problems we are suffering from today.

The purpose of life is life, ie, the genetic perpetuation of itself. The rest is supposition and metaphysical gobbledygook.

Death is an end to our conscious existence as human beings, the only existence that concerns us. If Dan can show otherwise, I for one would be quite pleased, being in the autumn of life. We may continue as elements of matter but that is not life after death.

Science, by which I mean rational thought and experiment, is the only route to "truth" or genuine understanding and advance. Ignorance leads to ritual pleading, leads to myth, leads to dogma and oppression: the bases of religion.

ROY EMERY  
Radstock

I AGREE that your new strapline expresses your philosophy more precisely, but I prefer not to call myself an "atheist".

True. I don't believe in any gods, but then I don't believe in the tooth fairy or little green men from Mars either. I don't give religion the importance of describing myself in terms of non-belief in its gods as opposed to non-belief in anything else.

I see no difference between the Christian God and the Easter Bunny – I can't detect either of them. I prefer the epithet "non-believer" because I reject the notion that belief represents a valid way of coming to conclusions about anything.

NORMAN HENDERSON  
Wales

IT is difficult to tell whether Dan O'Hara is more upset by atheism itself, or atheism's denial that it is a religion. I think most people realise that "religion" normally refers to God, heaven and hell, afterlife, worship, ritual, supplication and judgment. So why the insistence that atheism is a "religion"? It is obviously a basic philosophy, a world-outlook, a *weltanschauung*, upon which are built the positive metaphysics of Secular Humanism and Naturalism. Why is that so difficult to understand? In ridiculing atheism as faith, Christianity therefore ridicules faith itself; is that their intention? No wonder they get confused.

All world views and philosophies have to define themselves: so (strong) atheism says there is no god. How is that more dogmatic than religion saying there is a God?

I will trade Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Stalin for Torquemada, Ivan the Terrible, and the whole collection of religious fanatics and persecutors throughout history – who, we must remember are godly and therefore "good" – and should know better, unlike benighted atheists.

If Stalin and O'Hair turned atheism into

quasi-religions, why should that tar all atheists with the same brush? Do Torquemada and the murderous Crusaders invalidate all decent Christians? What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Some of the "commoner dogmas" of atheism listed by Mr. O'Hara are reasonable logical commonsense scientific and metaphysical hypotheses, made on the basis of lack of any evidence for the existence of their theistic dogmatic counterparts. When Jesus turns up on my door step, I will reconsider my position.

Are atheists not allowed to philosophise also? Is freethought and free speech to be labelled as "dogma" when proposed by atheists? Is that democracy?

REG LE SUEUR  
Jersey

**Editor's note: We were unable to contain all the letters we received on this subject in this issue. More will be published in February.**

### Balaam v Lock

DIESEL Balaam, I understand, was once the author of a book of fairy tales. It appears he has not lost the knack. So great a work of fiction is the portrayal of me in his recent letter to the *Freethinker* that I see no point in indulging it with a detailed reply. Suffice it to say, Mr Balaam's letter was such a tapestry of lies and fantasy that there is scarcely any point in wasting the time of your readers with a rebuttal.

Anyone who knows me or is familiar with my writing and activism (or who simply Googles my name) will find it hard to stifle a chuckle at Mr Balaam's "Reds under the bed" moonbatter.

Finally, anyone who is tempted to believe that the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association soft-soaps Islam is welcome to read our magazine, GHQ, online at [www.gayhumanist.com](http://www.gayhumanist.com) and see for themselves that no religious ideology gets a free pass and faith-based attacks on human rights are condemned, whatever the source, wherever they take place, and with no ifs or buts.

BRETT LOCK  
Editor, GHQ  
London

AM I the only *Freethinker* reader to be dismayed and frustrated by Diesel Balaam and Brett Lock slugging it out on the letters page of this magazine? Both are apparently secular humanists, both are apparently gay, and both evidently share the opinion that Christians and Muslims present some kind of urgent threat to gays and secular humanists alike.

They clearly disagree over the level of threat emanating from different religious groups, and what our priorities should be at this time, but surely there is more to unite them than divide them? Lock may not have the scholastic eloquence and wit of Balaam, but he more than makes up for that in passion and he too makes some valid points. Secularism needs its firebrands as well as its academics.

Perhaps GALHA should knock both their heads together and get them to combine their talents for the common good. They don't even have to like each other. Some of the most successful partnerships are antagonistic – just think of

Beckham & Ferguson, Jagger & Richards, or Blair & Brown. What we can all do without is a monthly re-enactment of *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* with Diesel Balaam playing Joan Crawford against Brett Lock's Bette Davis!

ERIC KNOWLE  
Surrey

**Editor's note: This correspondence at now at an end.**

### Veils and foreskins

IF non-Muslim girls have to wear veils at the orthodox Muslim school in Leicester, will gentle boys have to be circumcised in order to attend an orthodox Jewish school?

D L SIMMS  
London

## The Free thinker

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## Events & Contacts

**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.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, January 9, 7.30pm Dave Cooke: *Cultural Diplomacy – Whose Values?* Tuesday, Feb 6, 7.30pm. Darwin Anniversary Lecture by Robert Stovold: *The Evolution of Ethics*.

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

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High St, Berkhamsted. Sat. Jan 6, Annual Dinner. Tel for details (see above).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Essex Humanists:** Programme available, Details: 01268 785295. Friends Meeting House, Rainsford Road, Chelmsford. Sunday, Jan 21, 2.30pm. Andrew Copson, British Humanist Association.

**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:** Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings second Wednesday of the month (except January and August) 8pm at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Further information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977.

**Hasving & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thurs, Feb 1, 8pm. David Eames: *Maimonides – early Jewish Humanist*.

**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](mailto:secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Information and events: [info@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:info@humanism-scotland.org.uk) or visit [www.humanism-scotland.org.uk](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk). Media: [media@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:media@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Education: [education@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:education@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Local Scottish Groups:

**Aberdeen Group:** 07010 704778, [aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Dundee Group:** 07017 404778, [dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Edinburgh Group:** 07010 704775, [edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk)

**Glasgow Group:** 07010 704776, [glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Highland Group:** 07017 404779, [highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Perth Group:** 07017 404776, [perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk)

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, Feb 13, 7.30pm. Celebrating Darwin Day. Judith Hart: *In the Wake of Darwin*.

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

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, Jan 18, 8pm. discussion: *Humanism or Secularism?*

**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, Jan 3, 8pm. Frank Abel: Review of the Year. Wednesday, Feb 7, 8pm. Hilary Cave: *Why Church and State Must Be Separated*.

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

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

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

**Suffolk Humanists:** 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. [mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk](mailto:mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk). [www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk).

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

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

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

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

Please send your listings and events notices to: Listings, the *Freethinker*, PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD  
Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication.