

£1.25

Vol 127 No 3  
March 2007

# The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

## Mohammed cartoon controversy re-ignited in Britain and America

TWO seats of learning in Britain and America have enraged supporters of free speech by taking a stance against students who republished some of the Danish cartoons that led to widespread rioting across the globe in 2005.

On February 12, the education section of the *Guardian* reported that the editor of the Clare College newspaper was forced to go into hiding "after his attempt at religious satire backfired".

According to the paper, the 19-year-old student and aspiring journalist, who has not been named, is under investigation by the authorities at Clare College who described the satirical issue of the student newspaper *Clarefication* as "abhorrent".

Most inflammatory, the college said, was the reproduction in the newspaper of a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed first printed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in September 2005.

For his own safety, the student had been taken out of his accommodation and put in a secure place.

The newspaper had been renamed *Crucifixion* for the special edition of religious satire. The front page included the headline: "Ayatollah rethinks stance on misunderstood Rushdie."

On page six, there were pictures of Muslims holding placards reading: "Behead those who insult Islam" and "Freedom go to hell."

Enraged Clare students bombarded the college's student union with complaints, and the vice president of the university's Islamic society described the edition as "hugely offensive" and "crude, unabashed prejudice."

Earlier in the month senior college officials were locked in urgent talks about how the material came to be published and what action to take against the student.

In a statement issued by Clare College, a senior tutor, Patricia Fara, said: "Clare is an open and inclusive college. A student-produced satirical publication has caused widespread distress throughout the Clare community.

"The college finds the publication and the views expressed abhorrent. Reflecting the gravity of the situation, the college immediately began an investigation and disciplinary procedures are in train."

Calum Davey, the president of the Clare College student union, expressed his "deep regret" over the publication and offered his sincere apologies for causing offence.

He told the *Cambridge News*: "This material does not reflect the views of Clare students."

*Cambridge News* said Clare College fellows had, in a rare move, called a court of discipline, which would sit in judgment on the student responsible for sparking what the university regards as one of the most embarrassing incidents it has suffered in years.

But the National Secular Society has come out strongly in defence of the student, saying that "staff and students at Clare College should make a stand for free speech instead of backing those who would destroy it".

Terry Sanderson, President of the NSS said: "We are shocked that the staff and even the students union at this supposedly liberal college have joined the



Continued on page 4

Religion on TV is just one long yawn - p3

Inside

France strengthens secularism - p5

Praise Jesus and pass the paddles - pages 8 & 9

ARE we losing our religion? That was the question posed in a large headline above a piece penned by Rachel Pegg in the Brighton *Argus* last October.

Pegg revealed that "people in Brighton are less likely to follow a major religion than nearly anywhere else in the country". Her information was gleaned through an analysis of the 2001 census.

"Ethnic and religious data released by the Office of National Statistics shows 40 percent of people in central areas of Brighton say they have no religion at all," Pegg revealed, adding that "across the whole city, 66,955 people, or 27 percent of the population, have no faith – much higher than the national average of 15 percent." Makes me proud to live here.

Why should Brighton be less godly than other places in the UK? Hove-based Bill McIlroy, a life-long secularist, a long-standing member of the National Secular Society, and a past editor of the *Freethinker*, asked himself the same question – then threw himself into detailed research to find the answer.

About two months after the *Argus* carried the "losing our religion" piece, Bill dropped in to visit me, and placed in my hands an untitled manuscript containing the fruits of his investigation, bashed out on a rickety old typewriter. (Bill's debut into the world of electronic communications – like the Second Coming – has yet to materialise.)

I found it captivating – so much so that I immediately offered Bill technical help to get it published. Funding for the project was provided by the thriving Brighton and Hove Humanist Society, which often has standing-room only meetings in a room above the quaint Farm Tavern, in Farm Street, Hove.

This month *Without the Faith: Freethinkers and Freethought in Brighton and Hove* rolled off the presses. The timing could not have been more apposite, for it coincided with an *Argus* front page report which demonstrated just how deeply in decline Christianity in Brighton is.

This time the paper revealed that St Peter's, known as the "city's cathedral", was about to be made redundant. It is one of 11 Brighton churches earmarked for closure. According to the Church of England, just 1.7 percent of Brighton and Hove residents attend church services, so there is simply no point in keeping them open.

St Peter's is a huge, imposing landmark, and according to the *Argus*, news of its impending redundancy – revealed in a letter from the Diocesan Pastoral Committee, a C of E body in charge of Brighton's churches – "left wardens, parishioners, and residents in a state of shock."

I would very much doubt that residents give a fiddler's fig about its demise. There has, to my knowledge, been far more wailing and gnashing of teeth over the closure last month of a far more useful facility just a short step from St Peter's – the Co-op department store, housed in a monumental, grey Art Deco building on the London Road.

A palpable air of heart-wrenching sadness permeated the building prior to its closure, and, in the last days of this once grand old store, staff – many of them stalwarts who had worked there for the best part of their lives – stood forlornly by and tearfully watched as their departments were dismantled, and goods and shop fittings sold off under their noses for a pittance.

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE is proud to be living in 'the most godless city in Britain'**



Which brings me back to Bill's book – and the revelation therein that Brighton resident and leading Victorian secularist George Jacob Holyoake had played a leading role in the Co-operative movement.

"The 19th century was not an easy period for non-conformists of any stripe. Co-operative pioneers were vilified by the Anglican clergy and, as a secularist, Holyoake was doubly condemned," Bill reveals.

"Though anxious to distance himself from the more vigorous opponents of church and clergy, Holyoake's chance remark at a meeting in Cheltenham (suggesting that the Deity should be put on half pay) resulted in six months' imprisonment. And he once declared: 'I shudder at the thought of religion and flee the Bible as a viper.'

"Holyoake played a key role in the formation of Brighton Equitable Co-operative Society. There had already been small co-operatives in the town. Most were short-lived, but though they failed, the co-operative idea survived. It was fostered by supporters like Dr William King and Richard Russell, Licentiate of the Royal Society of Physicians. Lady Byron, widow of the poet, lived for a time in Brighton and was a generous supporter of the Co-operative movement.

"The initial meeting of BECS took place at 29 Duke Street on 18 November, 1887. During the following months new members were enrolled and a committee elected. G J Holyoake was president.

"The Society's first shop was opened on 16 May, 1888, at 32 North Road. (The shop is still there, but in private ownership.) The staff of three worked a 73-and-half-hour week with a half-day off on Wednesday. These near-Utopian conditions infuriated local shop owners whose staff worked between 75 and 90 hours a week with no half-day off. And of course the Co-operative dividend on purchases was a boon to working-class families.

"Holyoake's long association with the Co-operative and freethought movements is reflected in a notable 'double'. In 1844 he presided at the opening of Rochdale Co-operative store; in 1899 he chaired the inaugural

meeting of the Rationalist Press Association."

Holyoake was just one of an array of amazing characters who have helped shape Brighton and Hove's sceptical identity, and Bill – who has tirelessly carried on the tradition – has drawn them together in a marvelously detailed tapestry of scepticism. Not surprisingly, he has dedicated his 24-page booklet "to all those who have helped make this city the most godless in Britain."

*Without the Faith: Freethinkers and Freethought in Brighton and Hove* costs £2.25 plus 35p postage. There is a 25 percent discount on three copies or more, and bulk orders will be despatched post-free. Please make cheques payable to the **Brighton and Hove Humanist Society**, and send your order to **Bill McIlroy, Flat 3, Somerhill Lodge, Somerhill Road, Hove BN3 1RU (telephone 01273 227549)**.

LET joy be unconfined. The authorities in that bastion of tolerance and female emancipation, Saudi Arabia, have given a grudging nod to an all-women car showroom in Riyadh.

Saudi women who want wheels can now go to the showroom where, for the first time, female assistants will help them choose a tasty model, and answer technical questions about horsepower, carburettors and engines and stuff like that.

But there's a catch – there always is in Islamic societies. Neither the saleswomen nor their customers may take the car out for a test drive because females are still banned from driving in Saudi Arabia. But, for decades, they have been allowed to own cars.

Reporting last month in the *Melbourne Age*, Donna abu-Nasr revealed that almost half the cars in Saudi Arabia belong to women.

"So touchy is the issue of women drivers that most people who have called for dialogue on the topic have been silenced by conservative condemnation.

"Mindful of the sensitivities, the seven women at the spacious showroom insist their aim is not to advocate driving, but to provide comfort for Saudi women who want to buy cars but do not like to go to dealerships run by men.

"In this conservative kingdom, the sexes are segregated in schools, restaurants and banks, making any interaction between salesmen and women customers awkward", said the report, and quoted Widad Merdad, who works at the showroom: "I don't support women driving even if permission is given for them to do so, because our society is not prepared for such a step".

Recently I read that rich Saudi women, burqua'd to the eyebrows and beyond, are often seen closest to the catwalks at leading European fashion shows, choosing sexy and exceedingly expensive *haute couture* creations.

These are never worn – to do so would probably earn their owners a light stoning. Instead, in a bizarre act of fashion-by-proxy, these top designer creations are hung on mannequins in sumptuous apartments, and are exhibited in private to envious friends.

# Religion on TV: It's just one long yawn

ONLY four percent of viewers in a trial of High Definition television (HD) would opt to watch religious programmes, a study has found.

According to a National Secular Society *Newsline* report "the research carried out on Freeview in the London area in 2006 found that of all the programme categories that the 450 trial viewers would most want to watch in HD, religion comes last – by a very large margin.

"News" came top with 84 percent and "sport" second with 80 percent, while religion came "limping home" at 4 percent. Square-eyed couch potatoes would even prefer watching educational programmes rather than religious ones by a factor of almost four-to-one.

"This research," commented *Newsline*, "cuts no ice with the BBC's army of religious proselytisers. As Adam Kemp, commissioning editor for BBC TV said: 'Religion and faith are right at the forefront of our agenda. And not just for people involved in religious programmes, but also those involved in current affairs. Religion was

once seen as a little bit of a backwater in television, not one of the hottest genres, like science and history. But not any more'."

Kemp revealed that the BBC has just spent £4 million on a mini-series, *The Passion of Christ*, to be shown in 2008. Future programmes will include the latest religious pin-up, Rageh Omaar, reporting from inside Iran, and a series on the history of Christianity and Protestantism. Kemp claims that many people who don't know much about Christianity and religion in general are "hungry to fill in gaps in their knowledge".

"Unfortunately for Mr Kemp, every piece of research ever done into this area indicates the precise opposite. But still, the BBC's religious enthusiasts won't have it. Michael Wakelin, who this year succeeded Alan Bookbinder as head of the BBC religious propaganda department, and is responsible for god slots such as *Songs of Praise* and *The Heaven and Earth Show*, said: 'The research we have from the 2005 Ofcom report suggests that there is a

growing interest in, and need for, more programmes dealing with religious issues.'

"Is this the same Ofcom report into Public Service Broadcasting that asked viewers what types of programming they most valued on the terrestrial channels and found that religion came 16th out of 17? And in that same report, wasn't it religion that came 16th out of 17 in terms of what programme genres people ranked as having societal importance (only arts and classical music programming coming lower)?" queried *Newsline*.

"Or perhaps he meant the research from the Human Capital consultancy that showed that in homes that have access to Sky Television, religious programmes broadcast by terrestrial channels suffer an audience fall-off of 84 percent. It seems that when there is an option to switch elsewhere to something more interesting they do it *en masse* (and, it seems, even Open University programmes on Ukrainian tractors are more interesting than religion to the average viewer)."

## Noted journalist Christopher Hitchens joins the advisory board of the Secular Coalition for America

THE Secular Coalition for America has announced the addition of Christopher Hitchens to its Advisory Board.

Hitchens adds his intellectual firepower to that of scientist Richard Dawkins; author Wendy Kaminer; lawyer Michael Newdow; intellectual Stephen Pinker; and entertainer Julia Sweeney, to an organisation established to lobby for the rights of atheists, humanists, freethinkers, and other non-theists in the US.

British-born Hitchens is a well-known author, journalist and literary critic. He is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, provides a monthly essay on books for *The Atlantic Monthly* and has written for a large number of international publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Harper's*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

A regular television and radio commentator, Hitchens has also published more than a dozen books including the forthcoming *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (Warner Twelve), which posits that organised religion does more harm than good, and explains how society would benefit if faith remained personal rather than public.

Although his political ideas and positions may have changed through his career, he has steadfastly remained a believer in the Enlightenment values of secularism, humanism and reason.

"Today Hitchens is focused on protecting our secular democracy against efforts – both foreign and domestic – to impose what he



Christopher Hitchens

calls 'theocratic fascism'", says the SCFA.

Lori Lipman Brown, SCFA director, said that the new US Congress has taken an important step in promoting reason and secular values when the House voted to expand stem-cell research.

"However, there are many more policies enacted by the previous Republican-controlled Congress, under pressure from the religious right, which have corrupted our secular government and need to be repealed. These include: vouchers for religious schools in the District of Columbia, the funneling of federal tax dollars to churches through the president's faith-based initiatives, and privileging certain religious sects over the rest of society in zoning and prison policies."

The Secular Coalition for America said it

was proud to have Hitchens joining in the battle to "remove these and other theocratic intrusions into our secular democracy".

Hitchens was born in 1949 in Portsmouth, England, and received a degree in philosophy, politics, and economics from Balliol College, Oxford, in 1970. He now lives in Washington, DC.

### South African High Court upholds school decision to scrap Christian worship

THE Pietermaritzburg High Court in South Africa has rejected moves by predominantly Afrikaans parents of Newcastle High School pupils to retain Christian worship in the school.

The chairman of the school's governing body (SGB), Dr Prithipaul Ramkissoon, said in court papers that the school's religious policy was intolerant of religions other than Christianity, and the SGB had resolved last year to bring the school's religious practices into line with government policy by accommodating all faiths.

Heated debates and accusations, including allegations that some parents wanted to promote it, have followed the SGB's decision to scrap Christian worship.



attack on this student because he had the temerity to poke fun at religion. Free expression is such a precious commodity and is under such ferocious attack at present from religious interests that it is disgraceful that no-one is standing up for this young man's right to be rude about religion – even about Islam.”

Mr Sanderson has written to the master of Clare College, Professor Tony Bader and to the Senior Tutor, Patricia Fara as well as the president of the Students Union, Calum Davey. “We write after seeing reports in the local Cambridge press indicating that a contributor to your student magazine *Clareification* faces disciplinary action for having printed items that some people thought were “offensive” or “inflammatory”.

“If these reports are true, we wish to register our profound disquiet that a supposedly liberal college has reacted in this way. The reaction risks undermining one of the most precious and important rights that we have in this country: freedom of expression.

“Satire aimed at religion is no different to satire aimed at any other ideas and should not be punished or restrained. The freedom to poke fun at those who take themselves too seriously is a time-honoured tradition in this country. Regrettably, it is rapidly being eroded by cases like this. We urge you to think again and stand four-square behind the satirists, instead of disciplining them.

“We would like to remind all concerned that satirising religion – even if that religion is Islam – is not racism, as this episode has been dubbed. Religion and race have very different characteristics. We would have heartily joined the condemnation if the satire had been racially motivated, but according to the reports we have read, the issue of *Clareification* in question was devoted to religious satire.

“We would like to draw your attention to a case that is pending in France at the moment, in which a satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, has been brought to court by an Islamic organisation for re-publishing the Danish cartoons that are at the centre of so much controversy. In the French case, academics, artists and politicians of all hues have rushed to the defence of the magazine. Letters of support and statements defending free speech have been issued by some of the most influential people in the country – including M. Sarkozy, who is potentially the next President of France.

“Your own reaction – as reported – does not bear comparison with the principled French reactions. It sides with the oppressors and censors who are doing so much to retard open debate in academe and elsewhere.

“We call on you to support the publishers of the magazine and to tell the would-be censors that their protests have been heard but that they will not prevail. Without the freedom to debate, discuss and, yes, mock, ideas and ideologies, there can be no informed political discourse. Satire is an indispensable tool in the

# Freedom of expression under attack

(Continued from page 1)

operation of a truly free society.”

Earlier in February, students Acton H Gorton and Chuck Prochaska were suspended from the University of Illinois in Champaign after cartoons satirising Mohammed were reprinted in the university's paper, *The Daily Illini*.

Immediately after the paper was published, the university was flooded with phone calls. The cartoons were printed on the opinions page beside a column by editor-in-chief Gorton explaining why he was publishing them.

Shaz Kaiseruddin, 24, a third-year law student and president of the Muslim Student Association, said “I was in disbelief that they would do this,” adding that she was astounded “that our own student-based newspaper would be so ignorant and disrespectful”.

Muslim students and others then held a protest on the main quadrangle, saying they were stunned and hurt by the publication of some of the images that had stirred so much violence and caused so much pain in other parts of the world. Some members of the *Daily Illini* staff said they were furious, too, and in later editions, the publisher announced that Gorton and opinions page editor Prochaska had been suspended, pending an investigation into how the cartoons had ended up in the paper.

“This has gotten crazy,” said Gorton, 25, who decided to run 6 of the 12 cartoons.

He received calls for his resignation but also a deluge of praise, including comments of sup-

## Muslim group vandalises 100-year old banyan tree

A 100-year-old banyan tree in Jakarta, Indonesia, was vandalised by Muslim hardliners because some people believed the tree – a famous landmark in the city – had magical powers.

Islam insists that believing in any power other than God is a grave sin. “That is why we attacked the tree,” said Zainal Arifin, the leader of the Muslim group that hacked away the sprawling tree's branches, leaving just its trunk.

Sarwo Handayani, head of the city's park agency, said “this was an outrageous act,” adding that the police had been asked to arrest the vandals.

port from students as he walked on campus. “We did this to raise a healthy dialogue about an important issue that is in the news and so that people would learn more about Islam. Now, I'm basically fired.”

Most major American newspapers, including the *New York Times*, have not published the cartoons, which were first published in a Danish newspaper in September, 2005.

But on college campuses, student journalists are still grappling with the decision, saying the choice of most of the nation's newspapers makes theirs even more crucial. Editors at some student publications at the University of Wisconsin, Harvard University, Northern Illinois University and Illinois State University have published some of the cartoons.

The decisions have set off a painful clash, seemingly pitting two of the values so often embraced in university environments — freedom of speech and sensitivity to other cultures — directly against each other.

Other student newspapers, including those at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Arizona State University and the University of Arizona, have published their own cartoons that comment on or refer to the controversial cartoons.

Richard Herman, the chancellor of the university, sent a letter criticising the newspaper, which is published independently. In part, it said, “I believe that the *DI* could have engaged its readers in legitimate debate about the issues surrounding the cartoons' publication in Denmark without publishing them. It is possible, for instance, to editorialise about pornography without publishing pornographic pictures.”

In the days that followed, the newspaper ran an apology, held conversations with Muslim students and promised more complete, nuanced coverage on the issue. “We need to start fixing our image,” said Shira Weissman, one of two interim editors in chief of the paper in Gorton's absence. “We're being viewed as being hateful.”

But among students interviewed, many said they were angry not because the newspaper had published the images but because it was now doubting that choice.

“I was absolutely crushed to see that the editors were removed,” said Cody Kay, 18. “What happened to freedom of speech? If we start saying we can't look at things, what's next? Our books?”

Under the heading “The Daily Disgrace – a dark day for journalism in Champaign”, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn described the suspension of the two students as “a low moment for American journalism and the academy.

“Editors make tough calls on controversial issues all the time. The day they start fearing for their jobs if they don't come down on the popular or most sensitive side of an issue is the day we can all stop congratulating ourselves on our traditions of freedom of the press.”

# France plans to reinforce its secular state

A PANEL appointed by the French government has produced a charter that aims to keep public institutions, including hospitals, the armed forces, schools and government offices, free from religious influence. The document comes in the wake of an assault on a doctor by a young Muslim who objected to his wife being examined by a male clinician when she developed complications after childbirth.

The High Council on Integration is recommending to Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin that rules protecting the nation's secular society should be more strictly enforced. The proposed charter would clearly indicate how church and state should be kept separate in such public spaces. It would "define the rights and obligations of public servants as well as those of users of government-provided services".

Plans to stop unacceptable behaviour in hospitals – behaviour that put patients at risk – were first mooted three years ago during the debate over Muslim head scarves.

Male doctors, particularly in maternity wards, say they are increasingly subject to insults and physical attacks. These are perpetrated mostly by men opposed to nudity or physical contact with their wives and daughters.

The conviction last month of Fouahad Ben Moussa, a 23-year-old truck driver, brought the issue to a head. He had attacked Dr Jean-Francois Oury, the head of the maternity ward of Robert Debre Hospital in Paris after the doctor examined his wife, who had haemorrhaged after giving birth.

"In my religion, a man doesn't touch a woman," Ben Moussa screamed, as he slapped and pulled the doctor. At his trial, Ben Moussa claimed his real motivation was modesty, not religion. Expressing his regrets, he insisted that his behaviour was the result of stress and a lack of information. He said his family doctor had assured him that only women would take care of his wife.

At the trial, the prosecution said that a hospital "is a public, non-denominational place. It is a place where everyone comes into the world with the same chances – the first place where the sexes meet socially. It is not the place in which to invoke religion to obtain different treatment. Such behaviour is unacceptable." Ben Moussa was sentenced to a six-month jail term, part of which can be served at his home.

"I think the Oury case was the straw that broke the camel's back," said Emile Daraï, secretary general of the National Congress of French Gynaecologists and Obstetricians. The group, unusually, issued a statement last October asking, "Do gynaecologists and obstetricians now need police protection to practise?"

The statement affirmed that male and female doctors would treat patients "whatever their sex," and that a woman has the freedom "to

## Action needed to curb religiously-motivated attacks in hospitals and other public institutions

determine contraception, abortion, and sterilisation without the permission of her husband."

The recommendation affirms the rights of patients, but stresses the need for a "balanced approach." The report said there was no need to legislate on the issue, but highlighted that respect for the functioning of a hospital was vital. It suggested a charter laying out the constitutionally guaranteed principle of secularism be adopted and that pertinent sections be put on display at the relevant institutions.

The charter will remind government-agency employees that while the "freedom of conscience is guaranteed" while they're on the job, the "constitutional principle of secularism

requires [of all citizens] the obligation of [maintaining] strict neutrality" and "equal treatment of all individuals" and the "respect of the freedom of conscience" of others. In other words, no religious proselytising at work, even in subtle ways.

The proposed charter adds that, when a public servant "manifests" his or her "religious convictions during the carrying-out of his or her functions", in effect that employee's behaviour "constitutes a dereliction of his or her obligations."

Similarly, the text of the proposed charter also reminds those who use government agencies' services that they "must abstain from all forms of proselytising" if or when they avail themselves of such services.

The charter advises members of the public to be cooperative when public servants need to verify a person's identity. The clear implication of this is that anyone who has their head or face covered will have to uncover if identification is required. The charter would also be distributed at key events, including ceremonies where immigrants are granted French citizenship.

## Blood transfusion row breaks out in Canada

DOCTORS trying to save Canadian sextuplets clinging to life last month ignited a legal row and nationwide debate over parental rights, pitting a pious family that refused treatment against a state beholden to protect children.

According to a report in the *Melbourne Age*, The babies were born 15 weeks premature at a hospital in the western city of Vancouver in early January, weighing less than one kilogram each.

With medical attention, their chances of survival improved but, as Jehovah's Witnesses, the family opposed any treatment involving blood transfusions.

After two of the babies died the provincial Government stepped to ensure the others received the treatment doctors said they needed.

"Our obligation to protect children is paramount," British Columbia Children and Families Minister Tom Christensen told reporters last month after it was revealed three of the children had been taken temporarily into protective custody.

At least two of them had blood transfusions before custody was returned to the parents.

"We don't take any such action without a great deal of forethought, recognising that it's a significant step for the state to interfere in a family," said Mr Christensen. "But we want to ensure in every case that children are receiving the attention they require."

A child's welfare trumps a family's religious beliefs, he said.

But the family claims their right of religious freedom was violated. The father said: "My wife and I deeply love our babies and want them to live. We continue to be heartbroken about the death of two of them. We will not, however, consent to blood transfusions. We firmly believe that our creator commands us in scriptures such as Acts 15: 28 - 29 to abstain from blood products," he said in an affidavit.

Kerry Bowman, a medical ethicist at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital, told broadcaster CTV that the issue "raises deep questions in this country about people's right to religious choice".

University of Victoria bioethicist Eike-Henner Kluge argued that freedom of religion guaranteed in Canada's constitution does not apply to babies because they cannot express their wishes.

"While the parents are at liberty to make martyrs of themselves, their children aren't," he told the *Globe and Mail* newspaper.

"If one was to allow minority religious groups or individuals to practise values not held by the general run-of-the-mill public, the children are discriminated against by being born to these parents," he explained.

Doctors have said the remaining children have a good chance of survival, but face significant challenges.

AN Islamic school in Sussex has been shut down, and another, in London, has attracted criticism for failing to remove religious hate literature from its library.

The Jameah Islameah school, which was raided by police on September 1 last year during a terror alert, was closed after education officials said it was no longer good enough to operate.

The Department for Education and Skills removed the independent Jameah Islameah school in East Sussex from the Register of Independent Schools. This means it is illegal for the school to continue operating.

The closure came after the school failed to meet an action plan aimed at improving its performance.

The school, near Crowborough, was searched in September 2006 at the same time as 14 people were arrested in a series of raids in London.

Although no-one at the school was held, concerns were raised about it at the time, and a series of Ofsted inspections followed. The school, which is not currently operating because of a lack of pupils, was required to satisfy an action plan, but this had not been met, the Department for Education and Skills said.

A spokesman added: "The department has now concluded that, while some progress had been made, the school nevertheless continues to fail to meet the standards which all independent schools must meet under the Education Act 2002."

This relates to the quality of education provided; the welfare, health and safety of pupils, and the standard of the premises and accommodation.

Schools Minister Jim Knight said: "It is important that parents and the wider public are assured that all schools – whether in the maintained or independent sector – provide their pupils with a suitable education, and that we will take strong action against those that are failing. In the past three years more than 45 independent schools have shut down as a consequence of this government's tough approach.

"However, the government remains keen to support the delivery of high quality education by schools in the independent sector, and the recent Education and Inspections Act 2006 will make it easier for independent schools to enter the state sector to improve standards.

"The government has funded the Association of Muslim Schools to advise independent Muslim schools interested in joining the state sector," he said.

The founder of the school claimed in an interview in the *Guardian* that he was a victim of demonisation of the Muslim community in the media.

Bilal Patel told the *Guardian* that unsubstantiated claims that Jameah Islameah had links with notorious extremists such as Abu Hamza so debilitated the institution that it struggled to attract staff and pupils.

There were reports the school had been used

as an al-Qaeda camp because Abu Hamza and others linked to him rented space within the grounds in 1996. Mr Patel said he sought police advice before allowing Hamza in and was told there no reason to bar him. As suspicions were aroused, Hamza associates were asked to leave.

Mr Patel said: "We always cooperated with the authorities. We are in this position because our school was Islamic. We suffered unfair treatment from the media. We never had anything to do with terrorists."

Sir Iqbal Sacranie, former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, said: "The school was forced to endure the most terrible onslaught from the media. Who would send their children there in the face of such an onslaught?"

Shortly before the school's closure the King Fahad Academy in west London, funded by the Saudi royal family, found itself the focus of media attention because it had failed to remove text books which branded other faiths as "worthless".

The head of the academy, Dr Sumaya Aluyusuf, said pupils had never been taught from the chapters in question but that they would be removed "in the public interest".

An ex-teacher at the academy has claimed that pupils were taught from books which describe Jews as "repugnant" and Christians as "pigs", but the head insisted pupils were never taught religious hatred or intolerance. She said the academy promoted "inter-culturalism and inter-faith awareness".

She admitted that the textbooks – translated for BBC Two's *Newsnight* programme by two independent scholars – were kept at the school, but insisted that the translations were "taken out of context" and had "lost some of their meaning".

She said the controversy had arisen from the misinterpretation of the material which was based on the Koran.

"The school is currently moving towards an international curriculum and new books are being developed for that curriculum," she said, adding that pupils and parents had suffered discrimination and intimidation as a result of the controversy.

One local shop had put up a sign saying pupils from the school were not welcome and a passer-by had shouted abuse at a parent waiting outside the school gate.

"The local MP called me and said he was very concerned about the safety of the children and asked if we would like him to send extra police around the area."

Allegations about the Arabic books emerged when a former teacher accused the King Fahad Academy of institutional racism.

The British Muslim teacher began a case for unfair dismissal, complaining that he was made to suffer for whistle-blowing allegations of cheating at exams, and suffered discrimination as a non-Saudi.

## One Islamic school and another critic remove religious

The school denies the allegations and maintains that the teacher was rightly dismissed for misconduct.

About 600 children, aged five to 18, attend the King Fahad Academy private school which receives more than £4-million from the Saudi royal family each year.

The controversy centres on the use of textbooks produced by the Saudi Ministry of Education. A textbook dated 2005/2006 allegedly asks the reader to "give examples of worthless religions ... such as Judaism, Christianity, idol worship and others".

The book also asks the reader to "explain that those who die without adhering to Islam will go to hellfire".

In another textbook for 12 and 13 year olds, dated 2004/2005, the author says that a Koranic verse, which talks of turning people into monkeys and pigs, is about Jews and Christians.

**'The books they used to teach girls kept going on about idolatry and sin and how to avoid it. It was about the fires of hell, torture in the grave and how to make sure that your ways are not those of the infidel'**

The author quotes an early Islamic scholar as saying: "The monkeys are the Jews. And the pigs, they are the Christian infidels at Jesus's table."

This is not the first time that the academy has found itself in the line of fire. In May, 2004, the *Telegraph* carried a report that the Saudi government "is facing complaints from parents that it is teaching British children 'fundamentalist' Islam while giving girls an inferior education."

The *Telegraph* revealed that the academy, named after the current Saudi ruler, devotes up to 50 per cent of lessons to religious education and teaches almost all classes in Arabic, with boys and girls following different curricula.

Former teachers and parents have come forward to criticise the academy's religious teachings for instilling "hostility to the outsider". They also claim that there is discrimination against female pupils.

The school was opened in 1985 for the offspring of Saudi diplomats in London. Since then, many children of British Muslims have

# School is closed, criticised for failing to remove hate literature

joined the school. In 2002, only 37 per cent of the 738 pupils were of Saudi origin.

Originally the British and the Saudi curricula were taught side by side. Five years ago, however, the Saudi Arabian government ordered the school to phase out British lessons and to teach Saudi-style classes.

The school is segregated and younger boys and girls are now taught different courses, to comply with Saudi education policy, which states that a girl's education should "enable her to be a successful housewife, an exemplary wife and a good mother" or prepare her for work which is "suitable to her disposition as a woman".

Girls at the academy barely do any physical education and the only type of technology they will learn is "home technology".

Dr Mai Yamani, a research fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, had two daughters at the school, but removed them when she became uncomfortable about the education they were receiving. "I moved my eldest daughter at the age of seven. Her new school said that, in their opinion, she had been 'totally untaught' to that point. They had to put her in a class with much younger children, which was terrible for her.

"The books used to teach girls kept going on about idolatry and sin and how to avoid it. It was about the fires of hell, torture in the grave and how to make sure that your ways are not those of the infidel.

"The school is trying to make sure that the Saudis who go there abide by the system of state control in Saudi Arabia. The method is 'loyalty to the system and hostility to the outsider'. Three years ago I interviewed some of the pupils for a book and some of them were talking as if they didn't live in London at all."

Dr Yamani, the daughter of the former Saudi oil minister Sheikh Yamani, believes that girls at the school are given an inferior education to that provided to boys and that they are taught to "know their place".

She added: "They consider that the mind of a girl is less capable of absorbing education." Another parent who has two teenage girls at the school is unhappy with the direction the academy is taking.

"It used to be a wonderful school that taught the two traditions side by side. Now only one lesson in six is taken in English. The children would not have the standard to even read the paper by the time they reach A-level," he said.

"It has arrived at a situation where the school seems to be saying: 'This is the only

correct version of Islam'. It's such a fundamentalist approach."

A senior teacher at the school, who asked not to be named, admitted that girls did not receive the full curriculum. "Girls will not have as much PE and they will be taught home technology, rather than any other type of technology. The Saudi-type teaching is more didactic, with a lot of rote learning and factual stuff. There is not much in the way of understanding and applied learning. At 18, pupils will probably be at the equivalent of GCSE level." He said that it was "very definitely true" that Saudi education would not prepare pupils for life in Britain.

When asked if the school provided an inferior education to girls, he said: "It provides an inferior education to boys *and* girls." Dr Ali Alghamdi, the then principal of the King Fahad Academy, defended the phasing out of the British curriculum. He claimed that because the school taught mostly Saudi children, the curriculum was appropriate.

Dr Nasim Butt, a former teacher at the academy and an Ofsted inspector, said that the school's curriculum was no longer appropriate for British children. "As a teacher and an inspector of faith schools, I am interested in personal development and producing individuals who reflect deeply, self-evaluate and make a contribution to society.

"A Saudi education is not going to create individuals who make that kind of contribution in a free society."

Pupils in Saudi Arabia are obliged to spend half of the school timetable studying a rigid interpretation of Islam. A recent review of the curriculum by the Saudi government concluded that almost a fifth of lesson plans contained tracts preaching anti-Western and anti-Semitic views. The Saudi education department is now considering a redraft of the whole curriculum, the *Telegraph* said.

But in a report in June, 2006, the *Telegraph* revealed that Saudi Arabia had continued "to foster religious hatred in its schools, despite its repeated assurances since the September 11 attacks that it would rewrite textbooks that refer to Jews as "apes" and Christians as "swine".

The charges come after Freedom House, a non-partisan American research group which monitors civil rights worldwide, examined textbooks that it smuggled out of Saudi Arabia. The group found that despite promises of change from leading Saudi officials, including Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister, and Turki al-Faisal, the ambassador to America, schoolbooks in the kingdom still promote hatred of those who do not practise its strict form of Wahhabi Islam.

The report also alleged that some of the textbooks were used in official Saudi schools around the world, including the King Fahd Academy in London.

"Even if only a small percentage of the people who are exposed to this take it to heart and

act on it, that's still a lot of people," said Nina Shea, Freedom House's director, after the release of the 39-page report, Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance.

The report cites extracts from textbooks used in religious education classes for children aged between five and 16. It quotes the following exercise for the youngest children: "Fill in the blanks with the appropriate words (Islam, hell-fire): Every religion other than ..... is false. Whoever dies outside of Islam enters ....."

It claims that older students are taught: "It is part of God's wisdom that the struggle between the Muslim and the Jews should continue until the hour (of judgment)."

The report was an embarrassment for the Saudi government, which had made great efforts to restore its image since being painted as a bastion of extremism after September 11. When it emerged that 15 of the 19 hijackers that day were Saudi, many blamed the kingdom's education system for breeding hatred.

Only days before the report was released, the Saudi education minister gave a joint press conference with the American secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, in which he boasted of Saudi school reform.

"The education reforms in Saudi Arabia go beyond textbook rewriting," he said. "They go into teacher training [and] the messages that are given to children in the formative years... The whole system of education is being transformed from top to bottom."

When asked about offensive language in textbooks, he said: "This is taken out." But, according to Miss Shea, this is not true. "Teaching methods that ask kindergarten children to give examples of 'false religions', like Judaism and Christianity, add up to an ideology that runs throughout," she said. "It is not hate speech here and there. It adds up to an argument, an ideology of us versus them."

In the Saudi capital, Riyadh, the accusations are being investigated. "We do think some things need to be changed," Abdullah al-Obeid, the Saudi education minister, admitted. "There is some misunderstanding of some of the texts."

But according to Tanya Hsu, a political analyst in Riyadh with close ties to the education ministry, there is anger behind the scenes at an alleged propaganda campaign designed to make the government look bad.

"The charges are absolutely not true," she said. "We're really just looking at a few sentences and a few words. I don't know of any country in the world that doesn't have a few mischosen words in textbooks."

But Turki al-Faisal insists that change is happening. "We admit we have people in our midst who are bigots, who are intolerant and who see the world through a prism of 'us and them'," he wrote in a recent newspaper article.

"Are we working hard to change mindsets that encourage prejudice and intolerance? Yes, absolutely."

THE dangers children face when they are brought up by religious zealots were highlighted last month when the media spotlight fell on two churches in the USA and Britain.

In Georgia, the murder trial of a couple accused of whipping, confining and then beating their son to death focused attention on the child discipline practices of a controversial Brentwood, Tennessee church, and in the UK the pastor of a London-based African church was arrested on suspicion of child cruelty after claims that he had been identifying children as witches and ordering that they be sent back to Africa where he would "pray for them to die".

Josef Smith, 8, died in 2003 on the day he was allegedly whipped with foot-long glue sticks, locked in a closet and told to pray to a picture of Jesus. Ex-members of the Remnant Fellowship church say his punishment was in line with the discipline advice they were given while attending the church.

But church leaders, including its founder Gwen Shamblin, the charismatic woman known for creating the best-selling Christian weight-loss programme called the Weigh Down Workshop, insist that while the church encourages discipline, it is not in favour of abuse. Shamblin calls spanking a "loving, time-tested, ancient teaching from the Bible."

"Parents need to know that spankings and traditional groundings are not against the law," she said. "I abide by the law. We don't leave marks."

Remnant Fellowship has 30 branches across North America. Outlying members tune in to worship services through video webcasts, but many make their way to the handsome, 650-seat Brentwood flagship church for religious holidays and church celebrations.

According to a report by Anita Wadhvani and Heather Donahoe in *The Tennessean*, Joseph and Sonya Smith lived in the Atlanta suburb of Mableton, Georgia, and joined the church in 2000.

On October 8, 2003, emergency crews were called to the Smiths' home in Georgia after the couple reported Josef was having trouble breathing. He died the next day at an Atlanta hospital.

Sonya Smith told police that on the day he died the couple had disciplined Josef with a series of whippings, delivered in increments of 10. She said the boy was locked in a closet and made to pray to a picture of Jesus affixed to the ceiling. He was monitored in the kitchen via a camera in the closet.

A grand jury indicted the Smiths on murder charges, saying the couple struck him with unknown objects and confined him to a wooden box. The indictment included five counts of first-degree cruelty to a child, two counts of false imprisonment and three counts of aggravated assault, including beating him with glue sticks, the kind sold at craft shops and used in hot-glue guns.

The following May, Georgia investigators raided the Franklin headquarters of the Weigh



**Praise the Lord and pass the paddles:** Remnant Fellowship members pictured in prayer. A critic of church founder Gwen Shamblin said she "wants to turn Americans into slim Barbie and Ken dolls, each with a Bible under one arm".

Down Workshop, collecting files and computer disks over two days, but no charges were brought against Shamblin's organisation.

In an interview before the start of the Smith trial, Shamblin said her personal contact with the Smiths was limited and that she was only vaguely familiar with the family. She insisted the couple is innocent.

Hundreds of Remnant church members have prayed and decided to collectively foot the Smiths' legal bills, Shamblin said.

Part of the evidence collected by police is a tape recording of a women's group meeting in which Shamblin praises Sonya Smith for disciplining her son. In the recording, Sonya Smith tells Shamblin she had locked her son in his room from Friday to Monday with only a Bible.

"That's a miracle," Shamblin responded. "You've got a child going from bizarre to in control. So praise God."

At the start of the trial, defence attorney Manny Arora cautioned jurors they would see photographs depicting the boy's injuries that "may make you sick to your stomach." But, he said, those injuries "did not cause Josef's death." Josef slipped and fell on a banister, he said.

A prosecution witness, Laura Boone, 17, began baby-sitting for Remnant families, including the Smiths, when she was in junior high school. On one occasion, when she found Josef Smith crying Laura asked his dad what he wanted her to do. "He looked right at me, and he hit his fist into his hand really hard." The teenager said Smith told her to hit his son. "Hit him hard," she recalled Smith telling her.

"I just told him I didn't feel comfortable hitting his son," she said. "So he took Josef in the little room next door, and we could hear Josef crying really hard and his dad hitting him."

Boone said Josef returned to the nursery area still crying but with no visible marks on his body. That was the last time she or her

# Children put at

friends accepted a baby-sitting job at Remnant or for a Remnant family, she said.

Boone says she is testifying because she "wants to be a voice for Josef Smith Jr."

Some former church members say obedience to church leaders, called "getting under authority," is paramount for adults. Children's disobedience is a sign of sin, they say.

Ex-members have created an online support group called City of Refuge. Former member Adam Brooks, a Philadelphia psychologist,

## A special report by ANDREA CARTER

says the online group has attracted about 100 people, ex-members and family members cut off from those still in the church. They are closely watching the trial coverage, he said.

Like other members, Steve Miozzi and his wife joined Remnant after taking a Weigh Down class at their church in east Cleveland, Ohio. He said he and his wife were initially enthralled.

"You walked into the church, and you thought this is what heaven must look like," said Betsy Miozzi.

Everyone was thin, their teeth white, the children well behaved, and many appeared to be financially successful, she said. And everyone "love-bombed us", she said, using the church's terminology for friendly embracing of new visitors.

But when Steve Miozzi sought help on how to deal with an 11-year-old boy misbehaving during worship services, he said he was told by church leader Ted Anger to beat the back of the boy's thighs with a glue stick. If the boy didn't behave he was to keep repeating the procedure, and if the boy continued to misbehave he was to put him in a room with nothing but a Bible, Miozzi said.

Miozzi added that when he visited the Brentwood church for worship services, there were "glue sticks sticking out of diaper bags" in the aisles.

Shamblin said that the criticisms levelled by a handful of former church members distort reality. Miozzi, for example, had spoken with the media before. "Talking to someone who left our church in anger is like talking to someone's ex-boyfriend," Shamblin said. "People have learned they can get on television if they have something bad to say. It's really exciting being Gwen Shamblin's enemy."

The handful of church critics must be weighed against thousands more who have found joy in the church, she said.

The 1,200-member church has gone on the offensive to put to rest the bad publicity they have attracted in national magazines, blogs and newspaper accounts since Josef's death. Shamblin and 78 church members have



# at risk by religious zealots

also filed a \$3.3 million defamation suit against Rafael Martinez, who operates a cult-watch organisation, Spirit Watch, saying statements that described church members' use of "extreme discipline" such as "harsh spankings and whippings" were a "lie and a falsehood." The suit was filed last November and is shortly to be heard in court.

When the trial of the Smiths began last month, the state's chief medical examiner, Dr Kris Sperry, testified that although he originally believed the cause of death was "blunt-force trauma", his theory changed when he learned of statements the Smiths' oldest son, Booth Smith, made to the police.

The 16-year-old first told police that he and his parents forced Josef into a wooden chest and tied the lid closed with an orange extension cord after the boy became disruptive during a webcast of a service delivered by the Remnant Fellowship Church.

Soon after Josef was put in the box, Booth said, his younger brother stopped making noises. Sensing something was wrong, Booth said he cut the extension cords, and Josef was released.

Sperry said that the injuries to Josef's head, right side of the face and shoulder may have been sustained when the lid of the chest slammed down on the child.

Meanwhile, in the UK, the arrest of Pastor Dieudonné Tukala, 40, following a raid on his South London home, has thrown into sharp focus a growing tendency among some African churches to accuse children of being witches, or of being demonically possessed.

Tukala, who is married with two children, heads a Congolese church with a congregation of about 400 in Tottenham, North London.

The allegations against Mr Tukala were uncovered by Angus Stickler, who reported the case on BBC Radio 4's *Today* and on the BBC 2 programme *Newsnight*, when video clips were shown from services recorded by one of the church elders.

The children of up to ten families are alleged to have been affected at the church, one of more than a hundred Congolese churches in and around the capital. In one example, the BBC reported, a father branded his nine-year-old son with a steam iron. A former church elder told Stickler that he was present when the boy was said to be possessed with evil spirits and alleged that Mr Tukala told the parents to beat him until he confessed to being a witch.

Other parents said that Mr Tukala told them to send their children to Africa, where he could pray for them to die. One woman, Fifi, described how she was pregnant when the family arrived in England in November 2002 as asylum-seekers. She said that within two weeks, Mr Tukala had named her, her son and her unborn child as witches. As a result, she

alleged, her husband began to beat her and threw her on to the street.

Fifi told Stickler: "If someone is thought to be *kendoki* [a witch] in our country, they put car tyres around you and set you on fire." Another woman, who asked not to be named, said that she went to the pastor because her seven-year-old daughter was having nightmares. He is alleged to have said the child was possessed, and on each visit extracted cash, once up to £80, from the mother. She claims to have been told that in Africa he would pray for the child to be killed.

The church is the latest to face claims that children are being accused of *ndoki*, or witchcraft, meaning possession by evil spirits. The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service has been working with churches from the Congolese community in London, and with the police, to advise on child protection. Detective Superintendent Chris Bourlet, head of Project Violet, a police child protection project, said: "Where there are allegations of child abuse, we will act."

Exorcisms take place across the spectrum of Christianity — even within the Church of England, in which they are carried out by priests licensed by the bishop for "deliverance ministry". They may perform an exorcism

## Big demand in the US for beating instruments

THE photograph on the right is of "The Rod," a \$5 flexible, 22 inch-long whipping stick, described as the "ideal tool for child training." It was advertised in 2003 in the US magazine *Home School Digest*.

"Spoons are for cooking, belts are for holding up pants, hands are for loving, and rods are for chastening," read the advertisement for the nylon rod. It also cited a biblical passage, which instructs parents not to spare the "rod of correction."

The ad shocked Susan Lawrence, a Lutheran who home-schools her children and opposes corporal punishment. She began a national campaign to stop what she sees as the misuse of the Bible as a justification for striking children. She also asked the federal government to declare the Rod hazardous to children, and ban the sale of all products designed for spanking. Lawrence says striking children violates the Golden Rule from the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you".

According to a report in the *Boston Globe*, "her effort exemplifies the passionate debate among Americans over the role of corporal punishment in modern child-rearing and highlights the clashing interpretations of religion that underlie many cultural divisions in the United States.

"Where some see a time-honoured form of

only with the permission of their bishop.

Nearly six years ago Victoria Climbié, 8, died in North London after being abused by relatives who had brought her to Britain from Africa. A preacher at the church attended by Victoria told the inquiry into her death that she was possessed and that he had prayed for her to be "delivered from witchcraft or wicked spirits"

In September 2001 a torso, dubbed "Adam" by police, was dragged from the Thames near Tower Bridge. Aged between 4 and 7, he had died in what detectives concluded was a ritualistic killing.

Last July two women and a man were sentenced after abusing a girl, 8, whom they believed to be a witch. The court heard that the Angolan orphan, known as Child B, was cut and that her abusers had "beat the devil out of her" in Hackney, East London. She was found stuffed in a laundry bag in a stairwell. She had been beaten, had chilli pepper rubbed in her eyes and she was about to be thrown in a river. Her abusers were from the Congo basin, where there have been reports of thousands of children living on the streets after being thrown out of their homes for being *ndoki*

At the end of this case Det Supt Chris Bourlet, the head of Scotland Yard's Child Abuse Investigative Command, revealed that Project Violet had been set up to work with African and Asian communities to eradicate child abuse.



discipline, others see a sanctioned type of child abuse. Both sides cite biblical passages and scholarly paediatric research to back their views, as well as anecdotal evidence of children who went astray because of too little — or too much — spanking."

When Lawrence spotted the ad for the Rod, she began collecting online petition signatures protesting the device, eventually amassing more than 500 supporters, and set up a "Stop The Rod" website. With support from US

*Continued on page 11*

HAVING just caught up with John Cornwell's brave attempt to counter Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, I am reminded of a work by C S Lewis called the *Screwtape Letters*, which I much enjoyed reading as a child, but having put away childish things I now recognise a similar attempt to talk God into existence by putting words into his mouth.

As with many theologians, John Cornwell seems to think he knows all about God, and can speak for Him, and lay out his great plans for humanity in detail – whereas poor atheists do not have this ability. Having turned God into a fully human character by this method, he then contradicts himself by saying we (atheists) have anthropomorphised him, and even turned him into a "Great Big Professor Dawkins" in the sky – rather than say a Pope in the sky, or even John Cornwell in the sky.

One admires the easy familiarity with which Cornwell addresses "Richard" throughout his article in the *Sunday Times* (December 26, 2006) entitled "A Christmas Thunderbolt for the Arch-Enemy of Religion". Have they been introduced? This is a form of *ad hominem* in which the so-confident theologian attempts to reduce the victim (Richard) to the status of an imbecile child because of his unreasonable refusal to accept that one of the sons of a Jewish carpenter was in fact God.

John Cornwell uses every trick in the theologians' arsenal in his desperate counterblast: he tries to take over science for Christianity by pointing out that Gregor Mendel the experimental geneticist was a monk. Well why not? Monks etc had time on their hands, with nothing to do but pray. Why should they not rescue some of their native intelligence by doing some original thought? Also, as in the case of Newton and other scientists, until modern times they all had to be Christian – or else.

He then attempts to resuscitate all the defunct proofs of God – even the Ontological argument of Anselm, which was demolished by that Catholic stalwart, Aquinas himself, shortly afterwards. If they keep trying to re-fight lost battles and re-presenting old arguments as if they were new, theologians hope to impress new generations who have never heard of them. Is this honest?

Another ploy is to suggest that science and religion can exist in harmony – a bit like Stephen Gould's non-overlapping magisterial (NOMA). Naturally there is no argument if all one is doing is boiling up some copper sulphate in a test-tube – ie trivial science; but we are not talking about that – we are talking cutting edge science, ie the origin of life and the universe. Here, the theologians (as theologians, and not as coincidental scientists which some of them might also be) think they know better, because they have read in a primitive book that some Jewish god called Yahweh made everything – just like that – by magic.

Then we have the G K Chesterton quote about how people who do not believe in the Judeo-Christian God of Battles will believe anything – like logic, and empirical science maybe? Or maybe not. Perhaps they will instead believe in some other superstition, like astrology – or maybe another god, one whose followers do not constantly fight each other, often to the death.

We atheists are said to hate God; this is not so, we just do not believe he exists, and we do indeed resent the pushy claims of those who think they speak for him, not so much because they actually believe everything they say, but in order to preserve their cultural and political power, in the former provinces of the Christianised Roman Empire and its colonies.

Then of course we must not forget the two

## A counter-thunder Defender of the C

favourites, Stalin and Hitler. Stalin was an atheist, but did he kill for this reason, or was it because he was a natural born autocrat, brought up in a strict orthodox Christian environment in post Tsarist Russia, where democracy was an unknown concept, and the ruler was God – as in his arbitrary powers of life and death over peasantry and aristocracy alike?

### DR REG LE SEUER answers John Cornwell's criticism of *The God Delusion*

Hitler was a Catholic who never lapsed, who flirted with the Vatican, and who peppered his speeches and *Mein Kampf* with Christian references. He may have also made some remarks against Christianity in his "table talk" – but what Christian has not also had doubts or railed against the injustice of God's actions? The Vatican was quite happy to spirit away some of the Nazi leaders to safety, after the war. There were also, of course, good Christians who never accepted Hitler and the Nazis; one has to be fair.

So here we have two alleged atheists with whom Cornwell attempts to tar all atheists. But he is doing himself down – why not mention Mao and Pol Pot, then he would have four? Or were they mere imitators?

On the other hand, by similar logic, obviously the facts of Torquemada and the Holy Inquisition and the Crusades invalidate all of those decent Christians who are content to fol-

## Hallelujah! Ted Haggard is no longer gay

AFTER undergoing three weeks of therapy, the disgraced American evangelist Ted Haggard has told followers he is convinced he is not gay.

Haggard, former senior pastor of the 14,000-member New Life Church, was a vocal opponent of gay marriage who fell from grace last November in a high-profile gay sex and drugs scandal.

In an email distributed to his parishioners and posted on the New Life website, Haggard said: "Jesus is starting to put me back together."

Referring to Haggard's treatment, the Reverend Tim Ralph, a member of the New Life oversight board, told the *Denver Post* newspaper: "He is completely heterosexual."

Haggard resigned as president of the influential National Association of Evangelicals after the male escort blew the whistle.

Before the scandal, soldier-for-Christ Haggard – with his chiselled features, wide smile and five children, had been a poster boy for right wing conservative causes and the evangelical movement



## Christians have a licence to litter

CARLISLE Council has been forced to apologise for getting the law wrong after it tried to stop a street evangelist handing out religious leaflets, which were then thrown all over the street by a disinterested public.

An official from Carlisle Council told Keith Bullock, an evangelist with Open-Air Mission (OAM), that he could not hand out Christian literature in the city centre without their permission.

The council said it was exercising legal powers that came into force last year aimed at keeping the large number of handbills handed out by night-clubs and other businesses from becoming a litter nuisance.

But it transpires that there is a religious exemption to this new law which means that religious tracts can still be handed out, despite the fact that most people discard them in disgust as soon as they realise what they are.

The exemption is contained in section 1(4) of Schedule 3A to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

Colin Hart, Director of the Christian Institute, triumphantly declared: "Christians have the freedom to hand out Christian literature in the open air on public land without interference from the state.

That is an important protection of free speech and religious liberty. We were glad we could help this street evangelist continue his good work."

He did not mention who was required to pay to have this garbage cleared from the streets.

# Derbolt against the Catholic Empire

low their faith without having to declare war on those who think differently, and who try to defend true science and reason against blind fundamentalism.

I cannot believe that Cornwell actually trots out Fred Hoyle's quip about a Boeing 747 being randomly assembled by chance. Cornwell then asserts that evolution is accepted by theologians. Obviously he still does not understand how mutation and natural selection work. Just how well has he read Dawkins' books, where it is all explained in detail? Evolution is officially accepted by the Catholic Church, but with a bit of drastic titivation to mould it to Christian dogma. All Christians are necessarily creationists; do they not believe that God made everything? Of course, they believe God made evolution too, and intervenes in it constantly in order to guide humans towards the finality of his Great Plan – whatever that is – and moreover inserts “souls” into human bodies. Now try reading Darwin's *On The Origin of Species*. You will find that evolution is an entirely naturalistic theory, and an interfering God is no more required for it than it was for La Place's cosmology. A scientific theory that needs to be set up, and touched up, by a God is no theory at all – it is just multiple continuous creation.

It is obvious that Cornwell has not given Dawkins a fair reading. I can imagine instead that, as in the case of the late Mary Whitehouse, who would have behaved similarly, he furiously thumbed through the pages of *The God Delusion* with mounting horror, accompanied by frantic note-scribbling, and then rushed to the word processor to do his bit for God, and limit the damage caused to the power of his Church by such a wicked atheist publication.

We are asked to consider that creation of the universe by God is a rational position.

It would be if God were known to exist, but instead God has had to be invented specially as the creator of the universe. The pre-supposition here is that the universe did not exist in some other form and space-time frame prior to the Big Bang – rather than being eternal (just like God). It is further pre-supposed that the universe is an effect of some cause, rather than just an uncaused event; and as effects always have causes (except possibly in the quantum world – which could be the answer to the problem) a cause has to be found, and if there is not one to hand, then invent one, call it God, anthropomorphise it – and bob's your uncle – one pre-packaged circular God. “Where did the universe come from? Answer: God made it. Second question: Who is God? second answer: he is the person who made the uni-

verse”. Circular or what?

I could go on, but you get the general drift. Atheists are not push-overs. There are more of us than you would like to think, and we outnumber any one particular religious branch or sect, world-wide – including Islam and Catholicism separately. It is remarked that Christianity is a historic religion, as if this were a strong point. All it means is that it did not exist prior to its inception; Jesus was unknown, and would probably have faded into oblivion if Constantine had not imposed his new religion on the Roman Empire for

political reasons.

If Christianity is “the truth”, then why Islam? And why is Islam the world's fastest growing religion instead of the faith of Jesus? Muslims do not accept Jesus as divine – nor incidentally did many of the early Christians.

I have not answered every point, as I am weary of this continual argument and having to re-fight old battles. And as a mere amateur I will not over-extend myself but leave further atheist apologetics to the experts, of whom there are many others who agree with Professor Dawkins.

## ‘The Rod does not constitute a substantial hazard’

(Continued from centrepages)

Representative Edward J Markey, a Malden Democrat, Lawrence, in 2003, appealed to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission to ban the sale of product. But the commission said it could find “no basis for determining that the product constitutes a substantial hazard.”

Lawrence is completely at odds with the evangelical leader James Dobson, who recommends that parents use a “swish or paddle” or other “neutral” objects, reserving the hand as “an object of love.”

“Corporal punishment, when used lovingly and properly, is beneficial to a child because it is in harmony with nature itself,” said Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family.

Bill Maier, a child psychologist and the vice president of Focus on the Family, argues that Christian groups opposing spanking deviate from “the orthodox interpretation” of the Bible, which, he said, lists spanking as “one of many disciplinary methods that are at parents’ disposal.”

“There is no basis for claiming that Scripture says spanking is somehow evil or should not be used by parents,” said Maier.

But equally observant Christians, such as Al Crowell, director of the San Francisco-based Christians for Non-violent Parenting, are becoming increasingly vocal in their opposition to the practice.

“If taken literally, the Old Testament condones having slaves and stoning women who have sex outside of marriage. But if you look at the life of Jesus, it's pretty hard to imagine him hitting children,” said Crowell, a father of two who, along with 645 others, has signed Lawrence's online petition to ban the Rod.

Twyla Bullock of Oklahoma, wife of the Rod's creator, swears by the instrument. Named after the biblical “rod of correction,” it provides “a faith-based way to discipline children ... and train them as Christians,” said Bullock.

Another Christian peddler of a “disciplinary” product is Steve Haymond who sells nine-inch paddles online for \$6.50 apiece. He claims that “to raise a child, one needs three invaluable allies: the Bible, the help of an extended family and ‘biblical-based resources’ – spanking paddles made of blue polyurethane.

Joey Salvati, a Pennsylvanian carpenter and father of two, is such an ardent enthusiast of child beating that he gives away *free* home-made wooden paddles from a truck he often parks along busy roads. His paddles, roughly the size of cricket bats, are also available via his internet site, Spare-Rods.com for just \$5.75 to cover the cost of postage.

His site offers a comprehensive paddle guide, including instructions on how “calibrate” the instrument: “Before applying paddle to a child you should determine the force of your swing.

There is only one way to measure effectively – swat yourself on the rump and adjust your swing appropriately.”

His site also suggests the number of “swats” for various childhood misdemeanours: “one for disrespectful behaviour, two for cursing, and three for cheating, lying or direct defiance”. It claims that “for maximum effect”:

- Have the child tell you the reason they are being punished.
- Parent should wait one minute between each swat.
- Apply no more than five swats per day.
- Spank only on the rump.
- Child must be wearing clothes.
- Use force sufficient only to get the child's attention.
- Support child's torso so no stress can be placed on their spine.

“After punishment is served give your child a hug and tell them that you love them! The punishment was for their behaviour only.”



THE next sex taboos after adultery (3500 BCE), premarital recreation (undateable), and incest (2000 BCE), were not invented until the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. Then, within a century of each other, two law-givers came up with moral codes that were identical in some respects and diametrically opposite in others. The earlier of the two was the inventor of the still-existing Parsee religion, Zoroaster.

When Zoroaster founded his new religion, he recognized that there were two ways of increasing the number of tithe-paying believers. Proselytizing worked, but breeding followers worked even better. He accordingly invented the first set of sex taboos designed solely to maximize the birth rate. He declared that prayers uttered while copulating were ten thousand times more effective than those chanted in any other context. He categorized celibacy as a monstrous sin, a rejection of his god Ahura Mazda's greatest gift. He prohibited masturbation, in the belief that depriving masturbators of an alternative form of orgasm-release would force them to contribute to his breeding program. And he prohibited male homosexual recreation for the same reason.

Zoroaster did not ban lesbianism. In a culture in which it was not economically feasible



for a woman to live without a man, relationships between women did not prevent such women from breeding. Banning them would therefore have served no useful purpose. And all sex taboos down to and including Zoroaster's had a practical purpose. Besides, he probably saw lesbianism as a safe, sinless alternative to adultery for unsatisfied women. The Jewish priest who copied Zoroaster's taboos thought likewise. No ban on lesbianism is to be found anywhere in the Jewish bible.

Indeed, less than a decade before the author of Leviticus (18:22) categorized male homosexuality as a sin, the author of Deuteronomy (13:6) endorsed the legitimacy of "the male

# Zoroaster,

lover who means as much to you as your own breath." And the Book of Judith found in Catholic but not Protestant bibles shows the title character, after piously seducing an Assyrian general in order to murder him while he slept, and having achieved economic independence by a brief marriage, spending the remainder of her life with an intimate female companion. The author of that work of fiction did not see Judith's orientation as sinful or even questionable.

Excerpted by WILLIAM HARWOOD from *The Disinformation Cycle*, Booksurge.com

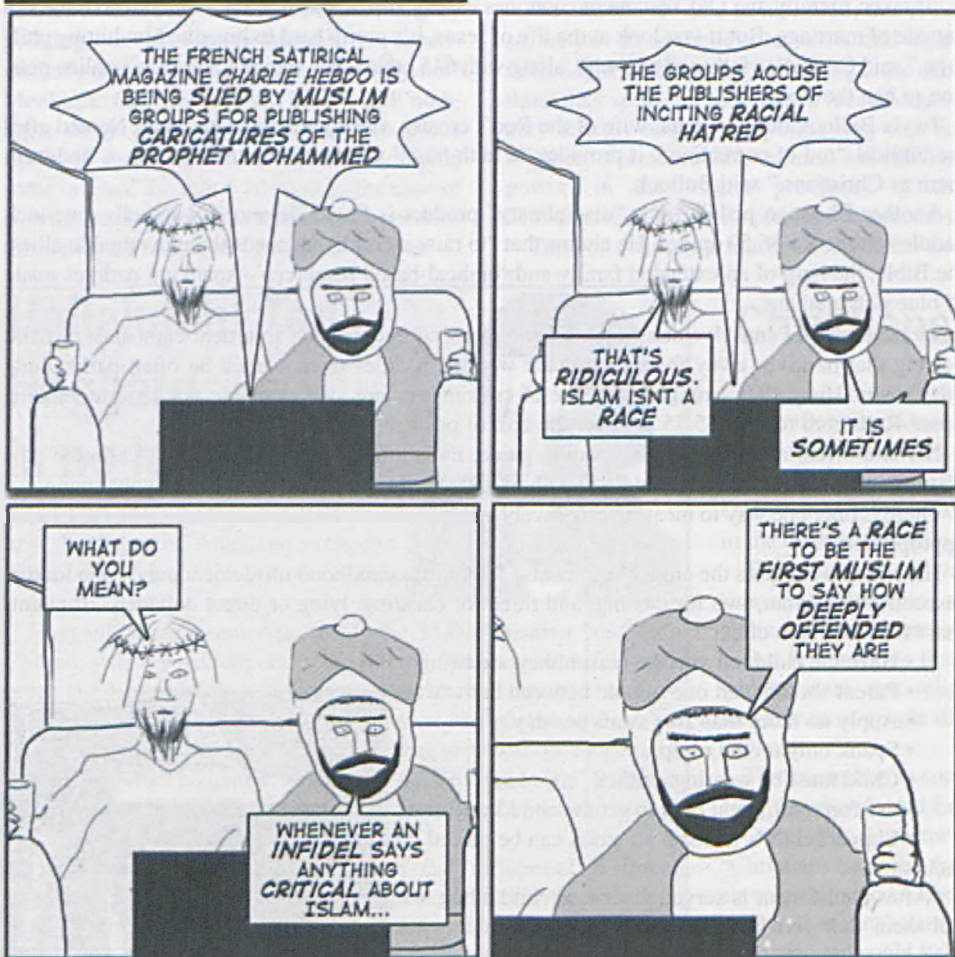
Zoroaster invented his taboos on masturbation and male homosexual activity around the middle of the seventh century BCE. No religion had ever banned such behavior prior to that date. It follows that, when the author of the oldest parts of Genesis wrote about "Onan" and "Sodom" in the tenth century BCE, those myths must have meant something quite different from the meanings retroactively attached to them by believers in the Zoroastrian taboos. In fact Onan was not a masturbator. He was a lawbreaker who, in a theocratic culture that had no afterlife belief, refused to keep his dead brother's name alive by impregnating his widow.

Not until long after the completion of the Jewish Torah in 434 BCE did the Jews acquire any kind of afterlife belief. They were ancestor worshippers who believed that a man's only immortal part was his name. As long as he had descendants to keep his name alive by their worship, he did not completely cease to exist. But when a man died childless, there was a serious risk that his name would die with him. To prevent that from happening, the Jews instituted a "brother-in-law" law, which stipulated that a childless dead man's brother must finish the wife-impregnation his brother had started. The child so produced would be the dead man's legal heir, obligated to keep his name alive by ancestor worship. When his elder brother died, Onan inherited that obligation.

Onan did not refuse to mount his dead brother's widow, Tamar. But, resentful that, if he added the necessary deposits to bring his brother's sperm up to "critical mass", any child so generated would have to offer ancestor worship to his brother rather than himself, he withdrew before ejaculation.

It was Onan's refusal to fulfill his obligation to his dead brother, not something as abstract as sperm-wasting, that the god of Genesis viewed as a capital disobedience. The modern practice of calling masturbation "onanism" is

## Jesus and Mo



Two volumes of Jesus and Mo cartoons, by Mohammed Jones, are available online via Lulu.com at £5.51 each, or follow the links on [www.jesusandmo.net](http://www.jesusandmo.net)

# r, the first homophobe

anachronistic. No masturbation taboo existed when the Onan myth was composed, or for almost three centuries afterward.

Similarly, the Sodom and Khomorah myth was invented at a time when no homosexuality taboo existed anywhere in the world. To the author of the story, the crime of the Sodomites was that they were blatant offenders against the universally-practised hospitality code, and for that they deserved to die.

In all ancient societies of which anything is known, including the Jewish, houseguests were sacrosanct. A gentile under the roof of a Jew was entitled to the same protection as a member of the host's family. Consequently, when the men of Sodom demanded that Levit (transcribed as *Lowt* in Greek and *Lot* in English bibles) surrender guests in his house to be abused by a mob, Levit's god was understandably annoyed. That the guests were male, and the recreation the Sodomites planned was therefore homosexual, was irrelevant. In a similar tale in Judges the houseguest violated by a mob was female, and the rapists' crime, failure to observe the hospitality code, was identical. The only significant difference was that, whereas the volcano god Yahweh, in his last outbreak before becoming extinct, was able to punish the Sodomites by erupting over them, in Judges he had to call upon a Jewish army to do the job for him.

Calling homosexual coupling "sodomy" is as anachronistic as calling masturbation "onanism."

Zoroaster was barely cold in his grave when an innovator in India promulgated a moral philosophy so antagonistic to Zoroaster's copulation glorification, that it seems incredible that both could have contributed equally to Essene Judaism and its gentile offshoot, Christianity. But Christianity's antigod, Satan, along with homophobia and the flamethrowers of Hell, can all be traced to Zoroaster, while its equation of celibacy with virtue dates back to the inventor of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, whose followers called him *Buddha*, "The Enlightened." If Gautama was enlightened, then so was Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Gautama decreed that all sexual activity was a sin, including the mating of husband and wife, in bed with the lights out, in the missionary position, while thinking of the motherland. The Jewish Essenes, three hundred years later, adopted the philosophy preached to them by Buddhist missionaries and became celibate masochists (tautology). So universally is joy now equated with sin, that even the names of ancient sex goddesses are deemed vulgar: India's Cunti, Germany's Frig, and Egypt's Nuki.

The Essenes eventually produced a secular wing that married and reproduced, and that secular wing gave the world John the

Immerser and Jesus the Nazirite. To this day the more dogmatic Christian denominations accept the Zoroastrian teaching that homosexuality is a perversion, and the Buddhist teaching that self-inflicted celibacy is a virtue. To an objective observer, it is self-inflicted celibacy that is a perversion. As Arthur C Clarke asked in *The Ghost From the Grand Banks*, "Exactly why should a vow of perpetual chastity be considered any nobler – any holier – than a vow of perpetual constipation?" The Talmud (Nazir 19a) agrees: "Anyone who causes himself anguish by abstinence from something he desires is to be deemed a sinner/

pervert/law-breaker."

Homosexual men and women are not perverts. Self-hurters such as smokers and boxers are perverts. But more than anyone else, priests and nuns are perverts—at least in theory. In practice, the number of priests convicted of sexual predation, or defrocked for sexual acts not prohibited by the secular state, raises the question whether more than a minority of alleged celibates practise what they preach. But that is conjecture. Undoubtedly, many are sincere, and must be regarded as worse victims of the buddhistic hoax than the masses they try to dominate.

• **William Harwood** is the author of *Mythology's Last Gods: Yahweh and Jesus (Prometheus, 1992)*, and editor/translator of *The Fully Translated Bible (Booksurge, 2007)*.

## Enter our album cover contest and win Dawkins' *The God Delusion*



DISCOVERED on the internet's Museum of Bad Album Covers ([www.zonicweb.net/index.htm](http://www.zonicweb.net/index.htm)), this cover was among the most hilarious in the religious albums section. The Christian Crusaders album was released (or more likely escaped) in the early 1970s.

As there appears to be no information available as to what "inspirational" tracks it contains, we thought it would be fun for readers to make up some spoof religious song titles, for example *What a Friend We Have in Cheeses*.

Entrants need to submit a set (or multiple sets) of three titles. The winner will receive a copy of Richard Dawkins' bestseller *The God Delusion*, plus a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*. There are two runners-up prizes of *Jesus and Mo* cartoon collections (volumes 1 and 2), plus a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*.

Please mark your entries *Freethinker* Album Cover Contest, and send them to PO 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD. The contest closes on April 15.

## O'Hara and Atheism

IT seems to me that in some of his letters over the past six months Daniel O'Hara has been postulating a somewhat nebulous link between atheism and international murder and mayhem!

It would be tedious and superfluous to catalogue the appalling horrors that were visited upon Europe when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, embraced the Christian superstition in the 4th century, for the facts are too well-known to belabour.

However, I don't think it would be irrelevant if I pointed out to Mr O'Hara that the most profoundly and shockingly wicked statement that I have heard in a fairly long life did not come from Hitler, Stalin or Mussolini (infamous as they undoubtedly were) but from a practising member of the Roman Catholic Church.

I well remember the day when I felt inordinately proud to call myself a secular humanist, for on the particular day in question (September 3, 1972), the London *Observer* newspaper carried an interview with the late Sean MacStiofain who, in the early 1970s, was the Provisional Chief of Staff of the IRA. During the course of the interview he was asked about the escalating violence and bloodshed in Northern Ireland. Even at this remove in time his reply still has the power to chill the blood and stun the intellect.

"What does it matter", he said, "if Protestants get killed? They're all bigots, aren't they?"

I'm sure Mr O'Hara can be persuaded to inform *Freethinker* readers just what effect the commandment "Thou Shalt not Kill" had upon a man who, according to one obituary, was a dedicated and regular attendee at Sunday Mass.

MARTIN O'BRIEN  
Gwent

I DON'T think Mr O'Hara's views, albeit highly intelligent, merit the whirlwind of conjecture that has raged in the letters' columns of the *Freethinker* these past six months. That Mr O'Hara was a vicar, then briefly president of the National Secular Society, yet now attacks atheists and atheism (reference Barbara Smoker's letter in the February issue), is redolent of an ambitious – or mischievous – disregard for intellectual probity.

Atheism most definitely is not a religion because, although atheists independently might have temporal "beliefs" born of free-thought, atheism – as has been iterated – is simply disbelief in a god, it is not an organised, regimented, ritualistic belief system. Religions are.

But there is a more telling difference. Because of or in spite of a religion's demands on its followers, believers' thought processes differ markedly from those of atheists, who are open to new ideas, new knowledge, and Kuhnian paradigm changes.

Religionists' minds, especially fundamentalists', are anything but open, as from an early age they are constrained by the dogma of

enforced beliefs. As Arthur Koestler wrote, "The true believer moves in a vicious circle inside his closed systems: he can prove to his satisfaction everything that he believes, and he believes everything he can prove." The proofs, needless to say, are tortuous confabulations not founded on reality.

This evidences, in my opinion, subtle but deadly neurological divergence between the brain operations of believers and (pacifist) non-believers. Perhaps one day neuroscientists will discover detailed explanations for that divergence and formulate remedies for its dire consequences; windy philosophising in the *Freethinker* (with apologies for my brief foray into the maelstrom), won't.

For example, of the progress being made, Steven Pinker, Professor of Psychology at Harvard, writing in *Time* (February 12), among other revelations says "... near-death experiences are not the eyewitness reports of a soul parting company from the body but symptoms of oxygen starvation in the eyes and brain.

In September, a team of Swiss neuroscientists reported that they could turn out-of-body experiences on and off by stimulating the part of the brain in which vision and bodily sensations converge." So two popular arguments that believers trundle out to support their beliefs in the phantasmagorias and delusions of an afterlife have been taken off their trolleys.

GRAHAM NEWBERY  
Southampton

WHEN Dan O'Hara states that "atheism is a religion" then his starting reference must be some dictionary unknown to the rest of us. Maybe he is adopting Humpty Dumpty's line: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean."

His remark that "absolutely no-one" doubts that Buddhism is a religion is rubbish. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, for example, acknowledges this difference of opinion, describing Buddhism as a "widespread Asian religion or philosophy (my italics).

No doubt there are atheists who are as dogmatic and zealous about their atheism as some religionists are as dogmatic and zealous about their theism. That still doesn't make atheism a religion.

R MCDOWELL  
Co Antrim

BARBARA Smoker wonders whether I have had a brain transplant (*Points of View*, February). As someone who usually takes pride in her deftness with Ockham's razor, she should know that far simpler explanations, usually involving a long and painful reappraisal of the evidence, can account for quite radical changes of viewpoint. And for the record, I was never a vicar: only an assistant curate.

The road between theism and atheism was, of course, always a two-way street. In 1949, on Guy Fawkes Day, Barbara famously renounced her Catholic faith to embrace atheism, and claims never to have had a

moment's doubt that she did the right thing.

Shortly before this, in 1948, Douglas Hyde (1910-1996), who had been a leading member of the British Communist Party for many years, and was the news editor of *The Daily Worker*, renounced his atheistic Marxist creed to embrace the Catholic faith, which he practised till his dying day. His journey to faith is well described in his book *I Believed*, first published in 1950.

Having explored both ends of the spectrum – and various points in between – rather more thoroughly than some of your correspondents, I can no longer agree with Barbara that atheism is "the best of causes": it now seems to me as unattractive as communism did to Douglas Hyde in 1948. But your readers may perhaps be relieved to know that this is my last word on the subject – in these pages, at least!

DAN O'HARA  
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

**Editor's note:** The phrase "the best of causes" was quoted from George Meredith, English poet and novelist (1828-1909).

## Rational argument, not hatred

EVERY month I look forward to reading the *Freethinker* for its intellectual content.

In February's editorial I read of "devout Muslim men who have to point their arses heavenward five times a day while mumbo-jumboing to the moon-god Allah."

Shame on you for using such offensive and insulting language about our fellow citizens. *Freethinkers* should employ rational argument not hatred.

M D ROGERS  
Leicester

## Circumcision

I'D like to thank you for the courage you demonstrated in showing the shocking picture of male circumcision on the February cover.

I've long been opposed to such practices, but seeing it like that was such a shock, and very moving too. Poor child. I hope that one day no child is ever circumcised. That operation looked barbaric.

I have two sons and neither my wife nor I would ever dream of putting them through such a traumatic operation – unless there was a damn good medical reason for it.

STEVEN JOHNSON  
Stockport

## Liberals and Islamic extremism

I READ with great interest the article by Sam Harris about Liberals having to wake up to the threat of Islamic extremism; in fact I read it twice to make sure that I had not missed anything.

Although I wholeheartedly agreed with the main sentiments, I searched in vain to find any criticism (however mild) of USA foreign policy since the end of WWII.

Near the end of the article he says, "The people who speak most sensibly about the



threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists." It was then that I saw the feet of clay – in fact he was clay up to the hips!

Apparently it has escaped his notice that the USA has befriended every vile, loathsome despot from Franco to Pinochet, so long as they were right wing. I recall that when our task force was heading for the Falklands, Ronald Reagan came on to our TV and declared that the USA had to be "even-handed" about our problem as Argentina was a "good friend" of the USA. The friend in this case being the murdering and torturing Galtieri.

"O, it is excellent to have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant." It seems that 400 years ago, here was Bill Shakespeare (in *Measure for Measure*) predicting what the present USA would be like.

C A M AITCHISON  
Glasgow

### Israel

YOUR correspondents Graham Livingstone and Ken Baldry show how the canons of anti-Jewish prejudice change in every generation, as do the religious superstitious that give rise to it.

In the 1940s at school I encountered anti-Jewish taunts "Why don't you all go back to Palestine?" and "How nice you would look riding on a camel!"

Moseley's fascists made that their theme when beating up Jews in the East End. The avowedly anti-Semitic journalist Douglas Reid wished all Jews to evacuate their countries, and he was full of praise for their efforts to build a Palestinian homeland.

How fluently critics invent facts to justify prejudices, because there are none to support them.

I will give £50 to the *Freethinker* Fund if either gentleman can tell me when the international community "connived at the brutal expulsion of the Palestinians".

On the contrary, the UN resolved in 1947 to create a separate Palestinian Arab state. That was with Jewish support. But the Arabs preferred to launch a wicked and genocidal war in which they outnumbered Israel 200 to one. They have been trying to destroy Israel ever since, a fact not mentioned by your correspondents.

All wars cause homelessness. The fault lies with those who want them. Palestinian Arabs who did not run away in the 1948 war were absorbed into the multi-racial democratic state of Israel where they enjoy full, democratic rights and sit in parliament.

How proud, as secularists, we should all be of Israel's struggle to survive and at last be accepted.

DEREK WILKES  
London

### Pareidolia

LYNETTE Van Dam's article on miracle images last month was fascinating, and "pareidolia" was a new word to me too. Just a few

comments.

Why are the appearances so ludicrous, in scraps of food and so on? Do the divine personages somehow leak into this world at random, or are they just having a bit of fun? Alternatively if Jesus, for example, is trying to tell us something, why doesn't he preach a sermon in Canterbury Cathedral, or at least write a letter to *The Times*? Second, it is notable that the images only appear to those who are familiar with their owners. Societies which had yet to hear of Jesus or Mary never saw images of these characters. Third, how do the fortunate finders of images of long-gone persons recognise them? There is absolutely no evidence at all as to what Jesus looked like. (Of course there are notorious fakes like the Shroud of Turin).

St Augustine himself stated: "What his appearance was we know not." Yet when Rosalie Lawson of Florida found a face on a burnt potato crisp she said: "It sure looks like the image of Christ to me." It all goes to support the thesis that there is nothing so absurd but that some people will believe it.

JOHN RADFORD  
London

### Anwar Shaikh's warning

IN the article on the admirable Anwar Shaikh (January *Freethinker*) Asad Abbas wrote that it was "as early as 1995" that he sounded his warning about the threat of Islam in the UK. On the distress that this religio-political construction causes I used to get the odd letter out of the depths of Islam itself – always written by a woman. (I have one dated January 1992).

And I must add that fine scholars have for at least 50 years been drawing attention to one or other aspect of an ideology that could not be more hostile to our notions of "the West". The problem is that our masters undoubtedly know the danger as well as we do, but they have a programme for dealing with it which, contrary to the evidence of history, they hope *will* deal with it.

So I'm afraid the best criticism in the world is not going to change anything. Worse, neither will another explosion at a crowded railway station. It needs a sustained terrorist campaign from Muslims to get our rulers to accept, where reason does not dictate, the need for a coherent policy for dealing with Islam. And, as in 1939, there is such a thing as being almost too late. Meanwhile, so-called "faith" schools and a knighthood in the UK and 20,000 more troops to somewhere-or-other in the *dar ul islam* will have to do and, as in 1939, we will have to be very lucky – the women of the *dar* infinitely more so.

KEITH BELL  
Wales

### Atheist Universe

William Harwood's review December, 2006 (*Freethinker*) borders on damning with faint praise by suggesting *Atheist Universe* "should be required reading for every schoolchild".

It's valuable precisely because it is the work of a theological amateur and does not follow the verbose methods of "biblical scholarship". Mills' ideas on existence before the Big Bang, original or not, are particularly illuminating.

I should very much like to hear more biblical scholarship from Mr. Harwood. Luke 19:27 has always interested me but I've not been able to find any reference to Mr Harwood's interpretation.

How does he know Luke, whoever he in fact was, inserted the verse to bring about the damnation of Herod Antipas? Most Christian sources I've looked at seem quite proud of the robust stance taken by Jesus on this occasion. They're in difficulty, of course, because to deny the authenticity of the verse discredits Luke.

PAUL ALBRECHT  
West Sussex

## The Freethinker

Founded in 1881 by G W Foote  
UK ISSN 0016-0687  
Editor Barry Duke

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

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

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

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

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

Annual postal subscription rates

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

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

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son  
Sheffield

## Events & Contacts

**Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://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, April 3, 7.30pm. Kenneth Humphreys: *Jesus Never Existed*.

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover.

**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 Multifith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website [www.secularderby.org](http://www.secularderby.org)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. 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 meeting 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](mailto:secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Information and events: [info@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:info@humanism-scotland.org.uk) or visit [www.humanism-scotland.org.uk](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk). Media: [media@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:media@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Education: [education@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:education@humanism-scotland.org.uk). **Local Scottish Groups:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, Feb 13, 7.30pm. Celebrating Darwin Day. Judith Hart: *In the Wake of Darwin*. 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](mailto:murielgarland@clara.co.uk). Website: [www.ionfreethinkers.co.uk](http://www.ionfreethinkers.co.uk)

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, March 15, 8pm. Martin Rowson: *God, Fiction, Pets and How to Stand Up to the Resurgence of Religion*.

**Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens.** Tel: 01553 771917.

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

**North East Humanists (Teesside Group):** Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

**North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):** Information: the Secretary on 01434 632936.

**North London Humanist Group:** Monthly meetings. Information: Linda Wilkinson, 0208 882 0124.

**North Yorkshire Humanist Group:** Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

**Reigate & District Humanist Group:** Information: Roy Adderley on 01342 323882.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, April 4, 8pm. *Raising the Profile of Humanism*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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