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The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

Churches have a hell of a job selling heaven

A RECENT sermon by the papal preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, skewered John Lennon's famous line, "Imagine there's no heaven," saying it represented an empty, secularised vision of human destiny.

But, according to the Catholic News Service, an Italian biblicalist, Father Carlo Buzzetti, has approached the question from a different angle. The modern church, he says, does a lousy job imagining what heaven is like and communicating it to the faithful.

Most Catholics, Father Buzzetti says, understand heaven as a vague place of eternal survival, where happiness can become monotonous and where the absence of human passions creates an "anaemic" atmosphere.

"In other words," writes John Thavis, of CNS, "boring. And if heaven is seen as a dull routine of perpetual bliss, how can it possibly stimulate people to live a good and moral life in this world?"

Father Buzzetti posed the questions in a long article in a recent issue of *Italian Clergy Review*. He based his analysis on extensive discussions with pastors, who told him the traditional images of heaven – a vision of God, a banquet or eternal repose – were making little or no impression on modern Christians.

Most people, in fact, seem to relate more to the concept of purgatory, where sinners atone for their faults in a final reckoning, than to a paradise that lacks any sense of interior struggle, he said.

"Throughout the ages, Christian pictorial representations of heaven, with placid rows of angels, have always seemed bland compared to the interesting if gruesome goings-on in hell or purgatory," observed Thavis, and pointed out that Father Buzzetti claimed that the Bible has little to say about heaven, and most of its references to paradise are in images: life, the feast or the heavenly Jerusalem.

Catechism of the Catholic Church says the lack of specific description is part of the point: The "mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all under-



standing" (No 1027).

But Father Buzzetti argued that this vision is unlikely to fascinate or attract anyone – which it should, if reaching paradise is still a goal for contemporary Christians.

One major problem with heaven in the eyes of many Christians is the idea that family ties, particularly marriage, no

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GOD, legend has it, created the world in a mere six days. He must have used a heck of a lot of superglue in its construction, because it took him 40 days to destroy it, using a "great flood" as his preferred weapon of mass destruction.

Central to the Great Flood myth is, of course, Noah and his wife, who was never mentioned by name in the Bible, despite the fact that ChristianAnswers.net insists that "Mrs Noah is undoubtedly one of the most significant women in Bible history." In a piece written specifically for children, the website goes on to reveal "we have no record of her name. She is merely referred to as Noah's wife the five times she is mentioned".

What [ChristianAnswers](http://ChristianAnswers.net) neglects to tell its young readers is that the Bible was written from cover to cover by men, and not naming Noah's wife – a mere chattel – is typical of the rampant sexism in this whacking great work of grisly fantasy.

Things might have been different had women been given a chance to chime in with a chapter, or even a verse or two, but, as G W Foote, founder of the *Freethinker* observed, "It will yet be the proud boast of woman that she never contributed a line to the Bible".

Why my sudden interest in this mythical woman's name? Simply this: last month I discovered that around 10 percent of American adults believed she was called Joan of Arc!

Amusing though this answer is, it is used, along with a number of other hilarious examples, to illustrate the deplorable lack of religious knowledge in a nation notorious for its unquestioning belief in God and religion.

This religious ignorance was the subject of a study by Boston professor Steve Prothero, who last month published his findings in a book entitled *Religious Literacy*. It shows that, in spite of the fact that more than 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God, only a tiny portion of them knows a thing about religion.

When Prothero began teaching 17 years ago, he discovered that few of his students could name the authors of the Christian Gospels. Fewer could name a single Hindu Scripture. And almost no one could name the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. He began giving religious literacy quizzes to his students, and, subsequently, to everyone he knew. Almost everyone miserably failed his tests.

His motivation for writing *Religious Literacy*, according to *Newsweek* magazine, is more than pedagogical. "In a world where nearly every political conflict has a religious underpinning, Prothero writes that Americans are selling themselves short by remaining ignorant about basic religious history and texts, by not knowing the difference between a Sunni and a Shi'ite or the name of Mormonism's holy book."

"Given a political environment where religion is increasingly important, it's increasingly important to know something about religion," he says. "The payoff is a more involved

[political] conversation."

I would go further, and suggest that – armed with a far greater knowledge of religion, Americans would soon start treating it with the same degree of suspicion and disdain that so many of us in Europe have learned to do. Here I am reminded of Isaac Asimov's comment "Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived."

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE lifts the lid on religious illiteracy in the US



Pretty much the same view is held by Susan Jacoby, author of *Freethinkers: History of American Secularism*, published in 2004.

A freethinker herself, Jacoby – commenting on Prothero's book in the *Washington Post* – said "the US is the most religious nation in the developed world, if religion is measured by churchgoing (or, to be more precise, by the claim that we go to church) and by belief in all things supernatural ...

"Some of Prothero's statistics, based on reliable public opinion polls, are truly astonishing and depressing to anyone – religious or secular – who cares about our common culture. Fewer than half of Americans can name Genesis as the first book of the Bible. Only about half can name even one of the four gospels. One of the more surprising findings is that evangelicals are only marginally more knowledgeable about Christianity than other Americans.

"Predictably, we are even more ignorant about Islam and various eastern religions than we are about Christianity and Judaism.

"I want Americans to know more about religion (as opposed to believing in religion) for two distinct reasons.

"First, anyone who hasn't read the Bible lacks one of the most important keys to Western literature and culture. I feel sorry for everyone who hasn't read the King James version of the Bible, with its boundless store of allusions and metaphors that do not require faith to be appreciated for their beauty and psychological insight into the best and the worst of human existence.

"And the importance of understanding the role of various religions in history – in our own nation and around the world – ought to be obvious at a time when we have gotten ourselves involved in a conflict that is, in part, a civil war between groups of Muslims arguing over which of them is the true heir of the prophet Mohammed (and over political power, of course).

"As a freethinker and an atheist, my second reason for wanting Americans to know more about religion is that knowledge fosters skepticism about faith – and I believe that our country needs much more skepticism and much less faith. If Americans actually read about the actions of a capricious God – his treatment of

poor Job, his slaughter of the Egyptian first-born on behalf of Jews, his slaughter of the innocents while sparing Jesus – they might think about whether they want to go on praying to such a heartless and unreliable being.

"I regard American religious illiteracy as simply one more manifestation of a broader cultural illiteracy, evinced by our equally deficient knowledge of American and world history. Furthermore, American high-school students consistently rank near the bottom in international tests designed to compare the scientific knowledge of teenagers.

"Prothero suggests that teachers, parents, and school administrators get together and devise a course about religion to be taught at the high-school level. This might work in the best of all possible worlds – a multicultural, educated community that pays its teachers high salaries and is willing to foot the bill for the additional training they would surely need to do justice to such a course. But what sort of curriculum agreement could be reached in communities where teachers are too intimidated by fundamentalist parents to use the word 'evolution' in biology classes?

"There is no Constitutional bar to teaching about religion, as distinct from indoctrinating children in particular religious beliefs. But that is really beside the point, because the line between teaching and preaching is too fine for the average public school. To take just one straightforward example, Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah – the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy – and Jews believe that Jesus was, well, just another Jew. An interesting Jew, perhaps a Jewish prophet, but a Jewish man and no more. I would love to hear the average high-school teacher explain this 'straightforward' fact of religious history, and its relationship to historical anti-Semitism, to a class of 16-year-olds.

"Furthermore, if we are going to teach the history of religion, we will also have to teach the history of secularism – something totally neglected now in public school American history classes.

"When we talk about 'mandatory' public school courses dealing with religion, we are really indulging in the fantasy that public schools can do a job that parents and churches are failing to do. Even though American ignorance about religion is clearly a byproduct of more general cultural ignorance, people of faith ought to be discomfited by Americans' shaky grasp of the tenets of even their own religions. There is something truly out of kilter in a society in which Christian fundamentalists take up arms in the culture wars in order to install the Ten Commandments in courthouses and ignore the fact that so many Americans (including politicians who have supported these efforts) do not know exactly what the commandments say."

Incidentally, although Noah's wife is not named in the Bible, according to Jewish writings she was called Naamah.

Faith schools 'a menace to community cohesion'

A LEADING teachers' union has come out strongly against faith schools after conducting widespread consultation and research among its 160,000 members.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers has concluded that faith schools that discriminate against potential pupils and staff should no longer be allowed state funding.

ATL general secretary, Dr Mary Bousted, said: "We need schools which embrace the diversity within our community, not a diversity of schools dividing pupils and staff on religious grounds.

"Faith schools must become far more accountable if they are to continue getting the current level of tax-payers' money. In a country which is becoming increasingly secular and multi-faith it is hard to justify public taxes being used to fund schools which discriminate against the majority of school children and potential

staff on the grounds of their religious belief.

"We acknowledge that some faith schools provide excellent teaching and are well integrated into their local community. However, too many do not and, unless there are some important changes to the way faith schools operate, we fear they will escalate divisions in society rather than help integrate our communities."

Faith schools currently get grants from the state of up to 90 percent of the costs of school buildings and 100 percent of the running costs.

As a result of selective admissions, pupils in faith schools are less likely to be entitled to free school meals, and are more likely to have English as their first language than the national average in schools across England. Many faith schools are allowed to discriminate when they employ staff. Voluntary aided faith schools can stipulate the beliefs of all their employees, and the fully local authority fund-

ed voluntary controlled faith schools are allowed to determine the faith of their head teacher.

ATL is calling for:

- The level of school autonomy – over admissions and the curriculum – to depend on the school promoting community cohesion.
- No extension of rights to be given to faith schools to refuse to employ staff on the basis of their religious belief.
- Faith schools to minimise segregation and promote community cohesion through their admissions, curriculum and employment policies.
- Faith and non-faith schools to work more closely together.
- More rigorous criteria with regular monitoring and inspection of the religious education (RE), personal, social and health education (PSHE), and citizenship taught in faith schools.

Teacher grilled over faith at 'right-wing Christian' school

THE "right-wing Christian" ethos of the King's Academy in Middlesborough was exposed last month in the local *Evening Gazette* which reported on the treatment meted out to a teacher who applied for a job at the school.

Dr Simon Valentine, 48, was faced with a barrage of questions about his religion – including whether he believed in Noah's Ark and what his opinions were on birth control.

Dr Valentine said he was amazed at the "right-wing Christian" approach he found at King's Academy. He is a part-time university tutor and had applied for the position of head of philosophy, theology and ethics (PTE).

But, he said, instead of being asked about teaching style he was grilled about his views on the Catholic Church, birth control and whether he believed in Noah's Ark. "They were asking for a missionary, not a teacher," said Dr Valentine, himself a Methodist lay preacher.

The school is controlled by Sir Peter Vardy, head of the Reg Vardy car empire and chairman of the controversial Emmanuel Schools Foundation.

Dr Valentine said that he had initially been made welcome at the school. During the interview, however, he says: "They asked me what I believed to be the most important duty as head of PTE.

"I replied by saying how important it was to prepare pupils for state examinations, but I was cut short by a sarcastic and disturbing comment – 'What is the point of sending young people out into the world with 20 GCSEs when they're going to go to Hell?' Not surprisingly, to my great relief, I was not offered the job. I know it may appear that this is sour grapes from me but it's not. Among other things I was angry that my taxes were financing a school which seemed intolerant, and imposing one very narrow religious view

on its pupils."

Nigel McQuoid, director of schools at Emmanuel Schools Foundation, said that Dr Valentine's account of the day was untrue. "Thankfully, the vast majority of our students continue to be able to distinguish between the Academy's Christian ethos and their own ability to think and decide what matters for themselves," he said.

A spokeswoman for the department of education and skills said: "The Vardy Academies

do what is required by law. The National Curriculum syllabus for science requires that the theory of evolution is taught and this requirement is fully met.

"The National Curriculum specifically states scientific data can be interpreted in different ways and produce different theories (eg the theory of evolution). The Vardy Academies' curriculum fully meets these requirements and Ofsted is content with science teaching at them."

Catholic school bans fund-raising for Comic Relief

STUDENTS at St Paul's Catholic College in Burgess Hill in Sussex were told last month not to participate in Red Nose Day because some of the money raised might be used to support charities that supply contraception or recommend abortion – activities that conflict with the school's so-called "Catholic ethos".

A parent of a girl at the college told the local *Argus* newspaper: "It is a shame for the children because they wanted to do their bit. It is a pity they can't take part when children at many other Catholic schools are. Many of the charities Comic Relief helps have nothing to do with contraception or anything like that."

Much of Comic Relief's work is done in Africa, where Aids is a major problem and it is considered vital that condoms are made available. The Catholic Church, though, opposes such life-saving methods.

An agreement was made between the Church and Comic Relief seven years ago to ensure Catholics could still raise money if they had assurances it would not be spent on any causes which clashed with their beliefs. Laura McCann, a policy and briefing officer for the Catholic Education Service, said there was no national policy regarding Red Nose Day and schools were at liberty to make their own decisions.

She said: "We have been assured by Comic Relief that no money at all goes to abortion charities. Three to five per cent goes to family-planning measures. Schools are welcome to take part but they should make clear they don't want their donations to go towards reproductive health."

A spokeswoman for Comic Relief said it had kept in contact with the England and Wales Bishops' Conference since the agreement and remained confident Catholics were able to support Red Nose Day in good faith.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, asked: "How on earth have we allowed these fanatics to get hold of publicly-funded schools and inflict their religious obsessions on the pupils there?"



Swedish Integration Minister draws fire from Muslim groups

SWEDEN'S new centre-right government led by Friedrich Reinfeldt, 41, the second youngest Prime Minister in Sweden's history, has come under sustained fire from Muslim groups for appointing 37-year old Nyamko Sabuni as Integration Minister.

Sabuni came to Sweden from Burundi when she was 12 years old. During her childhood in Africa her father was frequently jailed for his dissident activities, and in 1980 he sought asylum in Sweden. In 1981, Nyamko and her five siblings followed him with their mother.

Before becoming Integration Minister, Sabuni was well-known for her controversial views which did little to accommodate long-held Muslim traditions. Last July, as a Liberal Party MP, she urged that all schoolgirls be checked to ensure they had not undergone female genital mutilation (FGM), euphemistically called "female circumcision".

Though the practice was outlawed in Swedish in 1982, and subjected to a 1999 amendment which made it illegal to take a girl abroad for this operation, FGM is believed to be more common than is officially recognised in Sweden. Last June, a 41-year old man was given a four-month jail sentence for taking his daughter to Somalia in 2002, where she was mutilated. He was the first person to be convicted under the law.

Sabuni's suggestion for gynecological inspections, to be made as part of schools' routine medical checks, stems from her belief that girls subjected to such an operation are usually too scared of their parents to report them to the authorities. Sabuni is acutely aware of the climate of fear that attends what she calls "honour culture". She quoted from a study by Stockholm University which claims that 100,000 girls and young women are living under "honour oppression" in Sweden.

Last year she told the newspaper *Expressen* that: "Such examinations not only function as checks, but also give an opportunity to discuss sexuality, women's private parts and typical female diseases."

She also said that state funding for religious schools should be withdrawn, as such institutions cannot guarantee to respect children's rights to equality. And on the issue of the Muslim headscarf, or *hijab*, she declared that girls under 15 should be banned from wearing them. "The Prophet himself is supposed to have said that girls should first hide themselves when they start puberty. Today, girls are already wearing headscarves in nursery school."

She also suggested that child marriage and forced marriages should be made illegal.

Her ideas have enraged Sweden's Muslim community, which has called for her sacking. When she was made a minister, Kurdo Baksi, a Muslim writer and commentator said: "I am very disappointed that a person whom I consider to be an Islamaphobe has been appointed

integration minister. It is a very poor start to a centre-right government's integration policy."

But Sabuni insists that she is neither a "hard-liner" nor an "Islamophobe". "I am one of the few who dare to speak out. Sadly, some members of the Muslim community feel picked on. I regret that Muslims feel I am a threat to them. Everybody has a right to practise their religion, but I will never accept religious oppression. And I represent the whole of society, not just the Muslims."

Nonetheless, she stands by her basic premise: that immigrants must try harder to fit in to their adopted country.

"A lot of people misread their rights," she said recently. "They think that freedom of reli-

gion means that they can do anything in the name of religion, or that human rights means that they can act however they want against others. This is not true. If they want to live here, have kids, have grandchildren, they must make an effort to adapt to the society in which they live."



Nyamko Sabuni

Sabuni, who grew up non-religious although her mother is Muslim and her father Christian, says that she is eager to start a coherent dialogue with immigrants. Muslims in particular have marginalised themselves by conveying an impression of intolerance and aversion to change, she said.

"Practising Muslims who live by the word of the Koran and the Koranic books of course limit their own opportunities. A lot of people who live like me, or practising Muslims who hold that religion is a private matter, have had it easier than those who think religion should be part of a larger society.

"I need to pray five times a day because my religion says so," Sabuni continued. "OK, which employer will accept that? Or, 'My child shouldn't take part in music class, because my religion questions this.' OK, then we have a problem."

Addressing the question of the veil, Sabuni said "I would like to know what is happening in our society that makes families want to put a veil on our children."

"Maybe we don't need a law. Maybe we need something else so that people don't feel so insecure that they need to manifest their religion by using their children."

"Nowhere in the Koran does it state that a child should wear a veil; it stops them being children. By putting a veil on a girl you are immediately saying to the outside world that she is sexually mature and has to be covered. It's wrong," she said.

Such talk infuriates Sweden's Muslim groups, who say Sabuni is unfairly singling them out while avoiding pressing issues like unemployment. And, they say, she has essentially betrayed her past.

"I'm happy that she's a foreigner, and I'm happy about the colour of her skin, but I think maybe she has lost the connection to the immigrant communities," said Helena Benaouda, chairwoman of the Muslim Council of Sweden, the country's largest Muslim group. "Maybe she has thought too much about herself and her political career, and she should try to remember that she's not representing just herself."

Muslim woman takes the plunge in a hijab

A LEISURE centre in Oxford has decided to ban the public from wearing robes or street clothing after a Muslim woman in full *hijab* robes used the sauna, then plunged into the pool to cool off.

David Lloyd Club member Ian Caldwell, 46, was sitting in the sauna when the fully-dressed woman walked in. He said: "I pointed out that it was a sauna and asked her if it was appropriate. All the other women in there were all in bathing costumes.

"When I saw her in the pool later, she was still wearing the Islamic outfit.

"The pool attendant said she was allowed to wear this due to her religious customs. It was just political correctness gone completely barmy. I told the manager that it was my custom to attend saunas naked, as they do in Sweden, and said I trusted he would find that equally acceptable.

"But to be serious, this is a question of hygiene, not religious rights."

Surprised Muslim spokesman Taj Hargey asked: "How can you swim properly if you wear a hijab?"

Taj, chairman of the Muslim Educational Centre in Oxford, said: "Wearing a veil is nothing to do with Islam, it is a cultural tradition.

"People should have appropriate swimwear when they come to a leisure centre. It is basic common sense."

He added the incident demonstrated a problem among some Muslim women in Britain. "They think this is their way of making a statement, but this is the worst possible statement. They are shooting themselves in the foot."

Centre manager Liam MacGill said all pool and sauna attendants had now been briefed on the company's policy, and that robed or outdoor garments would not be allowed in future.

Islam motion defeated at Cambridge debate

LAST month, the Cambridge Union Society held what it called "one of the most controversial and immediately important debates of its history". The motion was "This House believes that Islam is incompatible with Western liberalism."

Astonishingly, the motion was rejected by almost two to one, the house dividing as follows: ayes 128, noes 249 and abstentions 98.

In proposition of the motion Jonathon Goldberg QC, said "Open-mindedness is the essence of Western liberalism, it is the equality of men and women and the separation of church and state. Islam is a theocracy. There are but a few voices of enlightened dissent, but these must live under the constant threat of repression."

Broadcaster Mariella Frostrup added that "This is the debating equivalent of a rhetorical question. As a body of beliefs, Islam means submission of all will to Allah. It would be ridiculous to say all Muslims cannot be liberal, but Islam is not a religion that can co-exist with others around it in its present form. Until I am deafened by a chorus of leading Muslim clerics demanding equality for women and the end of the barbaric practice of stoning, I will remain convinced that it is incompatible with Western liberalism."

Douglas Murray, journalist and bestselling author of *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It*, concluded the case saying, "All other religions allow some arguments against their deities without resorting to violence. Islam is opposed to freedom of speech. Theirs is the logic of "If you don't say my religion is peaceful, I will kill you."

In opposition to the motion, Baron Norman Lamont of Lerwick (former Chancellor of the Exchequer), said "Islam has been portrayed as always violent and always aggressive. But one could easily voice an argument that all religions are incompatible with liberalism. Many Islam states have not yet had time to naturally evolve; they are only decades old after having to deal with the legacy of colonialism and dictatorship. Europe and America deal well with the Judeo-Christian religions that are as extreme in their fundamental manifestations. So too will they do with Islam."

Lord David Trimble (Nobel Peace Prize Winner and former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party), concluded the case by stating, "If you believe that Islam is incompatible with Western liberalism then the only thing left is conflict. You acknowledge that people cannot live side by side. But this is wrong: Islam is not monolithic. I saw no positivity in the proposition's side. All I saw was an attack on a culture and a people that is completely unfair and unpolitical."

On learning of the debate and its outcome, *Freethinker* reader Dr Keith Bell of Wales,

sent the following note to the Cambridge Union Society: "I suppose it is because I get the odd letter in the national press and an article attacking Islam occasionally printed that I received a long e-mail which summarised the Thursday, March 1 proceedings.

"I am incredulous that at a place which I would normally have considered part of our defence of the different kinds of freedoms we enjoy, there was such an extraordinary judgement on a motion which hit off exactly how Islam works. Let me say straightaway that I understand that Baron Lamont hasn't lived in the *dar ul islam*, nor has Lord Trimble, so part of the misjudgement must be blamed on the Union organisers who ask people who, by trade, need problems to go away, serious problems to evaporate entirely; rather than ask scholars of Islam – say someone of the status of Patricia Crone, John Wansbrough and

Samuel Huntington – to speak on a political ideology which couldn't be more subversive of our notions of "the West".

"And scholarship, as I like to think people at Cambridge still believe, is important. So also is life on *droit civil* in different parts of the *dar ul islam*. My PhD under the wing of B Lewis and W N Medlicott obliged me to immerse myself in the texts of Islam and I have spent most of my working life, till I retired some twelve years ago, in different parts of the *dar*.

"Perhaps the Cambridge Union should inform the wider public what the credentials are of the two gentlemen who opposed the eminently sensible motion. After all, we don't like the idea that persons considered devout, but nothing more, should have sat in judgement on Galileo's knowledge. Authentic scholarship, one would like to believe, still counts for something at Cambridge."

Angry God, angry people

NEW research may clarify the relationship between religious indoctrination and violence, a topic that has gained new notoriety since the Sept. 11 attacks, according to a report by the Association for Psychological Science and World Science.

In the study, psychologist Brad Bushman of the University of Michigan and colleagues suggest that violence sanctioned by God in scriptures can increase aggression, especially in believers.

The authors worked with undergraduate students at two universities: Brigham Young in Provo, Utah, where 99 percent of students report believing in God and the Bible; and Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, where just half report believing in God, and 27 percent in the Bible.

Participants read a parable adapted from a relatively obscure passage in the King James Bible describing the brutal torture and murder of a woman, and her husband's subsequent revenge on her attackers.

Half the participants were told that the passage came from the Old Testament; the other half, that it was an ancient scroll unearthed by archaeologists.

In addition, half the participants from both the Bible and the ancient scroll groups read an adjusted version that included the verse: "The Lord commanded Israel to take arms against their brothers and chasten them before the LORD."

Participants were then paired up and instructed to compete in a simple reaction game that measures aggression. The winner gets to "blast" his or her partner with a noise that can be about as loud as a fire alarm.

The Brigham Young students were more



aggressive – that is louder – with their blasts if they had been told the passage they had read was from the Bible rather than a scroll, the researchers found. Likewise, they were more aggressive if they had read the additional verse that depicts God sanctioning violence.

At the more secular Dutch school, the results were surprisingly similar, the scientists said. Although the students were less likely to be influenced by the source of the material, they blasted more aggressively when the passage they read included God's sanctioning of the violence. This held true even for non-believers, though to a lesser extent.

The findings shed light on the possible origins of violent religious fundamentalism, the researchers said, and fit with theories holding that violent scriptures help lead extremists to aggression.

"To the extent that religious extremists engage in prolonged, selective reading of the scriptures, focusing on violent retribution toward unbelievers instead of the overall message of acceptance and understanding," wrote Bushman, "one might expect to see increased brutality."

Religious groups differ greatly in their insistence on rules. Quakers have few, if any, preferring spontaneous experience. Jews have complex codices with even more complex applications, and a kind of cottage industry of ways to circumvent the difficulties the rules cause. There are 39 basic things one must not do on a Sabbath (I hope devout readers will forgive me if I get the details wrong). One is lighting a fire. This includes operating an electric switch, causing a spark. That makes it difficult to use a lift, which is awkward if one lives in a tower block. The ingenious answer is to programme the lift to stop at every floor. Everyone can get in and out, and no sin is committed. While this is a tribute to Jewish creativity, which has given so much to so many societies, it does occasion the atheistical thought that it might be much simpler to ditch the whole thing.

At least, it causes no particular conflict, as do the other two Abrahamic faiths, Christian and Muslim, currently the most salient religions in Britain. Shabnam Mughal insisted on wearing a face-covering veil in court, with the result, it was claimed, that she could not be heard properly. Natalie Smart, a Muslim WPC, refused to shake hands with her boss, Sir Ian Blair. One wonders what will happen if she has to put the darbies on someone, or save them from drowning. And there is the rejection by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, joined by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, of legislation which, they say, will compel religious adoption agencies to place children with gay couples. Muslims have chimed in. These are just recent examples.

They do raise a very genuine problem, that of the rights of the individual versus the demands of the community or state. As far as I know, no-one has ever found a complete solution. Our society has a rather haphazard combination of general rules plus exceptions. Thus if citizens are liable for military service, there is provision for some exemptions in certain circumstances. But we do not make an exception for terrorists who want to kill, and may be as dedicated and/or religious as pacifists. Again, provision is made for the religious wishes of those in prison. But they are not allowed other privileges of freedom. Probably, there is a vague feeling that religion is somehow 'good', backed up by powerful pressure groups.

On wearing a veil in court, the (interim) decision of the Lord Chief Justice was that it should be permitted unless it interferes with the interests of justice. Although inconclusive, this is sensible. In our society we are not free to wear what we like. The rules are generally accepted, though individuals may dislike them. Public nudity is treated as an offence, and social pressure imposes other limits. Veils are not illegal, nor religious in themselves, and indeed were once fashionable, though not the strict Muslim version. They seem to me anti-social, and verging on the pathological, but

these are not by themselves sufficient reason for a general ban.

Where the argument becomes complicated, as so often, is when religion is brought in. There is often disagreement as to whether the rule has religious authority or not. Muslim dress for women does not, apparently, strictly require the face or hands to be covered.

The Church of England is currently tearing itself apart over homosexuality. Texts can be found to support various opinions. Many African Anglicans reject gays outright, while some American ones have chosen a gay bishop. Presumably, they are all devout, have all read the same Bible, and prayed to the same God for guidance. Either God has spoken with two voices, or the two groups have interpreted the message differently. In that case they must have fallen back on their own reasoning, or more likely preferences and prejudices. In other words, exactly the same basis for decision as the non-religious. And the "problem" was created by the faith in the first place, since homosexuality is simply a naturally occurring variation in behaviour found in many species including ours. Faith has then made things worse by giving an unjustified conviction of certainty.

Then there is the question whether religious rules should have any special status. There seem to be two arguments. One is that the rules are believed in very strongly and sincerely. This obviously cannot be a justification. Hitler and his Nazis were very sincere in believing that Jews and others ought to be eliminated. At a trivial level, I object strongly to many of the ways the Government spends my taxes. But I am not entitled to withhold them.

The other argument is that rules have divine authority. There is no general agreement, even among religions, that any such authority exists. There is no acceptable evidence for it, and no valid arguments. So it comes back to belief, which is, as just pointed out, insufficient. But even if one accepted the possibility of divine authority, there have been very many thousands of different claimants to it. The chances of any one of these possessing it are statistically tiny. And it would be impossible to accept all their rules, being both far too numerous and frequently contradictory. Allah apparently hates gays, but Zeus ran off with Ganymede.

In this country we have a form of democratic government. It is very imperfect, in that administrations are elected by a small proportion of those entitled to vote, and are then largely immune to public opinion. (Actually it is worse than that, as MPs generally vote as their leaders tell them, and legislation is increasingly made in Brussels.) Nevertheless, in principle our laws have some claim to general support or acquiescence, and can ultimately be changed by voters. This is not the case with religious rules, which are arbitrary but invested with spurious and often unchallengeable authority. With Jewish lifts, this does not

The Rules o

matter much. In the "gay adoption" case, it may harm children who do not find families to care for them, and families who do not find children (as well as the stigma of being classified as "unsuitable"). A further point here is that the religious adoption agencies are supported by public money, and for that reason alone should accept the law.

Of course there are many other notorious cases in which religious rules do demonstrable harm. The Roman Catholic ban on contraception directly contributes to AIDS. Ritual mutilation of children is widespread. Muslims are currently being told by some physicians that vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) contravenes dietary laws. This would endanger both Muslim and non-Muslim children (as the effectiveness of vaccination depends partly on the percentage of uptake in the population).

JOHN RADFORD ponders on the thorny issue of the rights of the individual v the demands of the community or state

Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor cites the precedent of Roman Catholic medical doctors who are not obliged to carry out abortions. This dispensation seems to me quite wrong. Medical personnel (especially when employed by the National Health Service) ought to supply whatever legal treatment their patients require, regardless of their own preferences. This is a basic obligation of all professions, that the interests of clients should come first. Those who cannot accept this should seek another career, or at least a branch of medicine in which the question will not arise.

The Cardinal, and William Rees-Mogg in *The Times*, also protest that the State should not enforce morality. But in our society some governmental decisions cannot avoid moral issues. We do not have the death penalty, or fox-hunting, or corporal punishment in schools, and we do have abortion and nuclear weapons, because a majority in Parliament thought them wrong and right respectively, at least partly on moral grounds. (In the last case, Archbishop Williams has criticised the Prime Minister's view. They are both devout Christians, and presumably sought the same divine guidance.) In each case a sizable part of the population disagreed, but had to accept it. They are free to speak out, and to work for a change. I think this is preferable to a theocracy in which "God's Laws" are unchangeable, and heresy can be proscribed, sometimes with severe penalties.

of Religion

Of course there are many other regimes which suppress dissenting groups, including religious ones, and it is often very difficult to decide when resistance is justified. But the decision, it seems to me, cannot be legitimately based on belief in one of countless supposed divine sources. Rather it must be on general principles of justice, equality and liberty, as

embodied in such statements as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and broadly shared by human societies. The conflicts within faiths, and between faiths and society, are fuelled by the faith concerned. Each group seems to feel it has a special status, to which it is not entitled

In general, society (in my view) should accommodate as wide a range of behaviour as possible. It should not seek to control beliefs. Where there are rules, there is often a case for exceptions on grounds of individual conscience, as with conscription or imprisonment.

Eccentricities like veils and nudity should be accepted unless there is specific reason against. But individuals or groups with rules, peculiar to themselves, that persistently conflict with the laws and consensus of society, must give way, or at least find a compromise or a way to avoid the problem. This is especially so if the rules are clearly harmful.

But what if a majority votes for the imposition of a dictatorship, religious or otherwise? I do not know the answer to this.

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Faith and State: Getting the Balance Right

GETTING the balance right between faith and state implies that religion may actually have a positive role to play in society and that discussions need merely focus on the extent and nature of its role, and that somehow there is a point at which we can find stability and equilibrium leading to an even more integrated society.

In fact, it is the complete opposite.

The more of a role that religion plays, and the degree to which it has access to state institutions, education, the law and so on, the more detrimental and divisive it is for society.

Let me clarify. In their recent opposition to Sexual Orientation Regulations and gay adoption, the Catholic Church supported by Islamic organisations and other religious groups asserted that they must not be forced to act against their conscience; that they should be allowed to discriminate; that it is their right to discriminate. In Iran, where religion holds political power, it is no longer a matter of the right to discriminate; gays are openly hanged in city squares for "perversion".

Another example is attempts by Islamic groups to portray sexual apartheid as a matter of choice and belief – whether it be in defence of the veil or of a Muslim police officer refusing to shake hands with the Commissioner last month because it was against her religion to touch a man.

In Saudi Arabia girls' schools are routinely policed to ensure the segregation of the sexes. In 2002 when a fire broke out at a school in Mecca, the guards would not unlock the gates and religious police prevented girls from escaping – to the point of even beating them back into the school – because they were not properly veiled; moreover they stopped men who tried to help, warning the men that it was sinful to touch the girls. 15 girls died as a result and more than 50 were wounded.

There are people with beliefs that belong in the Middle Ages and it is their right to believe in whatever they choose so long as they don't cause harm, but organised religion is a very different matter.

Clearly, there is a big difference between Muslims and political Islam. In the West today attempts are being made to blur that distinction

in a devious attempt to silence criticism of, and opposition to political Islam. Such criticism is particularly crucial given the havoc that political Islam has inflicted in the Middle East, North Africa and, more recently, here in the West.

When Islamists gain political power, they quickly resort to threats and intimidation. In Iran, Iraq and elsewhere, they kill and maim indiscriminately, tolerate nothing and no one, hang the "unchaste", "kafirs" and "apostates" from cranes in city centres, and say it is their divine right to do so.

MARYAM NAMAZIE, winner of the National Secular Society's Secularist of the Year Award, 2005, argues against the accommodation of religion in the affairs of state



Interestingly, the freedoms and rights demanded by religious groups were originally formulated to protect people from discrimination, persecution and oppression – not the other way round.

Unfortunately, cultural relativism has lowered standards and redefined values to such an extent that not only are all beliefs deemed equally valid, they seem to have taken on personas of their own, blurring the distinction between individuals and beliefs (whether theirs or imputed).

As a result, concepts such as rights, equality, respect and tolerance – originally created to protect the individual – are now being applied in ever-increasing measure to culture and religion, and often take precedence over human beings.

This is why any criticism, ridiculing or opposition to beliefs, cultures, religions, gods and prophets are declared "racist", or "disre-

spectful", and are said to incite hatred of, and even violence against those deemed to be believers.

We saw this during the organised protests by political Islam against the Mohammed cartoons. The distinction between humans and their beliefs is of crucial significance here. It is the human being who is meant to be equal not his or her beliefs. It is the human being who is worthy of rights and respect. It is the human being who is sacred, not his or her beliefs or religion.

The problem is that religion sees things the other way round.

Many Islamic groups, imams and "leaders" are self-appointed to help keep so-called minorities in their regressive, fragmented communities and run them on the cheap. Claiming that religious organisations and repressive Islamic states are representative of the Muslim community – which they aren't – implies that masses of people choose to live the way they are often forced to and imposes on them the most reactionary elements of culture and religion, which is that of the ruling elite.

Even if it was the belief of a majority that women are sub-human and honour killing is justified, it is erroneous and dangerous to confuse the right to a belief and the conscience of individuals with the right to then impose these beliefs and "conscience" on society or any segments of it.

And this is the main reason why religion must be kept a private matter.

More importantly than the fact that it divides, excludes, denies, restricts and so on is the compelling fact that when it comes to religion, it is not the equality, rights, freedoms, welfare of the child, man or woman that is paramount, but religion itself.

The promotion of secularism is an important vehicle to protect society from religion's intervention in people's lives. Of course, nowadays, secularism is often negatively portrayed. Religious groups equate secularism with the other extreme of religious fanaticism. But this is untrue.

(Continued on page 8)

Religion excludes whilst secularism is inclusive and ensures that a sect or group does not impose its beliefs on all – that a person's religion is a private affair.

What secularism does is require that at minimum government offices and officials from judges, to clerks to teachers to doctors and nurses do not promote their religious beliefs, and instead carry out the duties they are paid for. In the same way that a teacher must not teach creationism instead of evolution and science in the classroom; a pharmacist must not be allowed, by dint of his or her beliefs, to refuse contraceptive pills to a woman. Equally a male doctor should not be allowed to refuse to treat a woman patient, or vice versa. We are seeing this happening more and more as religion gains influence in society.

These are sometimes portrayed as restrictions on religious beliefs or freedoms, and even religious intolerance in the case of the banning of religious symbols in France, but again this is not so.

The veil

Moreover, when it comes to the veil, much more needs to be done than merely banning the burqa, niqab and the veil from state and educational spaces. The veil is a symbol like no other of what it means to be a woman under Islam – hidden from view, bound, and gagged. It is a tool for restricting and suppressing women. Of course there are some who choose to be veiled, but you cannot say it is a matter of choice because there is no "choice" for most Muslim women. In countries under Islamic rule, it is compulsory. Even here, in Britain, according to a joint statement about the veil from "Muslim groups, scholars and leaders", including the Muslim Council of Britain, Hizb ut Tahrir and the Islamic "Human Rights" Commission, it is stated that the veil "is not open to debate". The statement goes so far as to "advise all Muslims to exercise extreme caution in this issue since denying any part of Islam may lead to disbelief."

The veiling of children should not only be

Faith and State: Getting the Balance Right

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banned in public institutions and schools, but also in private schools and elsewhere too.

Here the issue extends beyond the principle of secularism and goes straight to the heart of children's rights.

While adults may "choose" veiling or a religion, children by their very nature cannot make such choices; what they do is really what their parents tell them to do.

Even if there are children who say they like or choose to be veiled (as some media have reported), child veiling should still be banned – just as a child must be protected even if she "chooses" to stay with her abusive parents rather than be taken into state care; even if she "chooses" to work to support her family in violation of child labour laws or even if she "chooses" to stop attending school.

The state is duty-bound to protect children and must level the playing field for children and ensure that nothing segregates them or restricts them from accessing information, advances in society and rights, playing, swimming and in general doing things children should do.

Whatever their beliefs, parents do not have the right to impose them, including veiling, on children just because they are their own children, just as they can't deny their children medical assistance or beat and neglect them or marry them off at nine because it's part of their beliefs or religion.

Similarly, faith schools – state or private – should be abolished. This is indoctrination of children. Just as we have laws against the physical abuse of children, we must have laws

against the psychological, emotional and ideological abuse of children.

The same applies to a sharia court for so-called minorities – something that was successfully opposed in Canada and is now being pushed for in the UK as a way to promote "minority rights". Aside from the fact that Sharia law is inherently unjust, it is discriminatory and unfair to have different and separate systems, standards and norms for "different" people. The concept of an Islamic court adheres to a principle of "separate but equal" similar to that imposed by the former apartheid regime of South Africa. It was clear then as it is clear now that separate is not equal. In fact it is a prescription for inequality and discrimination.

To sum up, one of the important roles of the state is to keep religion out of the affairs of state, rather than getting the balance right. The law is especially important here. Religious groups often speak of coercion when opposing laws such as the banning of religious symbols or the sexual orientation regulations, but much of law is just that – to coerce society to do what has become established norms. This ranges from preventing child abuse to curbing domestic violence.

Now I know that there are those who say that the vile political Islamic movement has nothing to do with religion. In Europe, Islam is constantly being repackaged in a thousand ways to make it more palatable for a Western audience. There is now moderate Islam, Islamic reformism, Islamic human rights, Islamic feminism, Islamic democracy etc. These notions would have been ridiculed by the *avant-gardes* of 18th-century Enlightenment. Nonetheless, Islam is key here both as the ideology behind and banner of the political Islamic movement; in fighting the movement, one cannot excuse or appease the ideology behind it.

As Mansoor Hekmat, the Marxist thinker said: "It has been proved time and time again that pushing back religiosity and religious reaction is not possible except through unequivocal defence of human values against religion. It has been proved time and time again that preventing religious barbarism does not come about through bribing it and trying to give it a human face, but through the fight against reactionary religious beliefs and practices. What price should be paid ... to realise that Islam and religion do not have a progressive, supportable faction?" (Mansoor Hekmat, *In Defence of the Prohibition of the Islamic Veil for Children*.)

Let me end by adding that this has nothing to do with the clash of civilisations. In fact, the clash we are witnessing between political Islam and the US-led militarism is the clash of the uncivilised.

The majority of humanity, a third camp that wants nothing to do with either side, represents 21st-century humanity and values. It is this front that must lead the much-needed fight for secularism today.

Trinidad may 'turn gay' if Sir Elton visits the the island

ROCK musician Sir Elton John, 59, who caused a furore last November when he said that organised religion was a source of bigotry and discrimination, turning people into "hateful lemmings", was proved right last month when the Anglican Archdeacon for Trinidad and Tobago, the Venerable Philip Isaac, condemned a planned visit by Sir Elton to Trinidad later this month.

The Archdeacon said the star's lifestyle and the fact he had a male partner (David Furnish) did not conform to "biblical teachings". And he expressed the fear that Sir Elton's visit might turn Trinidadians gay.

He said Christian principles dictated that a "man should not lie with a man". He added: "The artist is one of God's children and while his lifestyle is questionable he needs to be ministered unto. His visit to the island can open the country to be tempted towards pursuing his lifestyle."

Sir Elton is scheduled to perform at the Plymouth Jazz Festival along with other performers like Diana Ross, Mary J Blige and Earth, Wind & Fire.

In his 2006 interview with the *Observer Music Magazine*, Sir Elton John declared: "There are so many people I know who are gay and love their religion. From my point of view, I would ban religion completely. Organised religion doesn't seem to work."

Recently the liberal Bishop of Chelmsford, John Gladwin, had to cancel a diocesan visit to Trinidad and Tobago after opposition from conservative Anglicans.

Churches have a hell of a job selling heaven

longer count. According to the gospels, Jesus told his disciples that those in paradise neither marry nor are given in marriage, but will be like angels. That has led many to assume people married in this life will become free agents in the next.

But Father Cantalamessa took a different view in a commentary last year. He said Christ's words leave open the possibility that marriage – like friendship or family relations – will be transfigured, not nullified, in heaven.

Even spouses whose marriages were difficult and the source of suffering may find that, in heaven, the defects drop away and true love is experienced for the first time, Father Cantalamessa said.

Thavis said that Father Buzzetti took a similar view, saying more people need to understand that heaven is not emotionally sterile. Many people, he said, view the prospect of losing relationships of love and friendship as terribly sad and not at all paradisiacal.

The church, Father Buzzetti said, needs to urgently find a way to describe heaven in a "simple, accessible and imaginable" way that builds on the positive things in earthly existence. Pastors should explain to the faithful that this life will be present in the next life, in a way that infancy is present in the life of an adult, he said.

Describing heaven is a challenge, even for popes, Thavis reported.

In a series of talks in 1999, Pope John Paul II set aside the traditional geography of the afterlife. Heaven and hell exist, he said, but not as places of celestial merriment or eternal fire.

The best way to imagine heaven, he said, is to reflect on the happiness one feels when doing good. He characterized paradise as "neither an abstraction nor a place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Trinity".

Pope Benedict XVI explored the topic eloquently in a 2001 book, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*. Many modern men and women find heaven unimaginable, and without any kind of mental picture it becomes an abstraction, he said. Moreover, the thought of endlessly continuing one's existence strikes them as being "condemned to boredom".

But it's still a basic human drive to expect something greater from the next life, he said, and one of the deepest yearnings is for justice.

In this sense, he suggested heaven may be envisioned as the place where innocent people no longer suffer, where the strongest no longer win all the arguments, where "all the luck in the world" no longer drops into the laps of the guilty, and where gossip, cruelty and misery come to an end".

Meanwhile, a wake-up call to those who doubt the existence of heaven is contained in a recently-released "blockbuster DVD" containing "new scientific evidence that heaven is

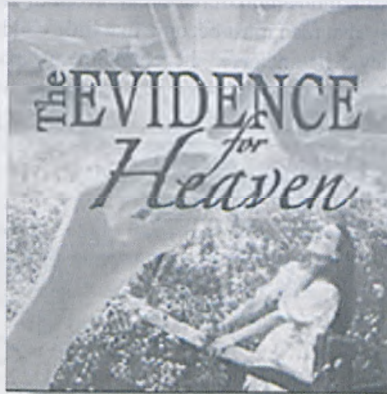
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real". *The Evidence for Heaven* – yours for just \$22.50 – includes "astounding back-from-dead testimonials".

The Christian website, WorldNetDaily, trumpets "Until now, heaven has been just a matter of faith. But a new documentary, *The Evidence for Heaven*, available exclusively through WND's ShopNetDaily online store, offers scientific evidence for the afterlife.

"It includes medical testimonials, first-person accounts of 'resurrections' from the dead and the latest developments on the scientific front ... No matter what your position is on the issue of the afterlife, this documentary will make you sit up and take notice. It will present you with evidence that demands a verdict.

"This special, full-length, unedited version of the documentary made for television by Grizzly Adams Productions is two hours long and will keep you on the edge of your seat. *The Evidence for Heaven* is like an electroshock-treatment for skeptics."



On discovering *The Evidence for Heaven*, a skeptical internet blogger commented: "I'm sure most of the supposed evidence is based on research by people who got their PhDs in Sub-Atomic Bio-Jesuscology", and added: "According to the DVD cover, most of the afterlife consists of standing in fields and dry-humping fence posts. Quite honestly, I can't think of a better way to spend eternity."

What WND neglects to tell readers is that, for an extra \$19.99, they can actually purchase a lot in Heaven by visiting heavenisforsale.com, a site established just over two years ago by American Karin Lewis. Here is an extract from her irresistible sales pitch.

"Friends, do you know where you will spend eternity? Do you really? You may think you know, but how sure are you? Perhaps you've been sold some 'Pie in the Sky' notion by a well-dressed, badly-coiffed 'Man of the Cloth', preaching that you can be assured of an Eternity in Heaven simply by following one particular religion or another (usually his), or by 'confessing your sins', or by believing in the *Savior du Jour*™.

"Well, the sad fact is that those days are well and truly gone. Yup. No more getting into Heaven on a wing and a prayer – no more sliding into Heaven at the last minute by the Grace of God. But I don't have bad news for you. Nosir! The news I have is wonderful and glorious!

"The fact is that I'm here to tell you that the Lord God Jehovah has decided to get out of the 'Heaven' business once and for all, and is now offering Lots in The Kingdom of Heaven to all comers, granting Eternal Allodial Title to ONE LOT – and He'll sell that Lot to anyone and everyone who has the wherewithal to buy it! Buddhists! Baptists! Mormons! Agnostics! Hindus! Muslims! Catholics! Even Atheists! That's right! I said even Atheists can now go directly to a Heaven they don't even believe in, and all because of the power, power, the wonder-working POWER of CAPITALISM!

"Yes, my friends, you read that right. Thanks to good-old American Capitalism (Amen, Sister!), this very day you can BUY yourself a whopping great piece of Heaven that'll be yours for all eternity, to do with as you like, and you don't even have to believe in anyone or anything to do it! Imagine an Eternity where YOU write the rules – where YOU decide whether it'll rain or shine; whether it's Monday or Saturday; whether it's Christmas or the Fourth of July; whether the Sun rises in the North, the South, the East or the West; whether you breathe water or air, or even what direction gravity works in!

"Eat yourself silly without gaining a single ounce! Get drunk as a Lord (no pun intended) or as high as Jesus, and then sober up instantly – without getting a hangover! Walk around stark naked or dressed to the nines, as the mood strikes you. You want diamonds? You want rubies? You want star sapphires or emeralds? Materialize them out of thin air just like the Lord God Himself! And virgins? Hey – if you want 'em, you've got 'em! This is YOUR Heaven, and you've got the Grand Deed that proves it! You can have 72 virgins like a Muslim, or even 72,000! YOU MAKE THE RULES!

"Now how much would you pay for a little slice of Heaven, my friends? Remember, this is ETERNAL LIFE we're talking about, not some time-share in Miami... Friends, I'm here to tell you that you can have ETERNAL ALLODIAL TITLE to one prime Lot in the Kingdom of Heaven for the unbelievable, ridiculously low, even ludicrous price of only \$19.95, American Cash Money...

"Buy your piece of Heaven TODAY, before it's too late!"

Despite this terrific sales spiel, even Karin Lewis is having a hard time flogging Heaven (or bits thereof). When she was contacted by the *Freethinker* last month she confessed that the number of lots she has sold to date can be counted on the fingers of three hands.

In the Western world, humanism developed before the Christian era. In ancient Greece several philosophers could be given the label. The 6th century BC Milesians – Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes – believed that the Earth was made of material substance and that it evolved. Anaximander said that all matter consisted of a single substance, that it was ageless and that no god made it, and that the world evolves, animals evolve and that man is descended from fishes.

Protagoras, a teacher and philosopher of the 5th century BC, formulated the dictum that man is the measure of all things, by which he probably meant that there is no objective standard or ultimate truth outside human values derived from human experience. Protagoras also taught that justice is a matter of agreed rules, not divine commands. His book *On the Gods* began: “With regard to the gods, I cannot feel sure either that they are or they are not, nor what they are like in figure; for there are many things that hinder our knowledge – the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life”.

Was Jesus a Philosopher?

This is the context in which we should examine the question whether Jesus was a humanist. First of all, a humanist is a philosopher, a lover

of wisdom, who seeks to answer basic questions about life and the universe. When asked who was his favourite political philosopher, George Bush replied, “Jesus Christ”, but we do not normally apply this label to the founder of Christianity. The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has no reference under “Jesus” or “Christ”, though it does include one on “Buddha”. A similar absence applies to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*: nothing on “Jesus” or “Christ” or “Christianity” but an article on “Buddhist Philosophy”. Why is this so? Why, in the view of most professionals, does Jesus not qualify as a philosopher?

If we read the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, we do not find a systematic, reasoned analysis of truth, knowledge, logic, the meaning of life or basic ethical principles, but what we are offered instead is a series of statements, so-called “divine” judgments and parables. Rousseau said that if Socrates lived and died like a philosopher, Jesus lived and died like a god.

That is the point: Jesus and his followers made claims far beyond any that a true philosopher would make. No true philosopher would presume to know the mind of a God, and no true philosopher would demand unquestioning faith in him. Indeed, throughout the Gospels, there is an explicit rejection of reason in favour of faith. To say that men must become like little children or they will not enter the kingdom of heaven

Was Jesus a

(Matthew 18:3) is to praise uncritical belief, and this is the precise opposite of philosophy. What renders a creed or ideology a “philosophy” is that its proponents set out arguments for it and invite others to examine and debate the case. Otherwise, it is merely a dogma.

So although in many respects Jesus was a rebel, it is not enough to go against the grain to be a philosopher. It is also necessary to reject faith in favour of reason. For what is faith if not irrational belief? And what is philosophy if not the rational pursuit of wisdom? Jesus did not seek wisdom; he claimed he already possessed it. Such arrogance contrasts with the genuine humility of the true philosopher.

BRIAN McCLINTON poses the question

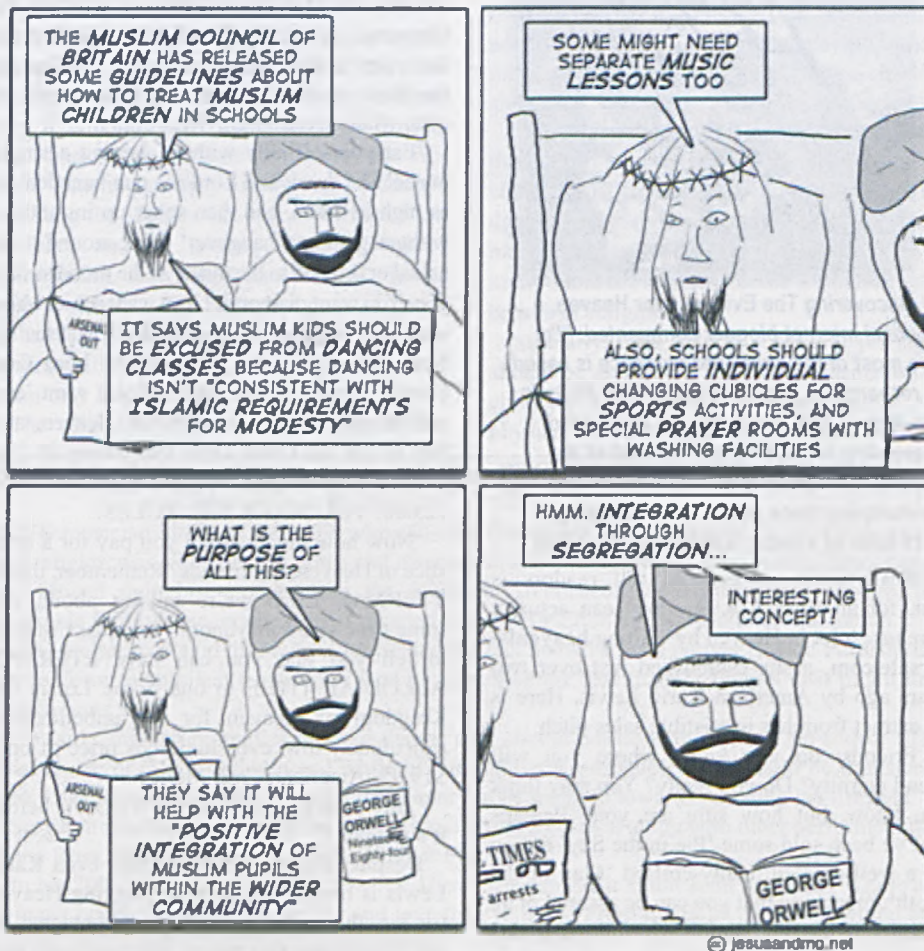
Indeed, this is precisely the reason why many Christians themselves would reject the label of “philosopher” as applied to Jesus. They would see it as lessening his importance. It would mean that he was no greater than Buddha, Confucius or Socrates, whereas they see Jesus as the Christ, the One who died and rose again so that we can be reconciled to God. As far as they are concerned, if people only believe in him as a philosopher, then they don’t believe who he himself said he was, namely God incarnate. Believing in the philosophies of Confucius or Buddha, in this view, will not get you closer to God – only Jesus can do that. Yet, here again, we discover another reason why Jesus is not a true philosopher, which is the fact that philosophers are not concerned whether people should believe in them and their special qualities, divine or otherwise – only that they should accept their ideas about truth, virtue and reality. A mystic like Jesus asks people to follow him; a philosopher merely asks us to agree with him.

Did Jesus question God(s)?

From our ancient examples, it is clear that humanists question the existence of gods. Their sceptical open-mindedness leads them to doubt orthodox explanations of the origin and meaning of the universe. As Protagoras implied in the earlier quote, this does not mean that they are necessarily atheists, if by that term we refer to dogmatic disbelief; it may mean that they just don’t know – they are agnostic – and think that, given our state of knowledge, there are more important things in life than theistic conviction.

In this important respect, the Jesus depicted in the Gospels was definitely not a humanist. For not only did he believe in God, but also he believed he had a special relationship to God. In John’s Gospel he is not recorded as saying the exact words, “I am God”, but he does say: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). And in John 10:30 he even goes so far as to state that “I and the Father are one”. Later, he says: “I am God’s Son” (John 10:36). And again: “No one comes to the

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.jesuandmo.net

a Humanist?

Father except through me" (John 14:6). And yet again: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Whether Jesus is actually saying that he is God incarnate, however, is another matter. The Synoptic Gospels do not make such a claim. The early Church had broadly three views on this question: the doctrine of logos – he was a divine being but subordinate to God; the doctrine of adoptianism – he was filled with a divine power ("adopted") by God; and the doctrine of modalism – he was a mode of appearance of God. At the Councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451) it was laid down that Jesus was God.

No humanist would ever claim to be God or be happy that supporters of his (her) views regarded him (her) as God. This is probably true of both Confucius and the Buddha. The latter in particular would be horrified to discover that he has been elevated to divine status and is worshipped by millions in the East. As far as Jesus is concerned, on the other hand, the extracts quoted above suggest that he would have been pleased to achieve such a status. Indeed, we could argue that worship of him as a divinity was precisely what he sought to achieve.

Did Jesus teach tolerance?

Humanists believe in individual rights, tolerance, reason, understanding, love and compassion. Did Jesus promote such values? As we have already seen, he was not a great advocate of reason. So let us consider tolerance. We could say that Jesus showed tolerance to the lepers, the paralytics, the deaf and blind, to Zachaeus the tax collector who was ripping the people off, to his disciples even when they lacked faith, to Peter when he denied him three times, and to the thief on the cross.

In John 8 we also read about the woman caught in adultery who was brought to Jesus. He showed love to this woman by not condemning her, yet telling her, "Go and sin no more" (vs. 11). He tolerated the woman, but he did not tolerate the sin. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) he taught tolerance of difference. Last, but not least, he showed tolerance to those who arrested him, tried him and crucified him. He prayed, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The people to whom he was intolerant were rival religious leaders and doubters. He condemned the former for their hypocrisy and he certainly wasn't afraid to get in their face. In Matthew chapter 23 he laid into them in no uncertain terms, calling them hypocrites who "go over land and sea to make a single proselyte and then make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15) and who are "like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones" (Matthew 23:27). He even went so far as to condemn them to eternal hell-fire: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how

can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matthew 23:33). And, of course, there was also the occasion when he went into the temple and turned over the tables of the money-changers (John 2).

As for the doubters, Jesus continually threatened them with eternal burning in hell for not believing in him: "He that is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). In his view, you were either a sheep or a goat, and to the latter he showed no mercy: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). A similar point is made in Mark's Gospel: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16).

What emerges here is a very mixed picture. The Jesus depicted in the Gospels was both tolerant and intolerant, and in this respect he was not much different from the majority of the human race. However, his animosity towards the religious and sceptical elites suggests someone who wanted to make a populist appeal.

Did Jesus teach love and compassion?

Jesus was also contradictory on the matter of peace. On the one hand, he delivered the Sermon on the Mount, telling the crowd to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies" (Matthew 5). And, of course, "First be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:24). On the other hand, he made statements like: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34); "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one"; and "But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me" (the last was spoken in a parable in Luke). And how about this: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth...and men gather them into the fire, and they are burned" (a verse cited by the Inquisition).

And what are we to make of his attack on family values? "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother" (Matthew 10:35). "And a man's foes shall be they of his own household". And again: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple". When one of Jesus' disciples asked for time off to go to his father's funeral, Jesus rebuked him, "Let the dead bury the dead". Of course, Jesus never used the word "family". He never married or fathered children.

He spoke approvingly of those who would "become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven". Even to his own mother he said, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?"

Did Jesus promote justice?

Was Jesus concerned with civil and religious liberty? Was he concerned about equality and the rights of women? Was he concerned about the spread of science and education? Was he, in short, a social and political reformer? The answer is that the political philosophy of Jesus – if we can give a series of disjointed and contradictory pronouncements such a grandiose title – is not at

all progressive, and certainly not humanist. In no way was this man a socialist, as is sometimes claimed. For a start, he encouraged the beating of slaves. (Luke 12:47). He never denounced slavery and incorporated the master-slave relationship into many of his parables.

As for poverty, he certainly seemed to align himself with the poor and oppressed and condemned the rich, who would find more difficulty than a camel going through the eye of a needle in entering heaven. Luke 6:24 is quite explicit: "Woe unto you that are rich, for you have received your consolation". When the rich man asked him what he needed to do to "inherit eternal life" (Mark 10:17), his reply was unequivocal: "Go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor" (Mark 10:21). But, although he condemned the rich and lived among and preached to the poor, he did nothing or said nothing that could be construed as a coherent policy to alleviate poverty. On the contrary, "Ye have the poor with you always".

The message instead seemed to be that the poor should be content with their state, for their reward would come in the next life: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). The essence of the Sermon on the Mount is that the poor, the hungry and the wretched should accept the status quo because they will receive justice eventually in a spiritual dimension beyond this world. As such, the political philosophy of Jesus is a profoundly reactionary message which fails to provide any practical scheme for the good of society. To tell people to "trust in God", to disregard the world, to have no thought for tomorrow, to welcome poverty, to neglect their home and families, to let evil happen is really to compel them to opt out of the human struggle in favour of an escape into an unreal mental world. Jesus is saying that religion is a drug. In his teachings he thus confirms the words of Karl Marx that religion is the opium of the people.

Ernest Renan, who wrote a *Life of Jesus*, knew his subject well. Jesus, he says, "had no knowledge of the general conditions of the world", was unacquainted with science, "believed in the devil, and that diseases were the work of demons", was "harsh" towards his family, was "no philosopher", went to "excess", aimed "less at logical conviction than at enthusiasm", "sometimes his intolerance of all opposition led him to acts inexplicable and apparently absurd", and "bitterness and reproach became more and more manifest in his heart".

These are less the qualities of a humanist than of a mystical, deluded lunatic. If there really was a preacher in some ways similar to the one depicted in the Gospels – without the supernatural powers, of course – then he said some good things which are indeed worthy of remembering, but he contradicted himself so often and talked so much nonsense on other occasions that it would have been better if we had let him rest in peace instead of transforming him into a deity.

The Jesus package, taken as a whole, is not the ideal purchase.

Suppose Christ did *not* rise from the dead

SOME years ago, I read a news report about an archaeologist in Jerusalem unearthing a human skeleton with a crucifixion nail through the ankles, and a sign attached (or maybe it was in a box) identifying the skeleton as the Aramaic equivalent of "Jesus son of Joseph." Instead of having his find examined by forensic scientists, the finder promptly reburied it, declaring, "It couldn't be *him*. He rose again on the third day." The report said nothing about the archaeologist being burned at the stake, or even having his degrees revoked, for his unparalleled crime against scholarship, so presumably neither consequence ever occurred.

When James Cameron announced that he had made a documentary for the Discovery Channel, about an archaeologist's discovery of an ossuary similarly labeled, I tried Googling for the original story. No luck. What Google did find for me was this novel, written in 1990, by an author who presumably read the same news story and decided to write a "what if?" novel in which the archaeologist did *not* suppress his discovery before it could be evaluated in much the way that Dan Brown wrote *The Da Vinci Code* as a fictionalization of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* – as if that fantasy speculation were not itself a work of fiction.

The jacket blurb begins, "Suppose Christ did *not* rise from the dead?" That is analogous to postulating, "Suppose the earth is *not* a flat disc like a dinner plate?" Nonetheless, Read is by no means as ignorant of relevant historical facts as Dan Brown. He is aware that Slavonic manuscripts of Josephus contain references to Jesus that Robert Eisler (whom Read names) concluded are basically legitimate even though they contain identifiable Christian interpolations. And he was able to insert a non-historical interpolation into Slavonic Josephus at precisely the point where it would be most believable.

But he is unable to recognize that passages such as, "A man appeared, if 'man' is the right word, who had all the attributes of a man but seemed to be something greater. For he worked such wonderful and amazing miracles that I for one cannot regard him as a man," are incompatible with anything the Jewish Josephus could ever have written. He is also unaware that Josephus (*Halosis*) described Jesus as four and a half feet tall, since the skeleton in the novel is five and a half feet tall, and Read nowhere draws attention to the discrepancy.

Read's recitation of biblical fairy tales, as if the aborted sacrifice of Isaac were a fact of history and not a seventh-century redactor's harmonization of an eighth-century author's Torah in which Isaac was sacrificed as a child with a tenth-century author's Torah in which the adult Isaac was prominently featured, can be excused on the ground that the characters citing such myths believed them. But his state-

ment that, "St John loved Jesus in a special way", reveals his uncritical acceptance of the Christian pretence that Jesus' Beloved Disciple, and the author of the fourth Gospel, and the John who redacted Revelation, were all the same person. But by having a character declare that, "a religious vocation is a symptom of a psychosis," he demonstrates his own ability at least to consider such a hypothesis. He is aware that much of what the masses believe about morality is promulgated, "not by priests from a pulpit, but by advertising copywriters over the TV screen". In asking, "Was love itself just an unreal idealization of a crude, atavistic instinct?" he reveals an awareness that cultural brainwashing is a fact of life.

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews
***On The Third Day*, a novel by**
Piers Paul Read, 1990,
Random House, 1745
Broadway, NY 10019, ISBN 0-
679-40089-3, 259 pp, hc, \$20

But in contrast, the statement that, "If there was a God, then what appeared absurd to us might seem sensible to him", appears to reflect the author's own cultural brainwashing, although whether Catholic or Jewish is never made clear. (Even the unanimity of the Jewish characters that, if the skeleton in question is not that of Jesus, then his remains are assuredly out there somewhere waiting to be discovered, could be a Catholic-thinker's perspective of Jewish-think.) Newsflash: A higher life-form whose concept of right and wrong is closer to the Marquis de Sade than William Wilberforce is an oxymoron.

But regardless of which stems from self-analysis, Read's portrayals of both Catholic-think and Jewish-think are right on the mark. Dan Brown could learn much from Read's technique. For example, in showing the Catholic hierarchy justifying its habitual lying on the ground that, "We must weigh against the lesser evil of a small deception the certain and substantial evil that will result if it becomes known" [that a priest committed suicide] he is totally accurate. And the scenes

showing activist Jews behaving in a similar manner, even when the "lesser evil" is the murder of an individual who knows too much, are equally reflective of the real world in which Israeli prime ministers such as Menachem Begin and Catholic popes such as Innocent III were prototype Osama bin Ladens. It would have been the scenes in which fanatic god addicts rationalized the virtue of deception and murder that caused a *Sunday Times* reviewer to declare that, "Read writes with such intensity that you can accept his central premise".

Read puts into the mouth of a Jew the *realpolitik* that, "The sympathy we can still count on for what we suffered under Hitler will not outlive those who remember the last war". Many non-Jews are hoping so, since they see professional Jewish propagandists as inflicting a fraudulent guilt trip on the rest of the world for the purpose of retaining the sacred-cow status Jews still enjoy on account of atrocities perpetrated by persons long dead.

Read's observation, put into the mouth of a priest, that "There are occasional suicides among priests", down-plays the reality that only falsification of death certificates conceals that the suicide rate among priests is the highest in any profession, even higher than among psychiatrists, the most suicide-prone occupation in which the true cause of death is not habitually falsified. The day eventually comes when a psychiatrist recognizes that he has spent his life practising glorified tea-leaf reading and is too old to learn an alternative marketable skill. And the day eventually comes when the number of times a priest has sat on a toilet seat reaches critical mass, and he recognizes that he is experiencing a reality that could not exist if humans were intelligently designed by an omnipotent creator. In both of those parasitical professions, suicide is often seen as the only way out.

Read's dénouement is nothing less than a cop-out. His failure to leave open the question of whether the skeleton was really Jesus, or another crucifixion victim from the first century, or something else, including a possible hoax, is best attributed, not to political correctness but to a lifetime of brainwashing that allows him to consider any hypothesis except that the god delusion itself is a gigantic hoax. Nonetheless, as a compelling mystery, better thought-out and less dependent on incompetent nonsense than *The Da Vinci Code*, *On the Third Day* is well written. Only the educated will be disappointed by the plot's chicken-excrement resolution, and repulsed and disgusted that Mother Goose addict Read's concept of a happy ending includes having the novel's most rational character start to believe that all the king's horses and all the king's men really did put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Muslim fanatic kills woman politician for not wearing a veil

AN Islamic fundamentalist shot and killed a female Pakistani minister last month because of her refusal to wear a Muslim veil. The attacker singled out Zilla Huma Usman because he believed women should not take part in politics. Ms Usman, the Punjab provincial minister for social welfare, was shot as she was about to address a public gathering in the town of Gujranwala, 70km north of Lahore.

The Vatican: Rotten to the Core

THE Vatican may have been discomfited for a while by Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, but that was, after all, only a badly written novel and a less than gripping film. A potentially much more worrying book for the Pope is David Ranan's *Double Cross: the Code of the Catholic Church* because this is not a novel. What it reveals is not some fanciful conspiracy, but just how vile and corrupt the Vatican has been during its long history, and just how rotten to the core it remains today. Indeed, David Ranan says the purpose of the book is to answer the question "Is the Catholic Church inherently evil?"

Evil is a very Catholic word, of course, so it is appropriate that it should be turned back on the institution that has applied it to anyone who criticised or challenged it. And evil is not too strong a word as far as David Ranan is concerned.

This well-researched book (44 pages of references) gives the whole unpretty picture of the Catholic Church and its almost unbelievably horrible history. But Dr. Ranan is not just any old anti-Catholic rant, he is a political scientist with an interest in the study of power structures.

Well, he's struck gold with the Catholic Church, which is the oldest surviving power structure in the world. During its almost 2,000-year history it has had plenty of opportunity to perfect and deploy its devious techniques. It is a master of propaganda, of double talk, of psychological warfare, of hypocrisy and cruelty. This book doesn't have a good word for the Church (or "her" and "she" as Dr Ranan annoyingly refers to it throughout the book).

Ranan acknowledges the sterling work done by individual Catholics in sometimes shocking conditions, but he asserts that their humane achievements are in spite of the Church rather than because of it.

But looking objectively and from without at the massive structure that is the "Holy See", it rapidly becomes apparent – at least to David Ranan – that it is incapable of any meaningful change. Its rigid conservatism is inbuilt and fundamental to its workings.

The reform that is longed for by liberal Catholics is impossible, Ranan says. It seems utter destruction is the only option. And I tend to agree. The world really does need to rid itself of this malignancy which has created the perfect platform for paedophiles to abuse children with impunity, and which has cruelly and senselessly forbidden the use of condoms to fight AIDS – the only known defence.

It has humiliated and demeaned women, insulted and defamed homosexuals, landed its priesthood with the intolerable burden of celibacy, carried out crimes that, even when it was caught red-handed, it denied. It illegitimately interferes in democratically elected governments and claims for itself powers that are denied to every other religious body.

It tortures and torments its followers, employing guilt and accusation to keep them in line. It has retarded scientific progress, and continues to do so when it can. It has treated the Jews with utmost cruelty throughout its history. It has sided with some of the most despicable

regimes that have ever existed – including the Nazis. It has entered into treaties (concordats) with filthy dictators in exchange for temporal and financial privilege. It is greedy for material wealth and commits financial crimes that would do justice to any mafia family. Yet unlike the mafia, the Vatican shrugs off criminal investigations and walks away unscathed.

And despite its many nefarious activities, it still wields a huge emotional hold over many people in the developing world (in the West the influence is thankfully fading). It uses the psychological screws, as well as its priestly power structures, to attempt to control lives from cradle to grave. In the past it has been able to do this throughout the Western world, and it has resulted in abominations like the Magdalen laundries.

TERRY SANDERSON,
President of the National
Secular Society, reviews
*Double Cross: the Code of the
Catholic Church* by David
Ranan (Theos Press, £15.99,
p/back, 426 pp)

Now that we are better educated, better informed and less deferential, the Church finds it harder to bring us into line.

But still it manages to get away with crimes that would bring the severest penalties if committed by others. Despite the fact that paedophilia is now regarded as probably the most heinous offence by Europeans, the Catholic Church is massively guilty of enabling it and seems, through its breathtaking skill at thwarting criticism and making the accuser seem like the real criminal, to have almost got away with it. The Church seems to have escaped the universal shame and rejection that it should have suffered. There has been a small acknowledgement of the problem, no real apology, and the only real penalty the Church has suffered has been financial. But even that its faithful dupes are rushing to put right, and the money is flowing freely again from America into the Vatican's bottomless coffers.

David Ranan says: "In [the Catholic Church] sick abusers did not find help, instead they found a playing field. Society-at-large and her own members were disregarded when the Church found out about sexual abuse and the matter was silenced. The police were not informed, the family of the abused was lied to and worst of all, the offending priest was sent to a new parish. It is almost as if the bishops wanted to ensure that paedophiles regularly had a

fresh assortment of children to pursue. The damage was multiplied by the Church's standing in the community that made law enforcement agencies and others figures in the public domain look the other way whenever a priest was caught offending. Not only that, but the Church was held in such awe by the faithful and members of the Church that for many years the sexually abused and their families participated in the hushing up of the abuse."

Of course, the present leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor was guilty of covering up the activities of a particularly voracious paedophile. When he was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, Murphy O'Connor allowed Michael Hill, a known child abuser, to continue working as a priest. Despite being well aware of his proclivities and previous record, Murphy O'Connor re-deployed Hill to work at Gatwick airport, where he continued his activities unrestrained.

Hill, who is suspected of having abused more than thirty children during the 1980s and 1990s, pleaded guilty in November 2002 to six charges of molesting boys over an eighteen-year period. He was later convicted of abusing nine children. When called to account, Murphy O'Connor accused the media of conducting a witch hunt against him. He wrote a letter to *The Times* accusing journalists of "relentless" attacks on the Church and even on the Roman Catholic faith itself – neatly making his accusers culpable of an apparently even more serious offence. He then wrote to the bigwigs at the BBC complaining that the *Today* programme was unfairly pursuing him after one of its reporters began to dig.

And guess what? Suddenly it wasn't the Cardinal who was guilty, but the media. From that moment, the guilt of Cardinal Murphy O'Connor for abetting these crimes has never again been mentioned in the mainstream media in Britain. Why was public discussion of this scandal suddenly shut down?

Murphy O'Connor was elevated from bishop to cardinal by the Vatican, and now he is accorded deference and respect by the same media that only a few years ago was accusing him of despicably betraying innocent children. Yet couldn't it be argued that rather than residing in a palace, Murphy O'Connor belongs in a jail cell?

The many – and they really are countless – crimes committed by the Catholic Church are recorded in this firecracker of a book. And yet it is clear that nothing will undermine the "respect" that the Church demands for itself and so often gets from those in power. The truth, which this book amply demonstrates, is that the Catholic Church is the original and continuing evil empire. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that *Double Cross* will even represent a pinprick in the scabrous edifice that is the Vatican.

• *Double Cross* is available from the NSS's on-line bookshop at www.secularism.org.uk or by post from NSS Books, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL (£15.99 plus £1 p&p)

Rational argument, not hatred

NO doubt there are many of us who sympathize with M D Rogers' point of view that "Freethinkers should employ rational argument not hatred" regarding our fellow citizens (*Points of View*, March). But rational argument has been employed endlessly over the centuries with little or no effect on those whose inherent intelligence, at whatever level, has been overwhelmed by a greater level of religious indoctrination.

Without discussing other issues, the main problem is, of course, with those religionists who actively seek to dominate the rest of us with their beliefs and demands. With faith being belief without evidence and therefore irrational, I see it as naive to expect rational argument to carry much weight with theists. History and current experience suggest otherwise. In the end we have to deal with irrational people, some of whom think that their beliefs give them the right to spoil, ruin or end the lives of those of us who do not hold those beliefs.

Sadly, that appears to lead to the inevitable conclusion that the only way for us to survive is to help the extremists on their way towards their infinite life of perfect happiness before they put an end to our finite existence. This century could well be mankind's last. I am not alone in believing it really is that serious. Rational argument will not achieve our survival.

Incidentally, on a lighter note, our esteemed editor Barry Duke tells-it-how-it-is (more or less!) and it is putting it too strongly to say that the editorial extract quoted displays hatred. "Ridicule" might be nearer the mark.

JOHN HUNT
Camberley

M D ROGERS needs to lighten up. Why shouldn't the *Freethinker* editorial laugh at "devout Muslim men who have to point their arses heavenward five times a day while mumbo-jumboing to the moon-god Allah"? This is, after all, merely ridicule, not gratuitous insult, let alone "religious hatred", or whatever overblown PC transgression the po-faced Rogers is seeking to invoke. He or she appears to have fallen for that eye-wash, peddled by the IslamophobiaWatch website and other Marxists, that to criticise or ridicule Muslims is somehow "racist". Of course, Muslims are not a race of people, they are simply followers of doctrinal beliefs. The fact that the majority (but by no means all) are of Asian, Arab, or African origin, is irrelevant. On that basis, criticising or ridiculing Christians could also be construed as racism, in which case, to avoid being tarred with the racist brush, we might as well pack up now and give the religionists free rein.

Unfortunately, the misguided and limp-wristed reasoning deployed by M D Rogers seems to be the *modus operandi* of most secular humanists these days, perhaps because so many arrived at atheism via the kind of desperate socialism that seeks to patronise and uncritically conscript any minority group that's

getting a hard time from the *Daily Express*. Even the NSS has been infected by the dubious double standards this limp-wristedness inspires. Of Christianity, NSS President, Terry Sanderson, has robustly declared: "I hate it. I despise it. I hold it in the utmost contempt. Even a cursory examination of the evidence shows it to be the root of some of the cruellest, vilest and most evil events in human history" (speech to LGCM – Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement – March 2000). Contrast that statement with Sanderson's recent soft-soaping take on Islam: "Last month we saw Muslims (not to be confused with Islamist extremists, who give everybody the creeps) ... being presented as the enemy of all the values that "we" hold dear, as a terrible threat to the fabric of society" he coos, sympathetically (*Gay Times*, December 2006).

Sanderson's trendy differentiation between "Islamist" and "Muslim" isn't very convincing. After all, depending on who you ask, Dr Yusuf Al Qaradawi is either a respected Muslim leader, or a "creepy" Islamist (from an atheist-humanist perspective, surely one and the same thing?). To be fair, back in 2000, Terry Sanderson also told the LGCM: "Terrible violence scars the Islamic world as it pushes to increase its influence and power. The Koran is clear – Islam must one day rule the world." His evident retreat from that unequivocally hostile position demonstrates just how far secular humanists are now prepared to go, post-Iraq, to ingratiate themselves with self-deluded "Marxlim" activists, some of whom have even been allowed to hijack parts of the freethought movement.

Practising Muslims deserve no more respect than the followers of any other belief system – and in view of Islam's particular nastiness and pandemic aggression, sometimes, some of them, deserve a lot less. In any case, wasn't it the ridiculousness of religion that inspired us all to become atheists in the first place? Why should we tip-toe around Muslims' sensibilities? Do they tip-toe around ours? Rational argument has to follow, naturally, but ridicule is a good starting point and the most potent weapon in the freethinker's arsenal (we don't do suicide bombings).

Thankfully, the *Freethinker* remains feisty enough to resist political correctness, but it only told half the story in the editorial M D Rogers takes such exception to. The depressing truth is, every time a devout Muslim throws his arse in the air to pray, there is a queue of fey humanists eager to bend down behind him and start licking.

DIESEL BALAAM
London

'Pram syndrome'

WHEN our first child was born we discovered the "Pram Syndrome." After we started looking for a suitable pram we noticed prams everywhere. Before that we scarcely noticed them. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has

had a similar effect on me. Professor Dawkins said that clergy were invited on to radio and television discussions where there was a hint of what someone regarded as an ethical or moral issue. Ignorance and prejudice are no bar and often seem to fuel their certainty. Nothing deters them and on discussions of scientific issues they are listened to with respect as if they had some understanding of the subject.

I now notice clergy of various hues and status everywhere and this includes the House of Lords where they are able to influence legislation without having the inconvenience of being elected. There is a rich vein opening up with the "problem of guns and their use by young people". Bishop Tom Butler was on *Newsnight* to give his views. *Thought for the Day* had another Bishop who said that a young woman, who had suffered agony all her life and had only a year to live, should not be able to have medical help to die as God had purposes we could not fathom. He said that she had given encouragement to many by her cheerful behaviour and her lovely smile. That was an important purpose. And so it goes on. They just make it up as they go along.

They are everywhere undermining our freedom to decide what we do with our own bodies, telling us what we must think and how we should behave and using as their authority a bible which, properly read, as Isaac Asimov said, "is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived". If they want to spend a year in chronic pain so that their "lovely smile" provides encouragement to their followers, then good luck to them. However, that is never enough. Such is their certainty that they are right, and their particular beliefs are those of the true religion, that they want to impose them on the rest of us.

I am delighted to note that there is now a Secular Medical Forum open to doctors and nurses.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Israel and anti-Semitism

DAVID Wilkes writes (*Points of View*, March) that "[the Arabs] have been trying to destroy Israel ever since [1947]". Why then was the Saudi peace-plan (before the Road Map), which included recognition of Israel with guaranteed borders, accepted by the overwhelming majority of Arab leaders? Even the PLO recognised Israel's right to exist in 1993.

David also denies any "brutal expulsion of the Palestinians". It is hard to believe that he does not know about the paramilitary groups such as Irgun Zvei Leumi and the Stern Gang, who made it their business to terrorise and evict Palestinians from their land. Has he not heard of Deir Yassin and other atrocities, which were committed in order to make Palestinians flee their homes?

If Israel wants to live in peace, why does she not get out of occupied Palestinian territory.



rebuild their security wall on their own border and not through Palestinian land, and rethink their brutal policies of collective punishment. I too want Israel to survive and admire its achievements and freedom of expression. However, Israel is not fighting for its survival. It is extremely powerful, and has the unconditional support of the world's only super-power. The threat to the existence of Palestine and of Lebanon is in my view far greater.

DAVID SIMMONDS

Essex

DEREK Wilkes concludes his disingenuous letter by asserting that Israel is a "multi-racial democratic state" of which "we secularists should all be proud".

Does he actually know anything at all about that country and its laws?

Israel's Declaration of Independence (1948) says, in big capital letters, "WE HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE".

No political party that seeks to change these words to redefine Israel as a secular state – the state of all its citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion – is permitted to put up candidates for elections. [Basic Law: The Knesset, Paragraph 7A / Amendment 9, 1985 – look it up if you doubt me.]

The so-called Law of Return (1950) gives the automatic right of citizenship and residency to anybody in the world who can demonstrate they have Jewish ancestry – even if no member of their family has set foot in the Middle East for a thousand years. At the same time, Israel denies the right of return to people who were born and spent their childhood in Israel (or, rather, in any of the 531 Palestinian villages that stood on land now occupied by Israel), and whose ancestors lived and worked there for many generations. Simply because they have the wrong ethnicity as defined in Israeli law, such people are condemned to a life and death of exile in overcrowded refugee camps.

Israel is the very antithesis of a secular state. It is an ethnocentric colonial project of a kind that was already discredited and in collapse almost everywhere else in the world, before it was even founded.

The reason Israelis are constantly engaged in conflict (or "struggle" as Derek Wilkes puts it) is that the existence of their state depends on the indefinite prolongation of a terrible injustice. This was recognised by Zionists such as Ze'ev Jabotinsky as long ago as 1923. In the words of Ken MacLeod, Israel's only hope of survival is to reduce the millions of people it has wronged to utter despair.

This is why Israel receives so much criticism, as Derek Wilkes must surely know. His deployment of the standard Zionist ruse when losing an argument – accuse everybody in sight of being a closet Blackshirt – is thoroughly disreputable, and does him and his dubious cause no good at all.

GRAHAM NOBLE

Fareham

IF Derek Wilkes was at school as long ago as the 1940s he should have learned by now to distinguish between anti-Semitism and moral reservations about Israel's behaviour.

Nowhere in my letter (*Points of View*, February) did I imply that all – or even any – Jews were hideous hook-nosed apparitions, dishonest in business, or engaged in a bizarre international conspiracy also involving international bankers and communists.

Ken Baldry wrote about welcoming our own Jews back to the UK, again hardly an anti-Semitic remark.

I remain, however, wholly unrepentant about my opposition to Israel's appalling war-mongering and unacceptable civil rights record, which Wilkes chooses to totally ignore in his letter.

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE

London

Clare College

ON reading of the Clare College chickening out over the Mohammed cartoons (*Freethinker*, March), I checked my will, for I was sure I had bequeathed money to my own old university college. I hadn't; it was for a nearer bastion of our freedoms. But people should check and if Clare College is an intended beneficiary, they know what to do.

This struggle against Islam is going to continue for at least another 50 years and it will not get easier by our mimicking those in charge who hope the matter will go away.

There are always things one can do. How about boycotting Brick Lane restaurants with their collecting boxes for mosques?

And we can refuse to vote if candidates won't talk about this subversive political ideology. A hung parliament with a Party of, say, six or seven Muslims deciding who shall form the next government is probably what is needed.

KETHU BELL

Wales

Two questions

TWO questions I'd like someone to answer from two articles in last month's *Freethinker*: On Islamic schools (p7) Tanya Hsu, a political analyst in Riyadh, says: "I don't know of any country in the world that doesn't have a few mischosen words on textbooks." This implies he's been looking at textbooks the world over. My question to him is therefore; "Which ones?"

My second question is full of erotic overtones: Ted Haggard is now "completely heterosexual" (p10); "How did they verify this?"

FABIAN ACKER

London

God's Advocate

I MUST voice objections to Jack Hastie's article as "God's Advocate" (*Freethinker*, February). The capitalization of possessive adjectives and pronouns that refer to an imaginary deity is a practice even liberal theologians

have abandoned. For a non-theist to adhere to such substandard English is indefensible. And the use of the article "an" rather than the correct "a" in front of a word beginning with a pronounced consonant "h" (as opposed to a silent "h") is simply fatuous.

Unless I am misreading him, Hastie makes a distinction between religion and the equally fraudulent pseudoscience of parapsychology, even though the latter has been fully falsified by competent statistical analysis.

Does he really think one form of nonsense is more valid than another? I hope not, and look forward to his making clear that he does not regard parapsychology as any more defensible than the nonsense arguments of Dembski and Behe.

WILLIAM HARWOOD

Canada

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Events & Contacts

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

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, May 1, 7.30pm. Subject and speaker to be announced.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information and programme: 01494 771851. Wendover Library, High Street, Wendover. Tuesday, April 10, 7.45pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

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

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

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

Harrow Humanist Society: Meetings second Wednesday of every month (except July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977. Next meeting April 11. Video evening presented by Mike Savage, former Chair of GALHA. Subject: *The Bloodline of Jesus Christ – What is the Evidence?*

Harving & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Sunday, May 3, 8pm. John Chaffey: *Osteopathy and Beliefs Systems*.

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

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

Aberdeen Group: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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Glasgow Group: 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
Highland Group: 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

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

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

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, April 19, 8pm. Asad Abbas: *A Rationalist Looks at Islam*.

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 Chenc, 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. Wednesday, May 2, 7.30 pm. David Granville: *Northern Ireland Update*.

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

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

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or email edward@gwinnell.orange-home.co.uk

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

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

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

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

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

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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