

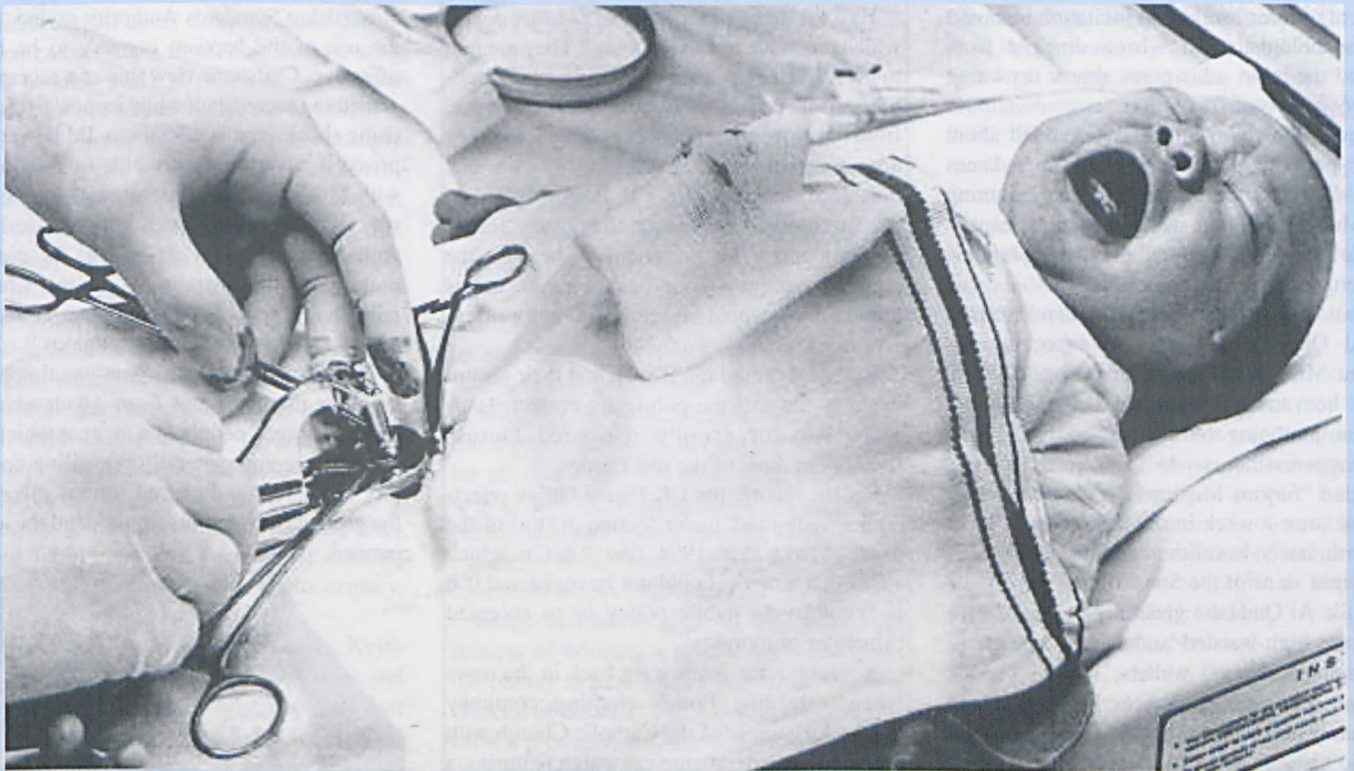
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The **Freethinker**

The voice of atheism since 1881

Muslim calls for circumcision of infant boys within a 'faith-based' NHS



New demands focus attention on the religious mutilation of infants – p4

Also in this issue:

Its all in the jeans: the baggy Al Quds brand leaves ample room for prayer ... and other stuff – p2

Disappointment on both sides over blasphemy case prosecution of the BBC – p3

French reject religion in growing numbers – p5

A miracle? No, stupid, it's simply pareidolia

– centrepages



BAD-TEMPERED and befuddled, I can sometimes be observed on my knees, head to the floor, arse pointing skywards. This happens when I am forced to poke about in the undergrowth of computer cables buried under my desk, in the hope of finding out why my internet connection has suddenly been lost, or why my computer has declared that it “cannot find printer”. On one occasion, in a moment of irrational, juddering fury, I swivelled the pc screen around, pointed it at my so-last-century Hewlett Packard and bellowed: “Look! It’s right here, you stupid effing machine – just where it’s been for the past five years!”

The same position has to be adopted when something goes awry with the linked hi-fi and TV set-up in the downstairs living-room. But here I have an added complication in the form of our huge, demonic, golden-eyed, black Persian cat, Smirnoff, who interprets my descent to floor level as an invitation to cavort in the bolognaise of wiring dragged from behind the tellie – his purrs almost drowning out my growls of frustration.

Now there’s two things I’ve learned about these periodic explorations: that my knees ain’t what they used to be; and that assuming the Muslim position while in denim jeans – which I wear practically all my waking hours – is excruciatingly uncomfortable.

What I really ought to have on hand is a pair of Al Quds jeans, designed especially for devout Muslim men who have to point *their* arses heavenward five times a day while mumbo-jumboing to the moon-god, Allah.

I happened across Al Quds jeans when I Googled “furious Muslims” – something I do at least once a week in order to find out what on earth, lately, has slithered under the exceedingly thin skins of the Sons of the Prophet.

While Al Quds are generally approved of – they are high-waisted and baggy enough to accommodate keys, wallets, mobile phones and small incendiary devices – it’s the name that has needed some. Al Quds, you see, is the Arabic name for Jerusalem, which is regarded as the third holiest location in Islam.

Why? Because Mohammed was “miraculously” transported there from Mecca by the Angel Gabriel who wanted him to behold the “Furthest Mosque”, Al-Aqsa. Having seen it, the suitably-impressed Prophet was then taken by tour-guide Gabriel to heaven, where he had a lengthy chin-wag with prophets who had gone before, then led this congregation of celestial holy rollers in prayer, before being returned to Mecca. (The Koran gives no inkling of what Mohammed may have smoked or imbibed on that eventful night to provoke such vivid hallucinations.)

Al Quds sparked a minor controversy because many considered the brand name “disrespectful” and “insulting”.

Pakistan’s top Islamic cleric, Grand Mufti Rafi Usmani, praised the thinking that went into the creation of the jeans, but said the name Al Quds could cause offence.

“I think it is a defamatory act to name the jeans after such a revered place, and I don’t consider it right at all,” huffed Usmani.

Austrian-based Syrian researcher Samer Ziyad added: “I’m pretty sure that the company which makes the jeans knows how dear Al Quds is held by the Muslims. We have never heard about any products named after the Vatican, Knesset, or the Wailing Wall.”

If you imagine denim jeans are faith-neutral, think again, says Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE



Has the man never heard of Jesus Jeans, which are made in Luxembourg? They are not, to my knowledge, designed to aid prayer, facilitate strolls across water, or even saviour arse from the cloven-hoofed hordes of hell, but they are, nonetheless, very popular – with one notable exception. The UK Patent Office in 2005 refused an application to register “Jesus” as a trademark for the company because the name has “religious significance and its use as a trade mark would be seen as morally offensive to the public”. *Pathetic!*

But, never mind the British and their absurd leanings towards the politically correct, Jesus Jeans has successfully registered “Jesus” throughout most of the rest Europe.

For the record, the UK Patent Office rejected the trade mark under section 3(3)(a) of the Trade Marks Act 1994 (the “Act”), which states that a mark should not be registered if it is “contrary to public policy or to accepted principles of morality”.

Not long after, jeans were back in the news when a leading Polish clothing company invoked the anger of the Catholic Church with a nationwide advertising campaign featuring a priest wearing its denims and a clerical collar.

According to KAI, Poland’s Catholic Information Agency, Professor Janusz Krolikowski, from Holy Cross University in Rome, claimed that the company had “dragged the clergy into a game of market forces”, and quoted him as saying “It’s an absurdity and an abuse. The firm is using something which doesn’t belong to it, for purposes which are wholly inappropriate.”

“This firm has deliberately used a priest, knowing that men of the cloth avoid publicly expressing their fashion preferences.”

Oh *really?* Is the professor unaware of the fact that Catholic *Führer*, Pope Benedict XVI, is an enthusiastic *fashionista* with a penchant for expensive designer labels? The Pope has, for example, been seen sporting pricey red Prada loafers (camp) and Serengeti sunglasses (cool). The American eyewear – the preferred brand of the Hollywood film star Val Kilmer – cost at

least £200. And the 78-year-old Vicar of Christ’s normal reading glasses have been identified as Cartier’s demilune Santos model, guaranteed to take a sizeable bite out of your bank balance. Other sharp accessories include a stylish but simple wristwatch, with black hands, a black face and a black strap. So far no one has identified the make or the model but it has been described as “retro”. And occasionally, the Pope wears swish black and gold cufflinks.

But back to jeans, and the theological pickle Levis ran into in New Zealand three years ago as a result of its 501 Jeans *Born Again* TV advertisement, in which a young woman throws off her skirt and is submerged backwards into a lake, assisted by a youth who pushes down on her forehead. As she emerges, fastening the top of a pair of Levi jeans, onscreen words state: “BORN AGAIN”.

One of several angry viewers wrote to the Advertising Standards Authority saying “I find the use of the baptism imagery to be highly offensive. Christians view this as a sacrament – something sacred and, while iconoclastic advertising shocks and is effective – I’d be very surprised if advertisers were able to mess around with Muslim or Buddhist symbols in the same way. Would they toy with holy war and *jihad* with impunity? Not a chance! In pluralist, multi-religious, tolerant NZ ... the Christian faith should receive the same respect and care and space accorded to other religions.”

The Complaints Board “was unanimously of the view that the Levis *Born Again* advertisement portrayed people in a manner which, taking into account generally prevailing community standards, had caused serious offence on the grounds of religious status”, and the ad was banned.



If you want jeans that are unashamedly *anti-religious*, go in search of the Cheap Monday brand, created in Sweden in 2004. They feature a distinctly ungodly logo: a skull with an inverted cross on its forehead.

The logo’s designer, Bjorn Atldax, declared “It is an active statement against Christianity. I’m not a Satanist myself, but I have a great dislike for organised religion.”

Atldax said he had a purpose beyond selling denim: to make young people question Christianity, which he called a “force of evil” that had sparked wars throughout history.

I’d buy a pair tomorrow, but am put off by their cut – “a punk-rock style, trendy tight fit.” Assuming I could actually shoe-horn myself into a pair of skinny Cheap Mondays, then dropped to my knees, it’s highly likely that I’d end up having to pay for several expensive sessions with an osteopath..

Hysterical fundamentalists fail to sway Lords over Equality Act Regulations

DESPITE an hysterical and dishonest campaign by Christian activists, the House of Lords last month supported new Regulations introduced into Northern Ireland to protect gay people from discrimination in the provision of goods and services. Democratic Unionist Lord Morrow's move to annul the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) was rejected by 199 votes to 68, a Government majority of 131, at the end of a two-hour debate.

According to the National Secular Society's *Newsline*, a crowd of about 1,000 evangelical Christians, hyped up by a campaign of distortion and exaggeration from their leaders, sang hymns outside while an impassioned debate was taking place inside the House of Lords.

"As usual, in the on-going and increasingly acrimonious battle between religion and secularism, there were strongly-held views on both sides. Christians persisted in their claims that the Sexual Orientation Regulations would force them to act against their conscience (which apparently demands that they make life miserable for another section of the community). At the same time, liberals from all sides of the political spectrum argued that granting protection from discrimination to homosexuals was simply giving them what all other citizens already have," *Newsline* observed.

"Despite some interventions from the likes of Lord Tebbit and Earl Ferrers that sounded like something from the nineteenth century, the Regulations were approved."

The NSS's Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, was present at the debate and was lobbying peers and the media up to the last moment. He said afterwards: "The Lords' result is very welcome news and we are glad that most peers did not fall for the misleading propaganda that religious groups have been putting out about these Regulations. We hope that this decision will strengthen the Government's resolve to put the English and Welsh version of the Regulations through without compromising them. There must be no further concessions."

Mr Wood said that the Regulations already had too many exemptions that protected religious doctrine. Christian activists now want to render them meaningless with "conscience clauses" that would absolve them of the responsibility of abiding by the law that everyone else in the country must abide by.

Meanwhile, George Broadhead, Secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association commented: "While we are very pleased that the Lords sent the Christian agitators packing on this occasion, they haven't gone away. The Regulations are still subject to a Judicial

Review, which will take place in March, and the judge might decide that the Regulations are incompatible with the Human Rights Act. If that is so, Parliament will have to reconsider them.

Mr Broadhead said that although the extremists on the religious right had shot themselves in the foot with their campaign of distortion and exaggeration, the mainstream churches were much more powerful and influential with the Government behind the scenes. "We should not forget that the Church of

England and the Catholics have both opposed these regulations and continue to do so. The Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham, Vincent Nichols, has even tried to blackmail the government into dropping the regulations by threatening to withdraw welfare services operated by the Church. The C of E has made similar threats. It is these powerful institutions that will be exerting pressure on Ruth Kelly – but in the light of the big majority in the Lords, we hope that she will resist any further exemptions."

The right-wing fundamentalist group, the Christian Institute, which has been at the forefront of this campaign, said: "All is not lost. Our legal action against the Northern Ireland regulations goes ahead as planned in March 2007. If it succeeds the regulations will be quashed. The regulations for England, Scotland and Wales have not been published yet, let alone voted on. We don't know what form they will take. Doubtless the controversy surrounding the Northern Ireland regulations will help put pressure on the Government to address our concerns."

The Rev Joel Edwards, General Director of the Evangelical Alliance, said that they would continue pressing the Government on the issue. He said: "Christians are not in favour of discriminating against gay people. But they don't want to find themselves coerced by law into facilitating the promotion of homosexuality. Freedom of conscience is an important right, which we intend to defend."

Stephen Green, National Director of Christian Voice, added: "The Government and their 'gay rights' friends have no right to impose their morality, or lack of it, on the 99 percent of the population who are not that way inclined. Christians, members of other faiths and indeed of none, cannot be forced to act against their conscience by providing services to those whose activities they find perverted, disgusting or simply against the clear, unequivocal word of God.

"The Government have totally misunderstood our position. They think we shall back down ... For us to offer our services to those who are carrying on against nature as the children of disobedience would be to deny our faith. We cannot and will not do that.

"Already, some churches have said they will close their adoption agencies altogether rather than place children in the hands of homosexuals. Others are planning to stop hiring out their church halls to outside events. It is the wider community which will suffer.

"The Churches are saying to the Government, 'If you want a fight, we'll give you one'."

Green attempts to prosecute the BBC for 'blasphemy'

TERRY Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, welcomed the news last month that Christian Voice's National Director Stephen Green had begun a private prosecution for blasphemy against the BBC for screening *Jerry Springer, the Opera*.

"We sincerely hope that Mr Green succeeds in his efforts to bring this to court – then we can see the blasphemy law destroyed once and for all. The court might do what Parliament won't," said Sanderson, adding that the blasphemy law was widely thought to be in contravention of the Human Rights Act and that a court case would confirm this.

Green announced that he has begun the process of bringing a private prosecution for blasphemy against Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC, and Jonathan Thoday, the show's producer, for their part in broadcasting the musical on BBC2 two years ago.

Green and his legal advisors said they had laid evidence before Horseferry Magistrate's Court in an effort to get a summons issued in a private prosecution of the two BBC men.

Green said: "There is an ancient law against blasphemy in this land because the law believes it should not occur. It is as simple as that. If artistic people do not know where or how to stop as they push against the boundaries of decency, then the law must step in and tell them.

"In this present case, it appears *prime facie* that a most odious and wicked blasphemy was perpetrated against Almighty God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Clearly, justice must be done. No-one, be they ever so influential or wealthy, can be above the law."

Editor's note: As we go to press, we learn that Mr Green's case has been thrown out of court.



Professor wants infant Muslim boys genitally mutilated on the NHS

MALE infant circumcision should be available throughout a "faith-based" NHS, according to a Muslim professor.

Edinburgh University's Professor Aziz Sheikh said that although a handful of NHS trusts carry out circumcisions, "most parents are forced into the poorly regulated private sector".

Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Professor Sheikh said a better picture of the health profile and experiences of British Muslims was needed to help them access services.

"Limited health data show that Muslims are about twice as likely to self-report poor health and disability as the general population," said Sheikh, adding that "Muslims are predominantly congregated in the inner-city slums, have the lowest household income, poorest educational attainment, and highest unemployment, and experience more poverty than any other faith community."

He said the first step towards collecting better data would be to record religious affiliation, not just ethnic background at primary and secondary care levels.

The NHS should also start to tailor services in a more targeted way. "Many Muslims, to maintain modesty, prefer to see a same-sex clinician. Such choice is typically unavailable despite the higher number of women doctors in the NHS.

"Another important service is to enable Muslims to avoid porcine and alcohol derived drugs."

Professor Sheikh, from Edinburgh University's division of community health services, added Muslims should be given better access to prayer facilities and advice over how they should modify their treatment for chronic conditions during Ramadan.

But Professor Aneez Esmail, from Manchester University's school of primary care, said: "While it is reasonable we try to plan and configure our services to take account of needs that may have their roots in particular beliefs... we cannot meet everyone's demands for special services based on their religious identity. It would not be practical."

And he added that some faith groups might support practices which may be morally and ethically unacceptable to the majority – for example, female circumcision and the refusal to accept blood transfusions in life-saving situations.

Professor Esmail said going down the path of providing special services for defined groups risks stigmatisation and stereotyping.

"In an ideal world doctors would ask about

a patient's beliefs not so that they can be categorised but because it might be important for the patient in their illness."

The Department of Health said services were and had to be decided on a clinical need, which was decided either on recommendations from the NHS advisory agency NICE or on a trust-by-trust basis.

The spokesman added: "All patients are entitled to ask to see doctors of a certain sex."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, commented: "Faith-based schools, faith-based hospitals – where will it stop? According to reports the NHS is on the verge of financial collapse. The possibility of separate facilities for 'faith groups' is pie in the sky, but the fact that it is even being called for is, in itself, another indication of the separatist mindset that drives so many religious activists."

A week before Professor Sheikh's views were published, the issue of circumcision was examined on the Radio 4 programme, *Beyond Belief*, hosted by Ernie Rea. It featured two supporters of the practice – a Muslim and a Jew – and one opponent.

Brushing aside the human rights of a Muslim infant, Leicester Imam Ibrahim Mogra, a member of the Muslim Council of Britain, declared: "Your parents own you. That is the Muslim approach. As parents we have a duty to do what is in the best interests of our children and religion. I believe that anything ordained by God cannot be harmful for the human being, otherwise he would not have ordained that for us."

He was challenged by Dr Richard Hoskins, Visiting Senior Research Fellow in Sociology of Religion at King's College London's Department of Theology & Religious Studies. He insisted that the idea of ownership over a child runs counter to the thinking of much of modern society in the West. "We have a sense that individuals should have a choice".

Asked whether he would have a son of his circumcised, Liverpool-based Dr Les Lancaster, Professor of Transpersonal Psychology, replied that he would. "If I had a son I would want him to have a spiritual, meaningful way of life. It's not just a physical body I am bringing into the world."

Late in 1999, Finland became the first country in the world to restrict the practice. The Juridic Ombudsman of the Finnish Parliament, Riitta-Leena Paunio, noted that infant circumcision should not be carried out for non-medical reasons. She said that children should be consulted and asked their permission. She said the Finnish Parliament should weigh up the

parents' religious rights over their children against the obligation of society to protect its children from ritualistic operations without immediate benefit to them.

In 2001, the Swedish Parliament passed a law restricting circumcision to licensed practitioners. The move, which infuriated Jews and Muslims, came after two Muslim boys died after the procedure.

Circumcision can now only be carried out in Sweden in the presence of a doctor and with an appropriate anaesthetic.

Catholic Church in Australia Denies Raped Women Morning-After Pill

ALARM is growing in Australia at the growing take-over of hospitals by the Catholic Church. The Church owns 70 hospitals and took over another one last month.

Now women's groups are up in arms as it emerged that Catholic hospitals have been forbidden by the Church from referring women to rape crisis centres that supply the morning-after pill. And the *Australian* newspaper revealed this week that another fertility centre has been told to move out by the Catholic buyers of the hospital where it is based.

The Church's policy on rape is contained in an "ethics" document approved by the Catholic hierarchy in 2001. Senior Catholic spokesmen defended the rape crisis policy as a logical and ethical extension of the Church's opposition to the morning-after pill, which it considers morally no different from abortion. But Melbourne GP and medical broadcaster Sally Cockburn said she was "blown out of the water" when she read the policy.

"If this is the way their staff are mandated to behave, then I don't believe rape victims should be taken to their hospitals at all," Dr Cockburn said. "They have no right to make us follow their point of view, and if they're going to be taking over more hospitals, I'm concerned."

Karen Willis, of the New South Wales Rape Crisis Centre, said it was standard practice for a raped woman to be offered the morning-after pill, if there was a real risk of her becoming pregnant with her attacker's child. "To not offer someone the morning-after pill would be negligence as far as we are concerned," she said.

French reject religion in growing numbers

BARELY half the French population describe themselves as Catholic, according to a poll released last month, sparking a leading religious publication to declare France "no longer a Catholic country".

A poll published in *Le Monde des Religions* showed the number of self-declared French Catholics had dropped from 80 per cent in the early 1990s and 67 per cent in 2000 to 51 per cent today.

The number of atheists has risen sharply to 31 per cent from 23 per cent in 1994.

"In its institutions, but also in its mentalities, France is no longer a Catholic country," wrote Frederic Lenoir, editor in chief of *Le Monde des Religions*.

French Catholicism, while suffering during the Revolution, did not begin its real decline

until 1905, experts say, when pre-war France was declared a secular state, all funding of religious groups was stopped, and religious buildings were declared the property of the state.

According to Henry Samuel, writing in the *Telegraph*, the poll showed that only 10 per cent go to church regularly – mainly to Sunday mass or christenings. Of the 51 per cent who still call themselves Catholics, only half said they believed in God. Many said they were Catholics because it was a family tradition.

Le Monde des Religions cited varied reasons for the decline, including the rural exodus, changing values and the rise of individualism. One devout Catholic said the biggest problem was that younger generations were no longer interested.

"When you go to Sunday mass, it's just old

people, except for special occasions like midnight mass," said Marie-France Guillon, a retired school teacher from the fishing village of Crac in Brittany. "When I tried to get my grandson, who took communion in March, to go to Sunday school, he said 'No thanks, I'd rather stay and play monopoly'."

Despite the drop, however, Catholicism remains by far the country's number one religion. The poll found Muslims accounted for only four per cent of the population (up from two per cent), Protestants three per cent and Jews one per cent.

"Catholicism will remain the most important religion," said Frederic Lenoir, who pointed out that the number of regular churchgoing Catholics still equalled the total sum of French Muslims, Protestants and Jews.

Lithuanian church to sue TV over *Popetown* series

The leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania said last month that the church planned to sue cable music channel MTV Lietuva over the cartoon series *Popetown*, which he said mocked the Pope and all Lithuanian Catholics.

The series, which depicts the Pope as a rotund 77-year-old obsessed with his pogo-stick and surrounded by toys, was commissioned by the BBC in Britain in 2002, but dropped in 2004 due to concerns that it would offend Catholics.

There were protests against the series in New Zealand and Germany, home country of Pope Benedict, but it has been aired in both.

"We are going to lodge a complaint in court because we believe that the rights of the faithful were violated by this mockery," Lithuanian Bishops' Conference President Sigitas Tamkevicus told Reuters.

He did not say when the church would lodge the complaint.

"The *Popetown* series is not only an insult to the Pope, but to all the Catholics of Lithuania," he added.

A NIGERIAN court last month sentenced a self-styled pentecostal pastor to be hanged for burning to death a female member of his congregation.

Emeka Ezeugo was found guilty of killing Ann Uzo and attempting to kill five other church members by pouring petrol on them on July 22 at his church in Ajao estate, a northern Lagos suburb.

The pastor, known as the "Reverend King", whose age was variously given as 34 or 40, was a leader of the Christian Praying Assembly. He regularly made the front page of Nigeria's tabloids.

Judge Joseph Olubunmi Oyewole, in a four-

The court earlier rejected a request from the Bishops' Conference to postpone the show's debut, the first trailer for which was shown over Christmas

The series depicts the Vatican as an office where the Pope's cardinals act like scheming managers.

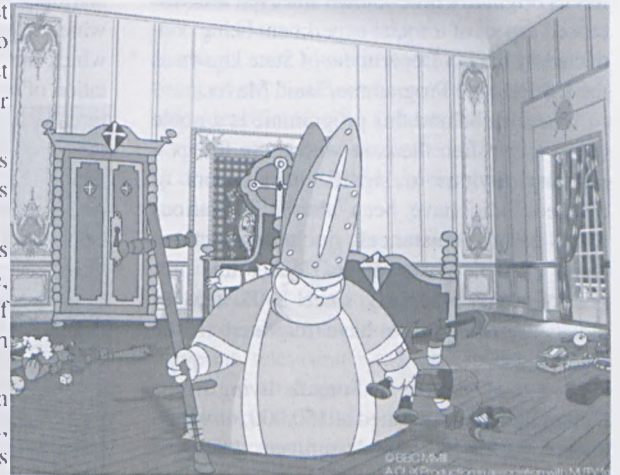
Tamkevicus, who as a priest was persecuted by the Soviet regime, said he sees MTV Lietuva's airing of the series as an attempt to diminish the role of the Church.

The head of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mindaugas Sabutis, said the series was an attack against all Christians.

MTV Lietuva, run by MTV Networks Baltic, rejected the suggestion that the series was an insult to Catholics.

"This is just an artistic satire and nothing more. We neither attempted to mock the religion, nor God himself," Ema Segal, spokeswoman for MTV Lietuva, said.

MTV Lietuva had received positive viewer



Popetown's infantile pontiff, with his collection of toys

feedback, and plans to air all 10 episodes, she added.

Andrius Serva, MTV Lietuva programme director, said: "We expected some protests, but not that sort of outcry. We think our audience is wise enough to distinguish between the caricature and the religion."

adultery.

The pastor's critics had also accused him of indulging in illicit sex with women who entered his sect.

It was reported that Ezeugo's defence would appeal the death sentence.

Ezeugo meant "a very great king" in the Ibo language and he was often cited by the local media as seeing himself as a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, likening his recent time in jail to the suffering of Jesus.

He said: "What happened to Jesus Christ about 2000 years ago is what I am going through today. The difference is only that I have not been nailed to the cross."

Nigerian pastor sentenced to death

and-a-half-hour summing up, found Ezeugo guilty on all six counts of murder and attempted murder, and said the pastor had given his congregation "stones for bread and scorpions for meat".

Ezeugo had pleaded not guilty.

The "Reverend King", a psychology graduate, had on several occasions admitted to flogging members of his congregation, normally to punish them for alleged fornication or

US 'Sharia' taxi row exposes the growing

FOLLOWING expressions of outrage from the public, Minneapolis International Airport authorities have dropped a plan to segregate the airport's taxi fleet into two groups – those willing to carry passengers with alcohol in their baggage, and those who would not do so because it flouted Islamic law. The plan was to put a coloured beacon on the roofs of the taxis to identify which cabs were booze-friendly, and which were not.

"This is a positive development, since the airport's 'solution' actually represented a capitulation to Muslim strong-arm tactics and thus a victory for the radical Islamists whose unstated goal remains the implementation of sharia in America under the guise of multiculturalism," commented William A Mayer, editor and publisher of the online magazine, *Pipeline News*.

"Largely obscured by the outlandish nature of the cabbie story lies a more sober tale, one that has its origin in a little-known and even less-discussed aspect of a social experiment being conducted by the US Department of State known as the US Refugee Programme," said Mayer.

"The idea behind this programme is a noble one – as is often the case with these things – granting asylum to significant numbers of refugees who have been abused in various ways by circumstances, including actions taken by their governments. Under this programme, and especially since 2003, tens of thousands of Somalis have migrated to the United States.

"The total number of Somalis living in the United States is estimated at 150,000, of whom about 40,000 are Somali refugees from the dominant clans. With tens of thousands of Somalis, Minneapolis has the largest Somali

community in the US. Other metropolitan areas with large numbers of Somalis include Columbus, Ohio, New York City, Washington, D.C., Boston, San Diego, Atlanta, and Detroit.

"Various publications have been assembled to explain and implement this programme. One, *Muslim Refugees in the United States: A Guide for Service Providers*, says this in its preamble: 'For some Muslim refugees, religion is a powerful determining factor in life, while for others it may be less important. This guide presents information on the needs that arise from the practice of Islam, such as the need for an appropriate space for prayer, consideration during the month when fasting is observed (Ramadan), and the need to observe dietary laws. It also outlines behaviours that may arise as responses to the fear that Muslims experience when they encounter anti-Muslim sentiments and actions in the United States.'

"Such passages, though not immediately alarming, suggest a Muslim-centric approach in which accommodation goes but one way and which inculcates in Muslim refugees an expectation of *dhimmitude* on the part of the host culture. More to the point, one must wonder what forms of 'anti-Muslim sentiments' exist in a nation reaching out to haggard Islamic populations who might reasonably be expected to perish in squalid refugee camps in Somalia without the intervention of the United States?

"This treatise presents a story-book version of Islam in which every potential area of concern is glossed over, such as their handling of *jihad*, defining it as 'the struggle – both the individual's inner struggle to follow the way of Islam, and the struggle on the side of what is right'; and this non-reality based declaration of gender equality, 'Islam emphasises the equality of all people,

and, according to the teachings of Islam, men and women are equal in the eyes of God.'"

Mayer points out that the Minneapolis taxi controversy was not an isolated example of a growing clash of cultures in the US.

"Consider the March 2005 case in which 30 Somali Muslims chose to quit their jobs at Dell Computer's Nashville, Tennessee, plant over a dispute involving a claim that the company had refused to allow them to stop work and pray five times a day while facing Mecca.

The job action, directed by the Saudi-funded Wahhabist front group, the Council on American Islamic Relations [CAIR], led to a series of lawsuits that eventually bullied Dell into re-instating the workers with back pay rather than continue to face the bad publicity associated with a Jewish-owned firm being pilloried in the press for being "anti-Muslim," a fact which no doubt caused endless satisfaction among CAIR's leadership.

"Similar cases have occurred in the Nashville area such as that of Whirlpool Corporation which – rather than knuckling under – chose to fight a similar dispute, taking it to the federal court which found on behalf of the employer, affirming that the practice of stopping entire production lines for evening prayer caused undue hardship on the company.

"Dell's record on recognition of religious diversity is exemplary, probably one of the reasons it allowed itself to be rolled by CAIR's thuggery. As the company's spokesman Mark Drury stated, 'Dell values diversity in all areas, and that includes religious beliefs ...The company's practice is to accommodate religious beliefs, so long as the accommodations are reasonable.'

"Drury further stated that not only does Dell accommodate minority religious beliefs, it goes to such great lengths that 'Employees are allowed time off with pay to pray. We have traffic-free areas for them to use for prayer.'

"He stressed however that reasonableness must be taken into account, claiming that, 'granting time off during a shift on a manufacturing line would be disruptive.'

In yet another legal case, this one also involving Minnesota Somali refugees, a group of nine has brought a federal discrimination suit against Gold 'n Plump, a Cold Spring based poultry processor. The suit alleges that the plant refused to permit the litigants enough break time for prayer.

"Gold 'n Plump spokesman Peggy Brown stated that the company has made considerable effort to accommodate its Muslim employees since 2003. Characterising the demands being made by the litigious Somalis, Brown said, 'modifications of this nature affect and possibly disrupt the lives and schedules of other employees'.

Egypt religion minister bans niqab

THE Egyptian minister of religious endowments has forbidden his ministry's religious counsellors from wearing the face veil, or niqab, according to press reports in January.

"I totally reject the appointment of fully veiled women working as counsellors meant to guide people in religious matters," minister Hamdy Zaquq told the daily *Al-Masri Al-Youm* newspaper. Zaquq's ministry oversees religious affairs in this predominantly Muslim country as well as managing religious properties, and has appointed around 50 of these counsellors across the country.

The minister said fully veiled women working as counsellors would just promote "the culture of the niqab".

"The niqab is a matter of custom and not the faith – it has nothing to do with the religion," he added.

According to the government daily *Al-Gomhuriya*, the minister said that any fully veiled religious counsellors would be reassigned to administrative posts.

Earlier in the month, Zaquq had a fully-veiled religious counsellor expelled from a training session for prayer leaders because her face was hidden.

Egypt is in the midst of a battle over women's religious garb. A growing number of Muslim women are now choosing to cover their heads and even their faces. But the Egyptian government is increasingly starting to speak out against the face veil, and has banned it from a number of government offices. In November, Culture Minister Faruq Hosni came under intense criticism for describing the veil as "repressive".

ing problems caused by Muslim refugees

"Looking at the totality of the evidence in this matter a number of aspects stand out.

1) In general, American society has made a tremendous effort to accommodate tens of thousands of these Somali refugees and their perceived needs into the mainstream, offering them jobs suitable to their skill level along with housing, social welfare assistance and a cultural support structure.

2) For its part the federal government has expended hundreds of millions of dollars on plucking these people from East Africa, most likely rescuing them from early death. It has taken extraordinary steps to be understanding and accepting of the refugee's culture and religion.

3) Unfortunately, in large part many of these refugees seem to have less than total devotion to the idea of actually becoming Americans as distinct from Somalis who happen to be currently sojourning here.

4) In many cases American hospitality has been repaid with a refusal by the Somalis to integrate into the larger society that hosts them, bringing lawsuits and allying themselves with radical Islamist organizations.

5) In fact many Somali Americans seem be intent on reproducing nothing more than "little Mogadishus" wherever they have been resettled.

The track record of America's Somali refugees so far suggests that these people are

largely unappreciative of the stunning commitment which has been made to them by the people of the United States.

"We therefore strongly recommend that the US Department of State re-evaluate the entire refugee program as it applies both to Somalia and to other African Muslim countries.

"What has been demonstrated so far is that — for whatever reasons, be they cultural or religious — the Somali refugees who have been granted asylum here are unwilling to live as full citizens, demonstrating a singular lack of commitment to making the necessary accommodations that are required to live in a pluralist, secular Western society."

Australian Islamic leader 'should be put out to pasture'

GOVERNMENT and Muslim leaders last month sent controversial cleric Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hilali an unequivocal message "If you don't like it here, don't come back."

According to Barney Schwartz, writing in the *Melbourne Age*, Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone said it, NSW Premier Morris Iemma echoed her, and Muslim leader Kuranda Seyit — formerly a staunch defender of the sheikh — suggested he should be "put out to pasture".

The Mufti of Australia was an increasingly isolated figure as Muslim leaders distanced themselves from his latest indiscretion: an interview on Egyptian television in which he claimed Muslims were not free in Australia and Anglo-Saxons were unjust and dishonest.

In the programme, *Cairo Today*, shown in Australia on satellite TV, Sheikh Hilali said that Muslims, who paid their own way to this country, were more Australian than Anglo-Saxons, who came in chains.

Senator Vanstone said on radio she was annoyed that someone who had been given citizenship could continually "bag" Australia. "I remind Sheikh Hilali that if he doesn't like Australia or our heritage or our way of life, he doesn't have to come back," she said.

Acting Prime Minister Mark Vaile asked why the sheikh would live in a country he apparently disliked, but Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said he didn't think people took the sheikh seriously.

Many Muslim leaders strongly rejected the sheikh's latest remarks. "They were ill-thought out, unwarranted and unnecessarily provocative," said Ameer Ali, former chairman of the Prime Minister's Muslim advisory group. "He's kindling a bushfire that he put out only a couple of months ago. It seems this man wants to live in controversy, and no one can help him."



Sheikh al-Hilali, who likened Australian women to 'raw meat'

Dr Ali said the sheikh showed total ignorance of how a democracy functioned, and if he had said the same things about Egypt he would have been jailed.

Islamic Council of Victoria spokesman Waleed Aly, who has previously urged the sheikh to resign, said the controversy tarnished the image of the Muslim community. He said there were Muslims among convicts sent out in

the first dozen years of settlement.

The Council's women's officer, Saara Sabbagh, said Muslim women would bear the brunt of any backlash because they were visually identifiable. "Statements like that set us back 10 years, but I think the wider community doesn't take him too seriously any more — we certainly don't."

Commenting on the sheikh's latest tirade, the *Age* said: "There is no longer any doubt that Sheikh al-Hilali is unfit to hold office. His latest remarks, made during an interview on an Egyptian television news program and transmitted on an Australian satellite network, are derogatory, inciteful, prejudicial and demeaning. They insult not only Muslims but most other Australians, their heritage and the laws by which they abide.

"Worse, the sheikh's spiel compounds the calumny of his Ramadan sermon at Sydney's Lakemba Mosque last October, in which he said women must bear some responsibility for sexual attack, and compared them to meat, left outside in the street. There was, quite rightly, a public outcry.

"The sheikh's justifications, made during the interview programme, that the sermon was a 'private gathering' and not a public speech, was in Arabic and not aimed at Australian women, are illogical and actually makes things worse. A congregation of 500 is hardly a 'private gathering', and his speech was offensive in any language. Moreover, his implication that Muslim women are morally different from other Australian women and therefore worthy of public castigation is surely a slur on the very women who have relied on him for spiritual inspiration and advice. This is not the behaviour expected of a religious leader of any denomination, and brings further shame to an already deeply discredited man ..."

*Yesterday, upon a tree
I saw Jesus' face, quite clearly
His face was there again today
I wish the pest would go away!*

I WAS prompted to rework Mearns' popular little rhyme – *Yesterday, upon the stair* – after I had read yet another of those idiotic news reports about religious images “miraculously” appearing on some or other mundane object.

The report concerned the discovery by “a non-practising Hindu” in Burgess Hill, Sussex, of “the face of Jesus” on a hawthorn tree.

A local newspaper said at the time that the tree was “set to become a focus of pilgrimage after a local pastor declared it ‘a revelation from God’.”

Sewdutt Maunick told of how he was inexorably drawn to the “divine” shrub. “Something was actually urging me to come to this end of the garden because we never actually sit here. Suddenly I rushed to call my wife, Vijayantimala, and said ‘Look, I have seen this figure of a man, come and look.’”



The Sussex hawthorn Jesus

According to the report, “the suitably epiphanised couple called in pastor Elaine Thomas who confirmed the revelation, saying: ‘I think that often we are in the right place at the right time. It’s touched my heart and it’s done something for me.’”

The report concluded “Mr and Mrs Maunick now plan to talk about their close encounter with the divine to the pastor’s flock.”

The *real* miracle of this particular sighting was that Jesus’s face had not been carefully hacked from the hawthorn, and sold for a mint on the internet auction sight, eBay.

Being at a loose end when I read the report, I decided to kill some time by looking deeper into the subject of “miracle” images. I’m glad that I did, because – if nothing else – the exer-

A miracle? No, stupid,

cise added a new word to my vocabulary: pareidolia, which I found in a feature article in Florida’s *Tampa Tribune*.

The piece opened with the discovery by a candy factory worker in California who saw “an amazing likeness of the Virgin Mary standing in prayer” under a mixing vat’s spout. Chocolate dripping from the spout had formed itself into the figure. The object was described as “absolutely a miracle” by Jacinto Santacruz, the 26-year-old Roman Catholic who stumbled upon the 2.5” “apparition” at the Bodega Chocolates factory. Had Ms Santacruz been an atheist, she would have seen the thing for what it really was – nothing more than a grubby lump of chocolate – and consigned it to the nearest trash can.

“All over the world, people like Santacruz have been finding religion in odd places,” the newspaper said.

Holy figures have been perceived in bricks, wooden logs, the gritty underpass of a Chicago expressway and a tiny gold nugget found in the Arizona desert. In 1977, a woman making burritos in Lake Arthur, New Mexico, saw the face of Jesus in the pattern of skillet burns on a tortilla, the paper revealed.

Christians aren’t the only ones to find the holy in the ordinary: followers of Islam have said they’ve seen the Arabic script for “Allah” or “Mohammed” on fish scales, chicken eggs and lambs.

“The phenomenon is so common that scientists have given it a name: pareidolia, the perception of patterns where none are intended,” the newspaper added.

According to Stewart Guthrie, one of a handful of professors who have studied it, such perceptions are part of the way human beings are “hard-wired.”

“It’s really part of our basic perceptual and cognitive situation,” said Guthrie, a cultural anthropologist, retired Fordham University professor and author of the book *Faces in the*

Clouds: A New Theory of Religion.

“It has to do with all kinds of misapprehensions that there is something humanlike in one’s environment, when really there’s not.”

At the root of the phenomenon, he said, is the survival instinct.

“It’s a built-in perceptual strategy of better safe than sorry,” Guthrie said. “In a situation of uncertainty, we guess that something is caused by the most important possibility.”

LYNETTE VAN DAM adds a new word to her vocabulary

The feelings generated by these perceptions can be powerful. At Bodega Chocolates, Santacruz and her co-workers quickly placed the chocolate Madonna in a small plastic case, and as news of the apparition spread, a stream of the curious and devout began making pilgrimages to



Diana Duyser, who sold her Virgin Mary toasted sandwich for \$28,000

the shop, where they prayed, crossed themselves in awe and knelt in veneration.

“It’s really emotional,” Santacruz said later. “I can’t describe the feeling; the emotions



Heavenly aubergine

SOMETHING heavenly has just entered a tiny home in the north of London in the holy month of Ramadan.

Kubra Kassam, 45, of Marrow, cut through an aubergine and was left flabbergasted at what she saw.

Instead of something to eat, she found an inscrip-

tion of “Allah”.

“It was a total surprise to all of us,” she told *Eastern Eye*. “We are going to store it for long as we can. We will certainly not be eating it to break our fast.”

The holy sighting has been confirmed by a local imam.

d, it's simply pareidolia

make me cry.”

Other alleged miracles have proved profitable. A 10-year-old grilled-cheese sandwich with a pattern resembling the Virgin Mary sold on eBay in 2004 for \$28,000; a pretzel in the shape of Mary cradling the infant Jesus fetched \$10,600; and a water-stained piece of plaster cut from a shower wall bearing what looked like the face of Jesus brought in nearly \$2,000.

Some of these manifestations attract worldwide attention.

In 1996, the owner of Bongo Java in Nashville, Tennessee, said he discovered a cinnamon bun bearing the likeness of Mother Teresa in profile.

Dubbed “the miracle nun bun,” the pastry got so much notice worldwide that he parlayed it into a commercial venture, selling nun-bun T-shirts and coffee mugs on the Internet. The items were taken off the market when Mother Teresa complained, but he refused to stop exhibiting the bun even after she died.

Eventually the venerated bun was stolen during a 2005 Christmas Day break-in and, despite the offer of a \$5,000 reward, only photographs of it were returned – anonymously – to a local newspaper.

Starting about the same time, an estimated 500,000 visitors flocked to see the glass facade of a home finance building in Clearwater, said to bear an iridescent image of a veiled Virgin Mary. Sceptics said it was merely a stain created by corrosion.

Eventually the building was bought by a Catholic revivalist group from Ohio, which dubbed it the Virgin Mary Building before replacing the miraculous windows, broken by vandals using slingshots, with a large picture of Jesus Christ.

Some believe, though, that the Jesus tortilla of New Mexico set the world standard for claims of miracle sightings.

After discovering it one morning while making her husband's breakfast, Maria Rubio mounted a display of the tortilla, which, by 1979, reportedly had been visited by more than 35,000 people bearing flowers and photos of their ailing relatives.

According to Roadside America.com – “your online guide to offbeat tourist attractions” – Mrs Rubio quit her job as a maid to attend full-time to the hastily constructed “Shrine of the Holy Tortilla” in her home.



UBILANT: Butcher Aziz Durrani, with the piece of lamb which he says has the name Allah written on it

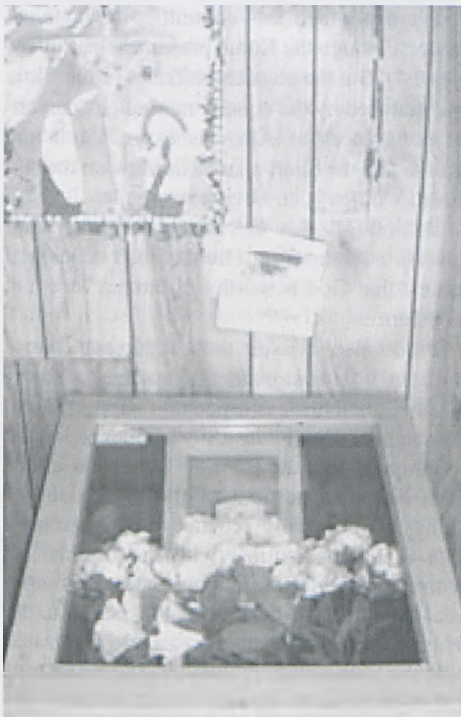
Butcher finds ‘a sign from God’ in cut of meat

This cutting from a Leicester paper tells of how a local Muslim butcher found the Arabic word for Allah on a portion of lamb

When away, she'd leave the door unlocked so that no one would be denied access.

She mounted the Tex-Mex relic in a wooden frame under glass, a puffy wad of cotton along the bottom making it appear as if Tortilla Christ was suspended just inside the Pearly Gates.

“In the wake of this first Tortilla visitation, all heaven broke loose. In November 1977 a competing Miracle Tortilla appeared in the skillet of Phoenix housewife Ramona Barreras. It was the face of Jesus, this time accompanied by the letters K. J. C. and B. which Ramona believed stood for ‘King Jesus



The famous New Mexico Jesus on a Tortilla shrine

is Coming Back’. According to the *Phoenix New Times* in 1997, the Barreras Miracle Tortilla rests in a Plexiglas box in a kitchen drawer”, reports Roadside America.

In March 1983, housewife Paula Rivera claimed the image of Jesus appeared on a corn tortilla she was making in Hidalgo, Texas. She created her own “Shrine of the Holy Tortilla.”

In the meantime, the faithful still travelled to Lake Arthur to see the original. Mrs Rubio eventually moved it to a small wooden shed in the backyard. Years of merciless south-western heat have literally fried and refried the tortilla. The image, once recognisable even in photographs, has faded to a half dozen brown spots and a wiggly burnt blotch.

“There are no signs that any healings have happened recently – no leftover crutches – so perhaps this miracle has run its course”, says Roadside America. “But Mrs. Rubio's family is perfectly happy to open up the shrine for any and all visitors”

The *Tampa Tribune* reported that church officials don't encourage people to revere pareidolia.

“The church encourages Christians to see the face of Christ in the homeless, the poor, the destitute and the immigrant – not in a plate of pasta,” said Tod Tamberg, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. “Imagine showing up on your judgment day in front of God, and he says, ‘Where did you see me? Did you see me in the poor and the immigrant and the homeless?’ And you say, ‘Well, no, but I did see you in a piece of chocolate once.’ Doesn't sound so good, does it?”

Carol Hogan, communications director for the California Catholic Conference in Sacramento, who once waited hours to observe a shadow resembling the Virgin Mary, said the real miracle wasn't what she saw on the wall.

“It was the people who came and stood in line,” she said. “That's the part that was so memorable to me. What it said is that there's a yearning out there for things spiritual; people have a great spiritual hunger.”

The late American astronomer and author Carl Sagan claimed that the human tendency to see faces in tortillas, clouds, cinnamon buns, and the like is an evolutionary trait. He wrote, “As soon as the infant can see, it recognises faces, and we now know that this skill is hard-wired in our brains.

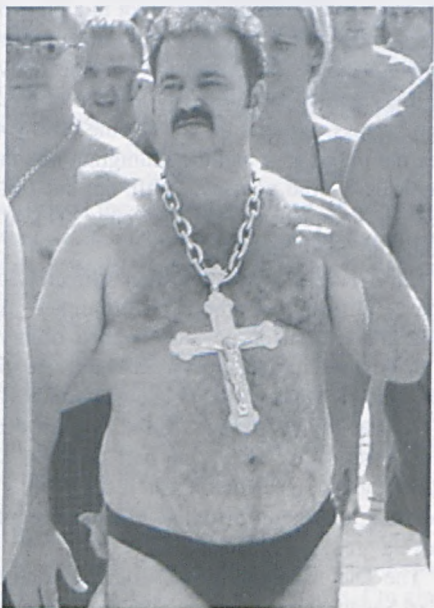
“Those infants who a million years ago were unable to recognise a face smiled back less, were less likely to win the hearts of their parents, and less likely to prosper. These days, nearly every infant is quick to identify a human face, and to respond with a goony grin.”

When asked how he would explain a “genuine mystical experience”, Sagan, who described himself as an agnostic, responded: “Your question presupposes the existence of a genuine mystical experience, and I'm not sure what that is. People have vivid hallucinations. How do you distinguish between altered states of consciousness?”

Inspired by Steve Jones' recent award as secularist of the year and by Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, I revisited some extremely sophisticated mathematical and scientific arguments propounded by Christian and Jewish apologists to justify their belief in God.

The arguments, by astrophysicists and molecular biologists, purport to prove the role of Intelligent Design in the structure of the universe. The maths, physics and biology are way beyond the grasp of a layman like myself and the arguments may be flawless for all I know, though most mainstream specialists in the various fields reject them. What surprises me, however, is the fact that many of the proponents of ID jump headlong from whatever it is that their arguments may be capable of demonstrating into the arms of Biblical mythology. Thus William Dembski, a mathematician and philosopher, in the course of advocating Intelligent Design as the explanation of life on earth, says "Christ is never an addendum to a scientific theory but always a completion."

BA Trolley Dolly Strike



Staff stage mass walk-out to defend their right to wear religious bling

Congratulations to Jo Holland of Doveridge, for winning the "trolley dolly" entry in our December caption contest, which takes the top prize of *The Very Best of Linda Smith*. Runner-up prizes of a year's subscription to the *Freethinker* go to Rogier van Bakel for his "'Your body is a temple.' Jesus said, but he never imagined he'd end up dangling from a temple quite as hairy and sweaty as Frank 'Manboobs' Cooper"; and Ken Moore, of Shropshire for "I thought the electronic tag and the ASBO were bad enough, but I'll never live this one down!"

In what follows I propose to ignore Jones and Dawkins, play God's advocate and assume that the arguments of the astrophysicists and molecular biologists are valid, and then compare what they might prove with the faith of the Christians and Jews who advance them. I will also look at other methods of scholarly enquiry and see how close they can take us to the mighty deeds of Yahweh and Christ.

First of all I must define these mighty deeds. And I'm going to disregard the fundamentalists. It's not fair to the vast majority of practising Christians or Jews to insist on a serpent whispering to Eve in the Garden of Eden in 4004 BC. Yet there is an irreducible core of mythology which no Christian or Jew can deny without ceasing to be a Christian or Jew in any meaningful sense.

For Jews this would have to include Yahweh's covenant with Abraham, His promise of the Land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants, His deliverance of His chosen people from the land of Egypt, and the giving of the ten commandments.

Christians might dispense with part of this, but would probably have to accept some direct communication between Jehovah and the patriarchs and Moses. To this they would have to add the Incarnation (albeit without angels and a wandering star), the redemption of mankind through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the Resurrection, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the doctrine of the Trinity. Catholics would additionally insist on Christ's appointment of Peter as the founder of an infallible church. Moreover the doctrine of the redemption implies a prior fall; so the Christian is committed to believing, in some sense, the story of Eve and the apple, which a thoughtful Jew might smile away as myth.

Islam is much less committed to mythical history, though the Koran presumes the truth of Genesis. But the physical miracles of the Bible are matched by the equally marvellous personal preferences of Allah as expressed in the Koran and the Shari'a law. His view on the status of women is an obvious example.

Behind all this lies the assumption, not always obvious from His recorded deeds and tastes, that God is worthy of human love and obedience.

I must also set aside those arguments whose success it is impossible to assume. Young Earth Creationism is a position supported not by scientific, but by historical evidence, on the assumption that the Book of Genesis is a reliable historical account of the beginnings of things. It is usually rebutted on the grounds that it is incompatible with the findings of astronomy, geology and palaeontology, but its real flaw lies elsewhere, in the fact that the Higher Criticism of the text has demonstrated that the book is totally unreliable as an historical document.

The argument that God is known directly by religious experience or can be inferred from our sense of absolute right and wrong must

God's Ac

similarly be dismissed. Those who have enjoyed such experiences vary from the saintly to the pathologically murderous and the objects of their veneration from the virgin Mary to Pan the randy goat god. It is not necessary to note that schizophrenics typically hear voices or to remember that Hitler thought it morally right to gas Jews, in order to realise the subjective nature of religious experience and moral conviction.

The Argument from Design in its classic form deserves lengthier treatment. This was originally proposed by a Dutchman, Bernard Nieuwentyt, in 1716. He argued that if you

If humankind was the creation must have been a Dr Frankenstein

found a watch you would infer that it had been designed by a watchmaker for the purpose of telling the time. In Nieuwentyt's day the sun was believed to be at the centre of the universe with the earth at exactly the right distance to receive the heat and light needed to sustain the life of man. It was also believed that the history of man was as old as that of the universe, give or take a few days. So, presumably the designer had designed the whole thing for the purpose of sustaining *homo sapiens*. At best Nieuwentyt could have delivered only an absentee designer, one who wound the watch up and then went off to holiday on some celestial beach.

But the Dutchman was soon out of date. In the 1780s the astronomer William Herschel demonstrated that the sun is only one star swimming in a galaxy of millions and that the spiral nebulae are other galaxies in their own right. James Hutton suggested that the geological processes that had shaped the earth's crust had been going on with "no vestige of a beginning; no prospect of an end". And it was not to be long before the fossil remains were discovered of creatures that had walked the earth long before the first appearance of man. What Nieuwentyt had found turned out to be, not really a watch, but a formation of crystals which only superficially resembled one.

Now to the sophisticated arguments, which I am going to assume to be valid.

First of all those of the astrophysicists. There are two principal arguments here.

Firstly, the universe conforms to certain numerical values, known as the constants of nature, which, had they been slightly different would have made it impossible for a universe such as we can conceive of, to exist at all. These constants include, for example, the strength of the electromagnetic force and the ratio of the mass of the electron to that of the proton. Why do they have the particular values

Advocate

they do? Because an Intelligent Designer planned it that way.

Secondly, the universe can be described and understood mathematically; there is a logic underlying it. Why? Because an Intelligence planned it that way.

From these propositions Leon M. Lederman, a sub-atomic physicist, concludes. "In the very beginning there was a void.....a nothingness containing no space, no light, no sound. Yet the laws of Nature were in place and this curious vacuum held potential.....We don't know anything about the universe until it reaches the mature age of a billionth of a tril-

ation of a deity, its creator Frankenstein, says JACK HASTIE

lionth of a second....Only God knows what happened at the very beginning."

Lederman may be correct. So what do his conclusions deliver? The God of Abraham who delivered His chosen people from Egyptian bondage? Jesus who died on the cross to redeem mankind from sin? Allah who instructed Gabriel to dictate to an illiterate camel driver His detestation of pigs and homosexuals? Or a template which, however intelligent it is or was, merely determines a physical universe, much as the molecular structure of certain minerals determines a crystalline architecture? Such reasoning can't even deliver a deity to whom worship is due.

Let's move on to the argument of the molecular biologists. These concern themselves, not with the physics of the universe, but with the biology of life on earth.

Michael J Behe, a biochemist, claims to find "irreducible complexity" in biological structures. From this he strays into probability theory and comes to the conclusion that these structures could not have arisen by chance and, therefore, must have been designed. He is supported by Demski, who delves into design theory, probability theory and the definition of complexity in order to demonstrate that life on earth must be due to design. Molecular biologists have generally refuted Behe and mathematicians and statisticians have done the same for Demski, but as God's advocate I am going to assume that the pair succeed in their arguments. Where do they lead us? Strictly, supporters of Intelligent Design often avoid stating explicitly who or what the designer is, though Demski is a committed Christian. In fact there are any number of possibilities; life on earth could have been designed by intelligent aliens, or by supernatural beings of a variety of kinds – Hindu gods, clever demons. The most design theory can prove is that some kind of intelligence wanted to create life; any inter-

est in the well being or even existence of *homo sapiens* is a further and unwarranted assumption. So why does Demski bother?

Then there are the arguments of the philosophers. Unlike the astronomers and biologists the philosophers don't argue from the detail of the way things are that they must have been intelligently designed, but rather from the fact that there is anything at all to the existence of a Supreme Being. Thus in the 4th century BCE Plato argued that there must be an uncaused First Cause of all things. In the 13th century CE Thomas Aquinas advanced the argument in a slightly different form, holding that there must be a Necessary Being who couldn't possibly *not* exist and upon whose existence that of everything else depends. Anselm, the 12th-century Archbishop of Canterbury, proposed a different argument; that, since he could entertain the concept of a Being "than which none greater can be thought," such a Being must exist. In the 17th century Descartes advanced this argument with a slight variation. For him the fact that he found in his mind the idea of "a Being possessed of every sort of perfection" proved that such a Being must exist.

It has been convincingly demonstrated that all these arguments are flawed, but let's give God the benefit of any doubt and assume they do succeed. Where do they get us? A Necessary Being and a First Cause aren't really any different from the constants of nature. They just are. If Anselm's argument is valid it will deliver a Being infinite in all respects, but not necessarily a creator, let alone one deserving human devotion. Descartes' alleged proof *could* deliver a Being worthy of human veneration, but still not a creator. And none of the philosophers' proofs gets us remotely near a God who performs mighty deeds in history or has preferences about human behaviour.

The present Dalai Lama has recently suggested that the technique of introspective meditation as practised and refined by Buddhist contemplatives is as valid and objective a method of establishing empirical data about the self and its relation to ultimate reality as Western science is in relation to the observable universe. He maintains that the method has its own rules, tried and tested, and its own standards for insuring objectivity. Hindu mystics – as distinct from the devotees of popular Hinduism – would no doubt claim the same for their discipline. If the method *is* valid it will be capable of delivering objective knowledge which is beyond the reach of western science. What like, then, is the God of the Eastern contemplatives?

The Lankavatara Sutra quotes the alleged words of the Buddha as follows; "When appearances and names are put away and all discrimination ceases that which remains is the true and essential nature of things and, as nothing can be predicated as to the nature of essence, it is called the 'Suchness' of Reality. This universal, undifferentiated, inscrutable 'Suchness' is the only reality."

In a Hindu version, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, attributes the following wisdom to the sage Yajnavalkya: "He who dwells in all things and within all things, whom all things do not know, whose body all things are, who controls all things from within, he is your Self, the controller within, the immortal."

So now we know. All that is, is all *that* there is; and you and I, the apple tree in the garden, Mount Everest and the planet Mars are all composed of the same sub-atomic particles.

From such speculation it is a relief to turn to a discipline which is at its best rigorously experimental and adopts a statistical approach to the problems of probability and chance – parapsychology. If its experimental methods are sound and its handling of chance statistically correct, it proves the occurrence of anomalous perception (ESP) and anomalous physical effects (PK). It is doubtful if its methods can ever prove the survival of the human personality beyond physical death, but let us once again adopt the role of God's advocate and assume they can and do. What can be inferred from its findings about God? The answer is that this one possibly valid method of pinning down the paranormal has nothing whatever to say about human immortality, judgment or karma, future states of bliss or damnation, or any kind of superior being(s) or ultimate reality.

Let the last word go to those who would argue that if the universe (or at least the earth) has been designed, it has been designed badly.

Firstly the biologists. As against Behe's arguments for irreducible complexity, others have claimed that many biological structures exhibit excessive complexity. Biologist Kenneth Miller writes, "In fact, the human genome is littered with pseudogenes, gene fragments, orphaned genes, Junk DNA, and so many repeated copies of pointless DNA sequences that it cannot be attributed to anything resembling intelligent design."

Then the historians. Even the Bible admits that God created a human race which failed its first test. Eventually things got so bad that He had to wipe most of it out in a universal flood. This corrective failed to work and, a few generations later He had to curb human wickedness by confusing the tongues at Babel. In more recent times, in the aftermath of two world wars, in the grip of international terrorism and threatened with catastrophic global warming, it seems clear that all is not well with the creation. Of course it's all the fault of human free will and original sin, because, as one Catholic commentator remarked recently, mankind is "deeply flawed". Precisely! If there *was* a creator he made a monster which went dreadfully out of control. The archetype is not a Perfect Being, nor a God of love, nor even jealousy, but Doctor Frankenstein.

Here at last God's advocate can find a point of reconciliation between scientists and the fundamentalist faithful; we can all believe in a God of bad design.

Morocco sentences journalists over Islam jokes

A MOROCCAN court last month sentenced two journalists who published a collection of popular jokes about Islam, sex and politics to suspended three-year jail terms and banned their magazine for two months.

Editors and journalists at *Nichane*, which means "As it is", had feared the worst when the state prosecutor said at the start of the trial that the magazine should be permanently banned, and the two journalists jailed for up to five years and forbidden from practising journalism.

But the Casablanca court's presiding judge, Noureddine Ghassin, handed down a lighter sentence. In addition to the two-month ban, he fined *Nichane* 80,000 Moroccan dirhams (£4,760).

The magazine journalists and editors left the court without commenting but their lawyer Chawki Benyoun said he would lodge an appeal soon.

Nichane's editor Driss Ksikes and reporter Sanaa al-Aji told the court last week the jokes were published merely to accompany an analysis of Moroccan society.

The magazine apologised to readers who may have been offended by the jokes after the

article triggered indignation among conservative Islamists in Morocco and abroad.

Last month, Prime Minister Driss Jettou ordered *Nichane* off news stands pending the trial, saying the jokes were an attack on Islam and "went against morals and customs".

Morocco's press is widely seen as one of the freest in the Arab world but journalists can still find themselves before a judge when they overstep some limits – like questioning the king's role as guardian of Islam or Morocco's claim to the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

Meanwhile, the press freedom organisation Reporters Without Borders has revealed that Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey have banned an issue of a French history magazine which focuses on fundamentalism

RWB condemned the bans imposed last month on the French bi-monthly magazine *Historia Thématique*, which is about fundamentalism. The magazine has as its subhead, "The major religions confront their old demons."

"The banning of a publication for the sole reason that it is liable to shock the religious sensibilities of some people or even the majority of the population is an archaic practice which we can only energetically condemn," RWB said.

The Tunisian authorities announced their ban

on 10 January, saying it was due to a picture showing the Prophet Mohammed, which is "formally forbidden in Islam and could offend the religious feelings of Tunisians." The picture in fact comes from an illustrated copy of the Koran dating from 1583 housed in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul.

The January issue of *Historia*, a monthly produced by the same publishing house, has been on sale without any problem, although it has an illustration showing Mohammed in partially animal form (with feathers and the tail of a fish).

Historia editor Pierre Baron told Reporters Without Borders that the reaction to the *Historia Thématique* issue was indicative of a current climate of intolerance. He pointed out that the issue was also about Christian and Jewish fundamentalism, adding that his staff decided that fundamentalism was an appropriate subject because of the increasing frequency of cases of offence being taken on the grounds of religious sensibilities.

Big winter boost for the Freethinker fund

FREETHINKER subscribers dug deep into their pockets between the end of last October and January 22 this year, contributing a total of £1,796.33 to the *Freethinker* fund. We would like to thank the following for their donations:

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Jesus and Mo



© jesusandmo.net

Challenging Harris on Israel

SAM Harris' comments on Israel (*Freethinker*, January) cannot go unchallenged. It is highly debatable that this country has any right to exist at all.

The international community could hardly have made a graver error at the end of WWII than to connive in the brutal expulsion of the Palestinian people to create a country for the adherents of an intrinsically intolerant religion.

Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people and its recent attack on Lebanon in fact demonstrate a callous indifference to human suffering on an almost unimaginable scale. Her policies are far more reprehensible than the worst excesses of apartheid South Africa.

The very least any liberal or indeed any decent person could demand of Israel is that she returns to her 1967 boundaries, gives up her weapons of mass destruction, stops persecuting her subject peoples and makes some effort to live in peace with her neighbours. Failure to do so should be met with comprehensive sanctions imposed by the international community.

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE
London

SAM Harris' otherwise excellent article contains two unfortunate items. The easily disposed one is the claim that Israel has any moral high ground. This Jewish colony on Palestinian land should never have been permitted, as it has, predictably, become a festering sore in the Middle East, giving all kinds of bad people a good excuse. We should take steps to dissolve it and welcome back our own Jews to Britain.

The second is his claim that only the terrorists were responsible for toppling the Twin Towers. He is obviously no physicist. There was insufficient kinetic energy in the planes and their fuel to demolish the towers. Indeed, no building has ever been toppled by aircraft impact.

The towers showed every sign of a professional demolition job. Maybe the terrorists had planted the demolition charges. Certainly, someone did. The lower level Building 7 was brought down by demolition charges later that day. Such charges take time to place, but the US authorities said they had to bring it down because of the fires in it. This is all very odd.

My own conspiracy theory is that Cheney suggested to Bush that, since they knew about the terrorist plot (and the FBI were on to them), they should let it go ahead and make sure it was successful, so that Bush could push through the Patriot Act and seize total power. Bush then vetoes the idea, which is why he looked so bemused when he was told the news, effectively, that Cheney had gone ahead despite his veto. This may be far-fetched but stranger things have been known.

KEN BALDRY
London

O'Hara, O'Hair and Atheism

HAS Dan O'Hara had a brain transplant or something? I know he was a vicar in his twenties, but then he apparently saw the light and became a secular atheist rationalist, and an active member of the National Secular Society, of which he succeeded me briefly as president. Now, however, he vilifies us at every opportunity – and, in unrestrained accordance with our commitment to free speech, he is given such opportunities month after month in our own journal.

I have become accustomed to his constant invective against atheism, but in December the main target of his venom was a particular American atheist – the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

As far as I am aware, Dan did not even know her. I did and she was a good friend to me, as well as an indefatigable campaigner for freethought and internationalism, and an excellent debater on behalf of "the best of causes".

I first met her in Finland in 1983, and the following year she invited me to the United States as her guest for six weeks.

Not only did she arrange and finance a speaking tour of the States for me, as a British spokesperson for atheism, including radio and television around the country, but generously took me to all the touristy places.

A reactionary magazine had dubbed Madalyn "the most hated woman in America", and the description stuck. It was a typical American assessment of anyone so un-American as to admit to being a nonbeliever, a socialist, a feminist, and a pacifist. She would not have been so vilified in this country. When the American media referred to me as "the British Madalyn Murray O'Hair", I was quite happy with the description, as the quickest way to explain my position to the American public, though I was well aware it would arouse hostility.

Extremely hard-working and immensely courageous, Madalyn expected a great deal of her family (her second son Jon Garth and granddaughter Robin) as well as her employees, but not so much as she expected of herself, despite her severe diabetes and arthritis.

Certainly, Madalyn was no saint. I disliked her coarse language, and she tended to exaggerate facts and even lie, as well as being less than scrupulous about money. (For instance, she would reprint atheist books from other countries without bothering about copyright.) And she made bitter enemies, as well as many loyal friends.

One of those enemies, David Waters (an employee she had fired), organised a small gang to abduct the family of three in order to rob them of their investments. The authorities did nothing, amid widespread allegations that the family had absconded of their own free will (in the middle of breakfast? leaving behind their valuable house, their possessions,

their publishing enterprise, their pet dogs, and Madalyn's life-dependent insulin?) and were living it up abroad with money belonging to their organisation.

When one of the kidnappers inadvertently killed Robin while raping her, Waters decided the other two must die immediately, in addition to one member of his own gang who seemed likely to blow the whistle; and the four corpses were dismembered.

For five years the FBI dragged its feet over the murders and allowed the clues to go cold. After all, three of the victims were only atheists, and the fourth a known criminal. Then Waters, terminally ill and in custody for a fiscal crime, confessed to the murders and revealed the secret graves, so as to die in a comfortable Federal prison instead of a local hell-hole.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

DAN O'Hara's purpose (*Freethinker*, December 2006) seems to be to pour out the vials of his wrath upon Barry Duke; but as effective argument his long tirade is quite useless.

Duke did not mention Madalyn Murray O'Hair in his editorial footnote to Ted Goodman's letter (November 2006). He merely regretted that there was not a British equivalent of American Atheists Inc.

O'Hara did not complete the elementary philosophical chore of defining his terms. Religion is multiform and protean, and consequently a notoriously difficult term to define; it is all too easy to exclude some aspects of religion or include some aspects that are not religious.

However, Duke's definition will do as an approximation; he need not be showing bad faith in using one that was open to criticism. O'Hara slid over the role of gods in Buddhism and descended into abuse.

To turn to dogma: this is a belief, sometimes depreciatingly defined as an arrogant declaration of opinion. More specifically, it is a body of opinion formulated and authoritatively stated ... a doctrinal system (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). As Duke pointed out, the idea that there is, even informally, an atheist church or an atheist priest is risible. There is no atheist creed or doctrinal system, and I should be very surprised if there are more than a few, even of those who would be happy to acknowledge that they are without belief in God – that is, atheists – who would subscribe without qualification to any of the dogmas listed by O'Hara.

Friedrich Engels claimed Karl Marx said "All I know is that I am not a Marxist". If O'Hara is right and I am quite wrong about atheist dogma, then all I know is that I am not an atheist.

COLIN MILLS
Amersham

I FELT that Dan O'Hara's acerbic comments in the December issue warrant some riposte. His

claim that atheism is a religion is weakened by the use of extreme examples, examples that are not necessarily true. Communism may possibly be referred to in some sense as a "religion", but Stalinism was a personality cult centred round an absolute dictator, supported by a secret police, and Stalin did not care whether Russians were religious or not. He was an opportunist, that is all, and allowed a revival of the Orthodox Church in the Second World War, as a patriotic organisation. To use his name in an atheist argument is disingenuous.

Forgive me if I am wrong but I sensed that Mr O'Hara's use of the word "dogma" was meant to indicate a religious doctrine, or belief, that is claimed to be true without proof. If that is the case, then I feel atheism is free from dogma in that it attempts to be fact-based rather than faith-based. Yes, mistakes will be made and wrong avenues chosen from time to time, but people at the forefront such as Dawkins are constantly increasing knowledge in many fields, whereas god-based religions rest on centuries-old literature of often questionable authorship, with no advancement in facts or knowledge in the intervening years. Atheism is therefore not a religion for me – it is a search for the truth, or a "work-in-progress".

Finally, Mr O'Hara's spurious attempt to link Madalyn O'Hair with honest atheism, the NSS and the *Freethinker* defies belief! History is littered with people from all religions and beliefs who were evil wrongdoers so, if she was one, it should not deter the NSS and similar organisations from continuing the search for the truth of life. Dystopia, Mr O'Hara, is a far more common state in countries with strong religious authorities than in those with secular tendencies.

MARTIN DICKINSON
Burnley

DAN O'Hara asserts that atheism is a religion, having numerous associated dogmas. Seeing that he writes approvingly of the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia*, I'll direct him to its (separate) articles on atheism and religion. The article on atheism notes that "while atheists tend to accept secular philosophies such as humanism, naturalism and materialism, they do not necessarily adhere to any one particular ideology, nor does atheism have any institutionalised rituals or behaviours". Contrast this lack of adherence to *Wikipedia's* definition of religion: "Adherence to codified beliefs and rituals that (generally) involve a faith in a spiritual nature".

Wikipedia notes that although atheism is commonly defined as the positive belief that no gods exist (strong atheism), "most atheistic philosophers and groups define atheism as the simple absence of belief in deities" (weak atheism). Newborn babies presumably lack a belief in God. Tables and chairs definitely do. Will Dan O'Hara contend that newborn babies and inanimate objects are all "religious", or will he concede that atheism (at least in the way most atheistic philosophers and groups

define the term) is not a religion after all?

If Madalyn Murray O'Hair was the "High Priestess" of atheism, as Dan O'Hara alleges, it's rather surprising that I've never even heard of her. Dan's claim that "The American Atheists website still has no posting about her disappearance and murder" is an outright lie, as the following article, on the official American Atheists site, proves: [http://www.atheists.org/visitors.center/OHair Family/ns-feb03.html](http://www.atheists.org/visitors.center/OHair%20Family/ns-feb03.html)

"David Waters, the man who authorities say was the mastermind behind a plot to rob and murder Madalyn Murray O'Hair, her son Jon and granddaughter Robin Murray, died in prison January 27 at the Federal Medical center in Butner, N.C. He reportedly succumbed to lung cancer at age 55. In January 2001, Waters reached a plea agreement with federal prosecutors, and led authorities to a remote Texas ranch where the dismembered bodies of the three prominent atheists were found. He pleaded guilty to extorting nearly \$600,000 from the O'Hairs, and avoided prosecution for his role in the grisly murders".

ROBERT STOVOLD
Brighton

DAN O'Hara is wrong to describe atheism as a religion. It is, of course, a belief or, rather, a set of linked beliefs. But so are Newton's theory of gravity and my belief that the *Freethinker* is a useful magazine.

None of these is a religion because, firstly, each depends on evidence that can be reproduced and publicly shared and, secondly, I'm willing, in each case, to say what evidence would cause me to abandon that belief. In the case of Newton's theory that evidence has been available for 80 years.

Now I can conceive of someone so emotionally committed to atheism – perhaps someone who had been abused by a priest as a child – that his mind was closed to argument and evidence. You could call that person's atheism a religion. But I don't believe that most declared atheists fall into that category.

We have firm beliefs – formed with thought and reinforced by experience. We may, like Richard Dawkins, be vigorous advocates of those views. We may speak forcefully and spend little time looking for countervailing evidence. But we do believe that we MIGHT be wrong. We would, I think, find conclusive evidence for a god disturbing AND fascinating. Our disbelief is not religious.

DAVID FLINT
London

DAN O'Hara's lively display of bangs and flashes (December *Points of View*), will doubtless attract plenty of comments, so I will try to be brief.

Although I agree with Dan's strictures about the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who created a bizarre analogue of a fundamentalist, authoritarian religious sect, some of her trenchant critics were atheists: Fred Woodworth and the

late Dr Gordon Stein, for instance. Opinions of O'Hair by people who knew about her tended to polarise: you found her style admirable and inspiring or else downright repulsive!

On the other hand, I am surprised to see someone of Dan's experience give an account of "a few of the commoner dogmas of atheism" that reads like a laundry list of right-wing religious caricatures and stereotypes. Atheists do not have to subscribe to "There is no God" (though some may do), and the question "What is the meaning of life?" is, for me, meaningless. (What is the "meaning" of the River Thames, Brighton beach, a beech tree or a tabby cat?)

Although codes of morality are human inventions, the capacity for morality, like the capacity for language, is very likely innate: a feature of our being social human beings.

Yes, a few atheists have been known to take their atheism dogmatically and obsessively, with almost "religious zeal" in fact. But the same can be said of some people with interests in jogging, yoga, cricket, football, collecting things, vegetarianism, bird watching, art and writing. Such people can be "religious" in a metaphorical sense, but we should not conflate this with "real" religious religion, which is almost invariably bound up with the concepts of "faith" and of magic or the supernatural: with reincarnation or an afterlife and usually with gods, goddesses or a god.

Atheism is simply an opinion about a common feature of many religions; and saying "no" to "Do you believe in the supernatural?" does not in itself make a man or woman religious.

NIGEL SINNOTT
Australia

DAN O'Hara says "what about Buddhism ... absolutely no-one doubts it is a religion". I wonder what his definition of "religion" is. As I understand it, Buddhism teaches that one can find life more bearable by facing reality, that life is impermanent and unsatisfactory. This seems like common sense.

JILL HARVEY
Surrey

The religious in prison

BY the same pedantry with which supposed high-school howlers in David Mills's *Atheist Universe* are castigated by William Harwood (December *Freethinker*), one might question his assertion that non-theists are "significantly under-represented" in prisons. In an environment with Christian (mainly C of E) chaplains, chapel services (or, it's said, latrine duties) and factitious piety, non-theists have real incentives to label themselves theists (mainly C of E).

There used to be good evidence that Roman Catholics were disproportionately represented in crime statistics, attributed partly to their lower socio-economic status and partly to their sacrament of penance, happily associated with absolution.



With the disappearance of their inferior status and growing numbers of "lapsed" Catholics, it's likely that practising ones are now no different criminally from the rest of the population.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

New strapline

I AGREE that the *Freethinker's* new strapline expresses its 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
Powys

Religious emblems

HEARING, as we have recently, so much about the wearing of religious emblems of one sort or another, the niqab and all its alleged guarantors of "Modesty", and the Christian cross, it occurs to me that it is high time that we rationalists and atheists should also enjoy our own piece of public advertisement. This could take the shape of a small, tasteful enamelled lapel-badge bearing the emblem of a blazing torch (standing for the idea of enlightenment) with the letters IDB around the edge (standing for "I don't believe") – or even IDBIF/T ("I don't believe in Fairy-Tales").

Of course there could be many other suggestions along these lines. Perhaps the *Freethinker* might care to run a competition for such ideas, publish the most striking, and invite readers to vote for the one they consider the most acceptable.

Who knows – some public-spirited non-believer might even be moved to pay for a batch of the favoured design to be manufactured, and arrange for them to be sold through say the British Humanist Association and its affiliated groups!

Produced in a luxury edition they might even make very acceptable "Christmas" presents! An idea worth trying, surely?

ALBERT ADLER
London

Cost of Bibles

I WONDER if there has been any research into how much money has been expended by the Gideon Society supplying bibles to each and every hotel worldwide.

I do not think I have ever stayed at any but the smallest hotel where on pulling open a bedside drawer – there it is, the ubiquitous book of myths and fairy stories.

At a very rough guess the expense must top

the million-pound or dollar mark. An awful lot of hungry little bellies could be nourished with that.

ALAN MANSER
Church Stretton

Making Grandad Proud

MY grandson goes to a minor public school "with a strong Christian tradition".

All the boys, including those from Buddhist and Hindu families, attend school chapel because that is the way things have always been.

With considerable reluctance, the school has given in to the insistence of David and his parents and he is now the first boy to be withdrawn from this religious service.

The Head is deeply concerned that this action "might open the flood-gates". On the first day of his withdrawal it was made clear to David that he would not be allowed to idle away this chapel time. "Oh no sir" he replied. "I've got the latest Richard Dawkins to read".

D HARDING
(a proud Grandad)
Worstead

Christian Lies

*If you ever stop to wonder
Just how low will Christians sink
The realistic answer is
Far lower than you'd think.*

A recurring task for freethinkers is to scan the papers for the lying claim that the Nazi and fascist regimes of 70 years ago "show what happens when man denies God", and to write pointing out that Hitler, Franco and Mussolini were all Christians of the Roman persuasion. (As fascism is nothing if not conservative, and their homelands Austria, Spain and Italy are all RC countries, how could they not have been?) When the *New Statesman* published such a letter from me in 2002 I was promptly phoned by a local Christian journalist who found my assertion "surprising". As he was paying for the call I let him talk to me for an hour: he may have learned something.

CONNAIRE KENSIT
London

Remembering Baskerville

THE year 2006 was the 300th anniversary of printer and publisher John Baskerville. He was born in January 1706 and was brought up in the family house in Worcestershire. He started his working life as both a tombstone engraver and a teacher of writing and book-keeping. His interest in writing and typefaces eventually led him to develop his own formula for printing ink and to improve the printing press. This interest in printing resulted in starting a printing and publishing business for which he designed the Baskerville typeface which is still in use today.

He was known in his day as having unconventional views on religion, but could not express atheist ideas as, in the 18th century, this would almost certainly have led to loss of

his business and possibly his life. John Baskerville died in January 1775 aged 69 and was buried in the garden of the house in Wolverley, the village where his family had lived for over 200 years. Nearly 50 years later his coffin was accidentally disturbed and was found to be buried vertically. This was the only way in the 18th century of showing atheist convictions, as it was dangerous to openly declare such views.

Baskerville having no children to claim his coffin, it was put on show with people charged a small fee to see the coffin of an atheist. He was eventually laid to rest in a cemetery in Warstone Lane in Birmingham. He was unable to express any atheist views during his lifetime but his chosen method of burial should allow us to celebrate him as an atheist.

R J C FENNELL
Wolverhampton

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Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Programme available.

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, March 6, 7.30pm. Valerie Mainstone: *International Womens Day – a Secularist View*.

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

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information and programme: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover. Wednesday, February 14, 2pm. Kenneth Humphreys: *Jesus Never Existed*.

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

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

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

Derbyshire Secularists: Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: info@devonhumanists.org.uk Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available. Details: 01268 785295. Friends Meeting House, Rainsford Road, Chelmsford. Sunday, February 18, 2.30pm. Annual General Meeting.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: June Kamel 01925 824844. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: NI Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: <http://hampstead.humanists.net>

Harrow Humanist Society: Meetings second Wednesday of every month (except July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977. March 14 Speaker: Charles Rudd, Secretary Ealing Humanists. Subject: Stanton Coit, Grandfather of the BHA.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

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

Humanist Society of Scotland: 272 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk. Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Local Scottish Groups:

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Glasgow Group: 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Highland Group: 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Perth Group: 07017 404776, perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, Feb 13, 7.30pm. Celebrating Darwin Day. Judith Hart: *In the Wake of Darwin*. Tuesday, March 13, 7.30pm. David Fanaroff: *The Planet - Plan It or Damn It?*

Isle of Man Freethinkers: Information: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: murielgarland@clara.co.uk. Website: www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk

Isle of Wight Humanist Group: Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail davidb67@clara.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Full programme of events on website: www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, February 15, 8pm. Alexander Hudson: *Faith and Reason – The American Search for Faith*.

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, March 7, 7.30pm. *Gillian White: Spirituality and Healthcare*.

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

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

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

Suffolk Humanists: 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk. www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk.

The Thomas Paine Society. Conway Hall Library. Saturday, March 3, 2.30pm. Illustrated lecture by Mark Philip: *The Good Book of Nature, Thomas Paine and Science*.

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

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

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

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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