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# The Freethinker

*The voice of atheism since 1881*

## Easter 2007 unleashes a torrent of mirth, embarrassment and outrage

IT MAY take some time for the British supermarket chain Somerfield to get over the embarrassment it suffered following a press release it issued lamenting the fact that young people in the UK had very little understanding of the significance of Easter.

In March, Somerfield launched an Easter quiz, first prize being a £100 voucher. After the competition closed, the company's PR agency issued a statement which pointed out that Britons were set to spend a massive £520-million on Easter eggs this year – "but many young people don't even know what Easter's all about".

It then went on to claim that the tradition of giving Easter

eggs was to celebrate the "birth" of Christ.

When the boob was discovered, a second statement was issued. The amended version changed "birth" to the "rebirth" of Christ.

This too was found to be at fault, and a third was released, declaring that Easter was a celebration of the "resurrection" of Christ.

The press release was written by Hayley Booth, 30, of the PR agency Brando. Ms Booth, who was privately educated, told *The Times* that she had corrected the release as soon as she became aware of the error.

An explanatory note on her second release read: "Please find below the amended story revealing Britons' mounting ignorance regarding Easter. Note the references to rebirth (not birth) as previously stated. Apologies for any confusion."

Hurried consultations with the Church of England followed and Brando then issued a third release.

Pete Williams, head of PR at Somerfield, said: "We spoke to the Church of England press office, who suggested we use the word resurrection, in keeping with the Church's teaching. We were happy to do that."

Ben Wilson, in the Church of England press office, said: "It was a genuine mistake, if a rather unfortunate one. I clarified with them that it would probably be best to refer to Easter as a celebration of Christ's resurrection rather than His birth."

A second C of E spokesperson added "Easter is as hollow as most chocolate eggs if we don't take the chance to think about what it means – that Jesus died, was buried, and was resurrected to show us the power of God's love – the power that allows us all to be born to new life."

Tosh, cried pagans the length and breadth of the land, dashing off letters and emails to the papers that had gleefully carried the Great Easter Egg Cock-Up story.

This one, from Steve Wilson of London, was typical of the many letters published on the subject. It appeared in capital's daily freebie, the *Metro*.

"I was shocked to read that most children do not know why we celebrate Easter. So, for their benefit, let me summarise.



*Sweet Jesus! The statue of Christ created with chocolate which was banned after Christians kicked up a fuss in New York*

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YOU and I would call it "having a senior moment". One moment you have something in your hand, or on your desk, and the next minute it has vanished. As I get older, these vanishings appear to be getting more frequent. The last – which had me grinding my teeth with fury and frustration – relates to mayonnaise.

Two days ago I had a sudden yen for a ham and lettuce sandwich, with a liberal dollop of mayo. The ham was in the fridge, and so was a fresh lettuce. But, although I was convinced I had a full jar of mayonnaise in there too, I simply could not find it. So I had to throw some clothes on to nip to the Co-op for a fresh jar.

On my return I opened it – then discovered that the fridge harboured TWO containers of the stuff – both in full view, one in a squeeze bottle. I decided to use one of the old ones, and recap the new jar. The lid had disappeared. I stomped out of the kitchen, swore at the cat, counted slowly to 20 through gritted teeth, and returned to find the lid on a table-top yards away from where I had opened the jar.

Something similar happened to a chap called Benjamin Creme, but it didn't involve mayonnaise. In 1979, Creme, then aged 57, laid a small box of cigars on the corner of his bed while he changed clothes. When he was ready to leave, it had disappeared.

A senior moment? Don't you believe it. The cigars had been deliberately removed by Maitreya, "the Christ, Head of our planetary Hierarchy". Maitreya – aka "The World Teacher" – had ambitious plans for Creme, and he did not want the Scotsman to ruin his health with "filthy weeds".

"The World Teacher" had singled Creme out to do a very important job as "the principal source of information" about his impending appearance on earth.

Today, Creme, an accomplished artist, heads Share International, and takes the Master's message to thousands around the globe who share Creme's belief that the Masters of Wisdom – "a group of perfected individuals who are the custodians of the Divine Plan for this planet" – hold humankind's destiny in their hands.

Maitreya is head honcho in this elite group: "The Master of All Masters", who has since made a number of visitations to earth. Creme, on his website, said he was convinced Maitreya would "come from one of the higher planets, probably from Venus" but he was later surprised to learn that this was not, in fact, so. So where are Maitreya's roots? Creme is not forthcoming.

Incidentally, when Creme told the Master of All Masters – via telepathy, of course, as Maitreya was not physically present in the room – that he would buy another box of cigars if his weren't returned, the missing ones reappeared, just where he had left them. And there was me, thinking that the job of a Master – especially a Master of All Masters – was to be Masterful, and not to cave in meekly to the petulant demands of a nicotine junkie.

My interest in Maitreya was sparked by a colourful individual who calls himself Rainbow

John. This portly, white-haired, elderly fellow is often seen on the streets of Brighton, festooned with glittery home-made badges and placards proclaiming the virtues of Maitreya-belief.

I first met him when he came into the store where I have a part-time job to ask whether we would allow him to place Maitreya material in the various free magazines laid out for customers. We politely declined. Allow one person to park leaflets in magazines, and the next thing you know every zealot and nutter on the planet would be demanding equal access.

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE investigates 'The Master of All Masters'**



I am not saying Rainbow John is a zealot or a nutter. He is simply a benign eccentric. And I have to say that nothing I have read on Creme's website suggests that Maitreya dishes out any of the intolerant crap – especially about sex – that so typifies other religions and cults.

Nowhere is this made more clear than in the a question and answer session with The Doctor – whoops, Teacher – regarding homosexuality.

Question: Dear Maitreya, Could you please answer the following questions on the gay and lesbian experience.

1 In my mind, sexual orientation is more fluid than society dictates. That is, I believe the majority of humans are bisexual, with a group at either end of the spectrum of experience who are purely homosexual or heterosexual. Is this true or false and please explain why.

2 What is the spiritual meaning behind the choice of a soul to have a homosexual incarnation?

3 What is the meaning behind the more extreme sado-machochistic sex within the gay community? Is it a form of self-loathing?

4 Was the human body designed with the possibility of male/male sexuality in mind?

5 Do you see the isolation of gay community from the rest of society (ie gays mainly associating with gays) as a hindrance to integration in the mainstream?

6 What of the physiological origins of AIDS? Is it because of the use of drugs and,



*Maitreya, who materialised as a Jesus Christ-like apparition among a crowd of worshippers in Nairobi in 1988, then vanished as mysteriously as he had arrived.*

especially, antibiotics which enhanced its spread?

7 Can a person with AIDS "come back from the brink" of death by changing their attitude to him/ herself (ie self-love and acceptance)?

8. What foods can help in the recovery of an individual who is suffering from AIDS?

9. Is being gay related to karma in some circumstances? If so, when the karma is repaid, does the individual change their sexual orientation? (I know that some believe they are being "punished" by God because they are gay.) Thank you, Maitreya, Love Dean.

Answer: Dean. Yes, the majority of humans are bisexual. The spiritual meaning of a person choosing to have a homosexual incarnation is different for each soul. It is a choice that the soul makes. ALL experiences whether homosexual or not are to learn from the experience. With regard to question three, this is a form of punishment in a way, and yes, self-loathing. In some cases it is past life connected. For instance, if a person was a monk in a previous incarnation and whipped himself as a form of punishment for sin as many monks did in the past, this soul would enjoy the pain in this incarnation, but not know where that desire came from. Many cases are connected to past-life experience. The body has evolved and is still evolving. It was created from animal. Love is not about sex, sex is a part of love, touching, holding, intimacy is not just for men and women, men can pleasure men and women, women. Humanity has degraded sex and the sexual act which can be very beautiful...

Humanity has put a shame on this form of attraction and relationship. I do not see the isolation of the gay community from the rest of society. Integration is taking place albeit slowly, more and more people are coming to support or understand the relationship of two people of the same sex.

The physiological origin of AIDS was created by a virus which came from a source out of your star system. It has however been assisted by certain medicines and fear. Fear has been the most prolific tool in the spread of this disease. Yes, a soul can come back from the brink of death by changing their attitude to themselves. All disease is in the mind. The mind is a very powerful foe. Humanity lives in the mind, because they do not understand their spirit or the spiritual part of them. There are many foods which can help a person who is suffering from AIDS, these include all organic foods, and a herb called Olive Leaf Extract. I am not a medical person, just a teacher, but Chinese medicine also has many answers, along with homeopathy and natural therapies.

Yes, in a way, being gay is related to karma in some circumstances. The karma is repaid only if the soul learns the lessons they have chosen to learn. The soul does not change their sexual orientation because of this, Maitreya says.

Largely tosh, of course, but what a refreshing change from the homophobic hate-mongering you will find on most Christian and Muslim websites.





# Religion pushes for more influence in Council of Europe

AT a recent meeting with Vatican officials, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) René van der Linden reiterated his invitation to the Pope to address the Parliamentary Assembly at one of its forthcoming plenary sessions.

Van der Linden said, "The personal contribution of religious leaders is of extreme importance and highly symbolic for promoting tolerance, respect and solidarity. It is for this reason that the Council of Europe's legal and political action must be strengthened through co-operation with Churches and other religious organisations which, by virtue of their moral and ethical commitment, are active components of civil society, and responsible partners in our democratic societies. Given the increasing discussion on the role of religion in society, the Council of Europe can offer the best forum for such a discussion."

"I am firmly in favour of the principle of the separation of Church and State," van der Linden concluded, "but there is no reason why Churches, with due regard for their specific features, should not have official status at the Council of Europe. For the value community the Council of Europe represents, it is important that Churches have a tribune to express their opinion on value issues."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "We feel strongly that religion is over-represented on all these bodies, and should not have privileged status that allows it to impose its doctrines on an unreceptive population. There is enough evidence accumulating that the Churches are out of step with the population of Europe. The so-called 'faith leaders' have no entitlement to claim that they speak for us all."

NSS Honorary Associate and MEP, Sophie in 't Veld, who is chair of the European Parliament Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics, has written to the President of the European Parliament protesting at the invitation he has issued to the pope. In her open letter to Hans-Gert Pötering, Ms in 't Veld writes: "We were informed that you have invited Pope Benedict XVI to address the plenary session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. On behalf of the European Parliament Working Group for the Separation of Religion and Politics, we would like to express our regret over this decision. Freedom of religion is one of the fundamental rights of the European Union."

"In addition, churches, religious communities and non-confessional philosophical groupings contribute greatly to the public debate and to shaping our European community of values."

"The European Union as a political body has never had a religious past: it never drew its authority from the idea of its divine foundation, as European Member States might have done in the past. It is a very young reality that resulted from the will of political leaders to make war and totalitarianism impossible in the future, ensuring peace and freedom for European citizens by founding a community based on universal principles and rights. Consequently this institutional reality took the form of a secular social contract based on political and ideological pluralism."

## Glasgow plans prayer space in museums and libraries

GLASGOW'S museums and libraries have been asked to set aside a prayer room to encourage people of different faiths to use them.

The Burrell Collection, the Kelvingrove Museum and the Gallery of Modern Art are among those which have been asked to make facilities available for those who wish to pray during the day.

Some Muslims pray five times a day and officials believe many are inconvenienced by the lack of specific facilities. There are an estimated 50,000 Muslims in Scotland, four-fifths of whom stay in Glasgow. Sikhs also pray during the day but have a less structured timetable.

Tom Harrigan, the council's inter-faith liai-

son officer, has encouraged museums to become more user-friendly for people of a variety of faiths.

St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art has a room available to people on request. Other museums are expected to follow its example depending on the space available.

"This applies across the city council," said Mr Harrigan. "It is not just about museums but about all the council buildings including venues such as libraries. The aim is to make a room available for quiet contemplation so people from any faith or indeed none can go there. If people want to make a day of it at one of the museums we want to make sure they are able to follow their faith and that they have somewhere quiet to go."

He is also helping to arrange group visits for asylum seekers who, he says, often feel too intimidated to use the facilities. A spokesman for Glasgow City Council said: "We are considering in which of our venues the idea might work."

**THE day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as His father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.**

— Thomas Jefferson, 1823

# Devout Christian jailed for cruelty to foster children

A DEVOUT Christian who subjected three children in her care to a "horrifying catalogue of cruel and sadistic treatment" was jailed for 14 years on April 19.

Foster mother Eunice Spry, 62, from Gloucestershire, routinely beat, abused and starved the vulnerable youngsters over a 19-year period.

The Jehovah's Witness forced sticks down their throats and made them eat their own vomit and rat excrement.

As punishment for misbehaving, she would beat them on the soles of their feet and force them to drink washing-up liquid and bleach.

Spry staunchly denied all the claims made against her and insisted the only physical punishment she ever used was "a smack on the bottom".

But a jury at Bristol Crown Court convicted her on March 26 charges, ranging from unlawful wounding, cruelty to a person under 16, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, perverting the course of justice and witness intimidation.

Judge Simon Darwall-Smith told Spry that this was the worst case he had come across in 40 years in law.

He told her: "Frankly, it's difficult for anyone to understand how any human being could have even contemplated what you did, let alone with the regularity and premeditation you employed."

In addition to her jail sentence, Spry was ordered to pay £80,000 in costs, which means she will have to sell at least one of the two properties she owns in Gloucestershire



## Vonnegut dies at 84

KURT Vonnegut, the atheist writer best known for his darkly satirical novels *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Cat's Cradle*, died last month following a fall at his Manhattan home, in which he sustained head injuries.

Fellow atheist and writer Gore Vidal said of Vonnegut "He was like nobody else. He was never dull."

Vonnegut is survived by his wife, the photographer Jill Krements.



# Evangelicals cross over dean's crucifixion remarks

OUTRAGE followed a Lent talk given by the Dean of St Albans, the Very Rev Jeffrey John, on BBC Radio 4. In it, the cleric said that traditional teaching about the Jesus's was "repulsive" and made God seem like a "psychopath".

The dean's comments in the run-up to Easter were met with outrage from leading evangelicals who said his comments verged on the heretical, even though he attempted to soften his message by adding extra lines on the eve of the broadcast.

Dr John, who was forced to stand down as Bishop of Reading in 2003 after it emerged he was homosexual, although no longer sexually active, said he had been taught that Jesus "took the rap" for our sins, but we got forgiven provided we said we believed in him."

But even at the age of 10, he had thought this particular explanation for the crucifixion was "pretty repulsive as well as nonsensical."

"What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own son?" Dr John said.

"And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this, we would say they were a monster.

"Well, I haven't changed my mind since. That explanation of the cross just doesn't work, but sadly, it's one that's still all too often preached."

A BBC spokesman said that the dean, reacting to criticism, had added two extra lines to "pre-empt any further misunderstanding or misinterpretation".

One of the lines was: "On the cross Jesus died for our sins; the price of our sin is paid; but it is not paid to God but by God." Fellow liberals defended his view, saying that a key difference between them and conservative evangelicals was their view of God. The Rev Giles Frasier, the vicar of Putney in south London, said: "What is at the heart of salvation, punishment or love? Liberals, like myself, believe it is love."

According to the *Telegraph*, "Evangelicals were furious, however, and the row will fuel their growing discontent with the liberal wing of the Church."

A number said that Dr John's comments showed how unsuitable he would have been as a bishop, regardless of his homosexuality.

In a statement, the Bishop of Lewes, the Rt Rev Wallace Benn, and the Bishop of Willesden, the Rt Rev Pete Broadbent, said: "Jeffrey John is saying that the cross is not about anger or wrath or sin or atonement, but only about God's unconditional love.

"There is, he says, nothing to understand in the cross which is anything to do with sacrifice or Jesus dying for our sins – and we say, No.

You've got it wrong."

Bishop Broadbent said: "Of course there are some very raw discussions amongst Christians about quite how Jesus died in our place and what that meant and how He suffered for our sins.

"But to ignore the entirety of the language about atonement and sacrifice and the cross is to nullify the message of what Good Friday and Jesus dying for us is all about. "Jesus Christ is sacrificed and he washes away the sins of the whole world and he completes the understanding of Scripture and fulfils it in a completely new way."

He added that he was disappointed that the BBC was using its schedules to undermine the message of Easter.

"You cannot read the Old Testament and New Testament and blank out an entirety of language and concept and understanding that means that we are guilty sinners, we need our sins to be paid for and we need Jesus Christ to die for us.

"That is what the Creeds say, it is what the Bible says and you cannot rewrite them. You cannot understand Jesus Christ without understanding Old Testament atonement material."

Bishop Benn added that "the truth that Jesus died as our sin-bearing substitute carrying the punishment for our sins on the cross is the glo-

rious heart of the Gospel. It displays the love of God: Father, Son and Spirit, for us.

"To deny or vilify that is a tragic denial of the power and heart of the Gospel. I hope Jeffrey John will speedily reconsider and repent of his attack on apostolic Christianity."

A spokesman for the BBC said: "Lent Talks are short individual authored opinions in which the contributor is invited to reflect on a different part of Christ's passion.

"There will be those who agree with the points being made and those who disagree. They are a reflection of ongoing debates within the Church."



Jeffrey John

## Education report says 'don't stare at Muslims, it's Islamophobic'

PUPILS and teachers have been told by an official body not to stare at Muslims for fear of causing offence, according to a report in the *Sunday Times* (April 15).

A document intended to educate against religious intolerance and sectarianism urges teachers to "make pupils aware of the various forms of Islamophobia, ie stares, verbal abuse, physical abuse".

But Learning Teaching Scotland (LTS), which issued the advice to schools north of the border, has been criticised by politicians and Muslim leaders for going "over the top".

### Church to disrupt funerals of Virginia massacre victims

MEMBERS of the Westboro Baptist Church – best known for its "God Hates Fags" website – last month vowed to picket the funerals of victims of the Virginia Tech shootings. A church press release explained: "God is punishing America for her sodomite sins... The 33 massacred at Virginia Tech died for America's sins against Westboro Baptist Church, just as US soldiers are dying in Iraq each day for America's sins against WBC." Virginia Attorney General Bob McDonnell warned the picketers that they could be arrested if they disrupted the funerals.

The document states: "Some Muslims may choose to wear clothing or display their faith in a way that makes them visible. For example, women may be wearing a headscarf, and men might be wearing a skullcap. Staring or looking is a form of discrimination as it makes the other person feel uncomfortable, or as though they are not normal."

Osama Saeed, a spokesman for the Muslim Association of Britain, accused officials of going too far. "There are far more serious elements of Islamophobia. People look at all sorts of things – that can just be a glance. A glance and a stare are two different things – glances happen naturally when all sorts of things catch your eye whereas a stare is probably gawking at something.

"Personally I have not encountered much of a problem with people staring. I don't know how you legislate for that."

Murdo Fraser, deputy leader of the Scottish Conservatives, said: "In a multicultural society like ours there are people with all different forms of dress and I don't think it's unreasonable to expect children in particular to look at those who are differently dressed from them. To describe this as a form of discrimination seems to go completely over the top."



# Muslims in a mess over the mouthy Mufti of Australia

THE Australian Federation of Islamic Councils – the main Muslim organisation – is split over the fate of outspoken cleric Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hilali.

A breakaway group led by Haset Sali, a former legal adviser to the AFIC council, is petitioning for a special congress to decide the sheikh's future.

Prime Minister John Howard has backed calls for controversial Sheikh Hilali to consider leaving Australia, saying he is an embarrassment to most Australian Muslims. Speaking on TV, Mr Howard last month backed statements by Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews that the sheikh should think about leaving Australia.

"[Sheikh Hilali] should make up his mind whether he wants to be an active, articulate, free-speaking member of the Australian community. If he doesn't, he ought to go somewhere else," Mr Howard said.

Resentment is spreading in Sydney's Muslim community over comments the sheikh is reported to have made in Iran calling on all Muslims to back the Shi'ite revolution in Tehran and its struggle against the West over Iraq and nuclear weapons.

The congress is being called to strip Sheikh Hilali of his much-used title, Mufti of Australia.

Sali said the sheikh's position, created 18 years ago, had been an anomaly because there was no provision in the AFIC's constitution for the position of Mufti of Australia.

It is believed the Board of Imams, an organisation unrelated to AFIC, has decided to dump the sheikh, but members remain divided over the position of Mufti of Australia.

Sheikh Hilali's comments have infuriated sections of Sydney's predominantly Sunni Muslim community, many of whom believe Iran is using the war to further Shi'ite power and influence in the Middle East. "People are also upset because these comments are likely to alienate the Saudis who have funded schools and community projects in Australia," a community source told *The Age*, Melbourne.

Meanwhile, one of Australia's most important Muslim leaders has sought police protection after criticising Hilali.

Tom Zreika, president of the Lebanese Muslim Association — and Sheikh Hilali's employer — said he received non-stop phone threats after he released a document urging greater integration and for Muslims to "mend their ways".

The report, prepared for a national meeting of imams in Sydney says some Muslims are "ruining it" for all and that Australians have "had enough" of Muslims. His report also rec-



ommends that imams become involved in community activities such as voluntary fire-fighting and surf lifesaving.

Mr Zreika said he was threatened recently after saying, "I can't tolerate this freak show", following recent remarks by Sheikh Hilali.

But after the contents of his paper were publicised, the threats, from Muslims, came non-stop. "They just say, 'Mate, if you don't shut your mouth we are going to come and fix you up'," Mr Zreika said. "I know they are Muslims because they quote Muslim prayers."

In his paper, Mr Zreika, a barrister, says the vast majority of non-Muslims understood and empathised with Islamic issues in Australia, but a small group of Muslims were inciting anti-Islamic feelings.

"Only when we mend our ways and we respect our fellow country people can we demand tolerance and forbearance."

## Christian couple jailed for life

A FUNDAMENTALIST Christian couple whose eight-year-old son died after a brutal beating administered according to biblical injunctions have been jailed for life in America.

Sonya Smith, 39, and Joseph Smith, 47, of Mableton, Georgia, were found guilty of abusing and murdering their eight-year-old son Josef. They will be eligible for parole in 30 years.

The couple were members of the Remnant fellowship Church, and enthusiastically embraced its teachings, which included the spanking of children with glue sticks.

A full report of Josef's death was carried in the March issue of the *Freethinker*.

## Spanish bishop slams new film on St Teresa of Avila

BISHOP Demetrio Fernandez of Tarazona, Spain, has issued a letter denouncing a new film on St Teresa of Avila that portrays her as a sex symbol, and is the subject of an "orchestrated media campaign" to depict the saint solely "through the prism of sex".

*Teresa, Muerte y Vida (Teresa, Death and Life)* opened in Spanish cinemas last month, but is reportedly playing to very small audiences.

In his letter entitled, "Poor St Teresa," Bishop Fernandez lamented the media attention being given to "a movie that presents the saint as morbidly sexy".

"The curious thing is that the people behind these absurd ideas tend to accuse the Church of being obsessed with sex, and it turns out they are the ones who see sex everywhere. They see sex even where there is none."

Such individuals "are unable to grasp kindness and goodness, and instead project their own filth onto persons, realities and subjects which have nothing to do with what they are putting forward". The bishop added that "a person who doesn't have faith shouldn't get involved with this subject matter because he or she will ruin it, and on top of everything else the person thinks he or she is creating a work of art," the bishop added.

Spanish newspapers reported the film to be a portrayal of St Teresa as a feminist sexual revolutionary who described her mystical experiences as "carnal orgasms".

St Teresa, in 1989, was the subject of a short film, *Visions of Ecstasy*, directed by Nigel Wingrove. Described by Mark Kermode of the *Observer* as "an innocuous (if rather silly) film depicting the ecstatic and erotic visions of the saint, the movie was judged "blasphemous" by the British Board of Film Censors, and was banned. *Visions of Ecstasy* remains the only film to be banned in the UK solely on grounds of blasphemy.

Earlier this year the head of Extremadura's regional government in Spain was forced to apologise over a book containing "pornographic" pictures of Jesus Christ.

The book, published by the Regional Editora of Extremadura (ERE) which is run by authorities in Extremadura, contains images of Christ and other religious figures in sexual poses.

The opposition Popular Party protested about the images which it claimed were published using public money. But Jose Ibarra, regional prime minister, denied any public funds had been used for the book, by Jose Antonio Moreno Montoya. He said public money was used to show the pictures at an exhibition in 2003 in a private gallery in the Church of Precious Blood in Caceres.

Montoya said the pictures were meant to be critical of the Church but denied they were pornographic.



# To Catch a Clergyman

NEITHER my daughter nor her husband has any church connection, though it would probably be optimistic to claim either of them as fully paid-up atheists. They wanted to be married in a register office.

This presented logistical problems. There was neither adequate seating capacity in the office nor convenient car parking nearby to accommodate all the guests. Besides, to transport about 60 people, many of whom were strangers to the area, to a register office and then decant them to a hotel would involve a manoeuvre of almost military complexity.

There was an obvious solution; ask the registrar to conduct the ceremony in the hotel. However at that time, in Scotland at least, registrars couldn't officiate outside their own offices.

At this point I contacted the local representative of the British Humanist Association. He was willing to conduct a secular service in the hotel. However, he did point out that this would not have the force of law and that the couple would have to visit the register office first to make it legal. As the whole point of the exercise was to avoid a two-venue event and to minimise ceremonial, this was a non-starter.

So it looked as though we would have a minister. OK, if my daughter had been a really committed humanist she would have put up with the hassle and gone to the register office. But for young people who are basically 'don't cares' rather than convinced atheists, the law loaded the dice heavily in favour of the clergy.

At this point two potential officiants emerged. The first was the Church of Scotland minister in parish A where my wife and I and my daughter lived. The other was a Unitarian minister who plied her trade some distance away, but who would be willing to conduct a

civil ceremony in a hotel. This clergyman (clergyperson?) was an unknown quantity and no-one in the families concerned knew much about the Unitarian Church; so my daughter asked the Church of Scotland man if he would officiate in the hotel. He agreed, subject to getting permission from his opposite number in parish B in which the hotel was situated.

## JACK HASTIE explains how his daughter reluctantly wound up marrying in church

Then he left the parish to take up a job elsewhere and abruptly advised my daughter to find another minister.

Once again I tried to advance the claims of the Unitarian. But my daughter felt it would be simpler to approach the Church of Scotland man in parish C, adjacent to parish A, who was slightly known to some members of both families. God's man in parish C was uncooperative. It appeared that, during the vacancy in parish A, the spiritual needs of the flock would be attended to by an 'Interim Moderator'. My daughter should contact him. The Rev C added that etiquette demanded that the wedding ceremony should be conducted by the minister of the parish in which the bride's mother resided.

At this point my daughter's fiancé lost patience and went to see the minister in parish D where he lived. This chap was friendly and

helpful. Of course he would be perfectly willing to marry the couple in the hotel, subject only to the approval of the minister in parish B and the Interim Moderator in parish A.

You still with me?

If I add that behind all this deference to protocol among the clergy was the threat of an amalgamation of congregations which none of them wanted, but which might be imposed by the General Assembly, you will appreciate that, while a Catholic Cardinal might have picked his way through such labyrinthine politics, a starry eyed young girl about to be married was a little confused.

So she phoned the Interim Moderator in parish A. He said it was his prerogative to conduct the ceremony, but preferably not in a hotel. The service ought to be in a church.

There was, however, another difficulty; a 'locum' as distinct from an Interim Moderator, might be appointed to parish A. In which case it would be up to him to conduct the service. Failing the appointment of a locum, he, as Interim Moderator would be happy to do the business.

At this point my daughter, being of limited stamina, gave up. In vain I urged the Unitarian option, but she had had enough. Resignedly she agreed to a service in parish church A, to be conducted either by the Interim Moderator or a locum, depending on the will of God and the administrative procedures of the local presbytery.

It has to be said that the service was tasteful and my daughter thoroughly enjoyed her grand moment walking down the aisle to the majestic music of a church organ. But it had taken all the skills of a foreign office diplomat to sort it out with the clergy.

And it wasn't what she'd originally wanted.

# Some problems about God

mals, including invertebrates and insects? Are we to conclude that this was so that he could start again?

## DENYS DROWER elucidates

Why then, at the end of the succeeding Triassic period, did he have a further, if less drastic, mass extinction? And why during the cretaceous period, 65 million years ago did he decide to wipe out the dinosaurs? Did he think he had made another mistake? Or was this so that mammals could develop, leading to the ascent of man? If so, why did he bother creating dinosaurs?

C.A description of the deity, repeatedly expressed by the faithful, is that of "a loving God", "Allah the Merciful". Many recent events, involving as they have the violent deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent

men, women and children as the result of earthquake, flood and tsunami, scarcely justify either the words "love" or "mercy". How does the theist answer?

D. Judging by the behaviour of other stars in other galaxies astronomers are certain that the earth will be engulfed and incinerated by the dying sun in a few billion years time – unless, that is, we are not blasted into extinction meanwhile by an as yet unidentified meteorite or a sudden violent rent in the earth's crust. Is such an event also part of God's plan?

God then, appears like an artist drawing with a pencil in his right hand and an eraser in his left, every now and then rubbing out what he has drawn and trying again. Is this the action of an all-knowing, infinitely wise, being? But perhaps God knows exactly what he is doing and is a capricious and totally uncaring being, happy to destroy sentient beings whenever the thought seizes him. There is of course a third option – that God cannot control these events and is constantly seeing his handiwork wrecked, compelling him to start all over again. If that is the case then God is neither all-knowing nor all-powerful.

I seem to be becoming a theologian.

THE Dawkins scale of theism has Stage 1 representing total belief in the existence of an all-powerful, all wise, all-seeing and loving God. Thence down through varying degrees of disbelief it sets Stage 7 to represent totally certain Atheism. I, like Professor Dawkins, find myself at the top end of No.6; I cannot say with certainty that there is no God, but I find his existence highly improbable.

Among other things I wonder whether a theist can help me solve the following problems:

A. Mathematicians have now demonstrated that not only did the universe begin with the Big Bang about fifteen billion years ago, but time itself began then. Therefore there can be no meaning to the phrase "before the universe came into being"; there was no such time as "before". I must therefore conclude, if I am to accept the idea of God's existence, that he came into existence at the same moment as the Big Bang? If so, how could he have created himself?

B. If I could be persuaded to accept that there is a God who did all this, I then want the question answered: why did he make so many "bosh shots"? Why, in the Permian era, 250 million years ago, did he wipe out 96 per cent of marine species and 70 per cent of land ani-



Eostre (old spelling but same pronunciation) was the Saxon goddess of rebirth. Her symbol was the egg, and her sacred animal the hare (hares were called 'bunnies' before rabbits were introduced) – hence Eostre eggs and Eostre bunnies.

"So every year we celebrate the spring birth of the earth's animals – especially our livestock – in the run-up to May Day, when we celebrate the flowering of the fruit trees.

"Of course, a later religion has adopted a lot of this – but we pagans are traditionalists."

Somerfield's embarrassment was further compounded when the BBC Radio 4's *Now Show*, which take a wry, sideways look at the week's news, examined the questions posed in the supermarket's Easter quiz, and the choice of answers offered.

"Why do we have an Easter bunny?"

"Because (a) He led the disciples to the location where Jesus was resurrected (b) He was present at the birth of Jesus (c) He is a pagan fertility symbol.

"Why do we give each other Easter eggs?"

"Because (a) Jesus liked chocolate (b) It was the first food Jesus ate after his resurrection (c) They symbolise the rebirth of Jesus (d) Lots of chickens died at Easter.

One of the *Now Show* presenters commented "at this stage even Richard Dawkins must be thinking this is in bad taste."

"Bad taste" is precisely the term the Catholic Church in the US used to describe a chocolate sculpture of Jesus that was due to be exhibited in New York at Easter. The six-foot (1.8m) sculpture, entitled "My Sweet Lord", depicts Jesus Christ naked.

Catholic League head Bill Donohue called it "one of the worst assaults on Christian sensibilities ever".

The sculpture, by artist Cosimo Cavallaro, was due to be displayed at Manhattan's Lab Gallery, but at the last moment the gallery buckled under pressure to ban it.

The Catholic League, which describes itself as the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organisation, also criticised the timing of the exhibition. "The fact that they chose Holy Week shows this is calculated, and the timing is deliberate," Mr Donohue said.

He called for a boycott of the gallery and the hotel which houses it.

The gallery's creative director, Matt Semler, who has since resigned in protest over the ban, said he had received a flood of angry e-mails and telephone calls. "We're obviously surprised by the overwhelming response and offence people have taken," he said. Semler insisted the timing of the exhibition was coincidental.

Cavallaro, the Canadian-born artist, is known for using food ingredients in his art. On one occasion he decorated a hotel room with mozzarella cheese. He used 200 pounds of chocolate to make the sculpture which, unusually, depicts Jesus naked.

Shortly after the chocolate Jesus controver-

## The Great Easter Cock-up

*Continued from page 1*

sy broke, the American web-based magazine, *Postcards*, revealed that the *real* reason for the sculpture's non-appearance was that it had been vandalised. The magazine claimed that someone had hacked the penis from the nude, anatomically-correct sculpture, and had made off with the object. It's failure to appear at the gallery had nothing to do with censorship.

According to *Postcards* reporter Biff Scuzzy, a gallery official who announced the cancellation of the exhibit, explained that there wasn't enough time to re-sculpt the missing part before the opening.

"Jesus was big for his age," said Geoff Bolton, creative director at the gallery. "You didn't find many six-foot-tall men with a size thirteen sandal in his time, and getting the details right in a correspondingly large penis takes some doing. Besides, part of the Lord's left testicle was damaged in the theft, so his entire kit would have had to be re-hung."

Bolton pointed out that artist Cosimo Cavallaro had used a great deal of chocolate in

crafting the sculpture.

"That works out to thirty-three pounds a foot. At three-quarters of a foot for the penis, we're talking twenty-five pounds of chocolate."

Catholics reacted angrily to the defacement of the "My Sweet Lord" sculpture. Will Montague, head of the watchdog Catholics for Christianity League, called it one of the worst assaults on Christian sensibilities ever.

"I was privileged to see the sculpture at a sneak preview last week," said Montague. "Believe me, that penis was so lifelike. Its eye seemed to follow me around the room."

Cardinal Connor O'Malley of the archdiocese of New York hinted that a homosexual might have been behind the theft.

"I don't think I have to say that only a sexual pervert could do such a thing," said Cardinal O'Malley. "I shudder to think where the Lord's member might wind up."

Although Christians and art fanciers alike were incensed by the theft, many New Yorkers found humour in the situation.

"Imagine waking up and finding that in your Easter basket," said dock foreman Vic Longhesi, who had come to the Lab Gallery with a few of his co-workers to view the copulating bunnies display.

The *Postcards* report appeared on April 1.

## Stormont Parties to get a copy of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*

WHEN the Northern Ireland Assembly re-opens on May 8, every party represented at Stormont will receive a copy of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, thanks to an initiative by the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland.

The initiative forms part of the highly successful campaign, conducted through Pledgebank.com to provide a copy of the book to every MP in the UK.

HANI Director Alan Watson said "We decided to extend this national campaign to remind our MLAs of the large secular constituency in Northern Ireland, partly demonstrated by the huge sales of this book in the province."

The campaign forms part of a grassroots initiative by humanists who want to challenge state privileges given to religious groups.

The campaign, organised through the community action website, is also an attempt to demonstrate how widespread secular and atheist views are in the UK. It comes in response to Professor Dawkins' rallying cry in the book for atheists to be more vocal.

"The reason so many people don't notice atheists is that many of us are reluctant to 'come out'. My dream is that this book may help people to declare their non-belief in

God. As in the case of the gay movement, the more people who come out, the easier it will be for others to join them.

"Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of, standing tall to face the far horizon, for atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind."

Pledgebank works by hosting pledges from people who want to recruit others to achieve a common aim. James Christie from Fife posted the original pledge: "I will arrange for my MP to receive a copy of Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, but only if 645 other people (one per UK constituency) will do the same for other MPs."

Having achieved enough pledges, copies of the book were sent to MPs in April.

• A new poll in Ireland shows that 82 percent of parents intend to let their children choose their own religion rather than force them to join the Catholic Church. Thirty years ago only 7 percent of parents felt the same way.

The MRBI/RTÉ poll also found that 12 percent of Irish people no longer believe in God (up from 1 percent in 1977), and 22 percent do not think there is an afterlife.



Perhaps the most interesting and unexpected aspect of this new millennium, has been the game of ideological musical chairs currently taking place in Britain. Our greatest living philosopher, the Conservative, Roger Scruton, who asserts that Al Qaeda supporters have not corrupted an otherwise peace-loving religion, but are, in fact, A-grade students of the "vitriolic and man-hating" Koran, has recently moved leftwards to occupy the Greens' territory. There, he has collided with our greatest living activist, Peter Tatchell, arriving from the opposite end of the political spectrum, after being spat out by the far-left for daring to speak out against misogynist anti-gay Muslims.

David Cameron seems equally determined to move in on the Greens' territory, while even the BNP, no longer racist (so they say), but simply anti-immigration and anti-Islam, is also muscling in on the Greens' act. If only the Green Party could devise an ecological way to repatriate misogynist anti-gay Muslims, at no extra cost to the public purse, it could increase its share of the vote ten-fold!

Clearly, the events of 9/11 have driven a coach and horses through long-standing assumptions and allegiances. One of the most startling effects is taking place right here in

# How socialism became a poison

Britain, where a solid and economically competent Labour Government, swept into power by widespread popular anticipation of long overdue reform, has been diverted, if not completely derailed, by American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whatever the rights and wrongs of those conflicts, what cannot be denied is the resulting radicalisation of Muslims settled here in Britain, a constituency which, thanks to *de facto* open-door immigration policies, an increasing number of converts from within the settled/ indigenous population, and the tendency for Muslims to have bigger families than most, is emerging as a serious political force to be reckoned with.

During the 1990 Gulf War, some British Muslims made a point of backing Saddam Hussein, while Palestinian grievances and other wars in distant lands are routinely shorn of their complexities and peculiarities to become exercises in a generalised anti-Semitic and anti-Western machismo. When our forces are defending Muslims in Bosnia or Iraq, they are rarely thanked or given any credit for doing so. Muslim zealots prefer to worship suicide martyrs and drool over hand-to-hand combat, deriding US and British troops as "poofs" for their modern "risk-averse" fighting methods. The internet could have been invented for

Muslims such as these. New technologies did not create this community of religious resentment and aggression, but they do renew, invigorate and expand it. This should be a wake-up call to the complacent British Left, but, as usual, it has completely got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Having invented etymologically dubious terms like "Islamophobia" to proscribe criticism of militant Islam, deluded socialists believe they can harness this disaffected and angry religion to breathe new life into their obsolete Marxist agendas.

## What is a freethinking libertarian to do in today's 'multicultural' Britain? DIESEL BALAAM poses the question

For freethinkers, it has been most illuminating to see what an extraordinary effect 9/11 and its aftermath has had, domestically, on our own politicians. Unusually, the reaction began on the ideologically ossified far-left of the political spectrum. Take, for instance, the Muslim "Global Peace & Unity" conference in December 2005, when left-wing notables, including Ken Livingstone, Michael Mansfield QC (wearing a fetching black and white keffiyeh headscarf), and the cricketer, Imran Khan, whipped up the 20,000-strong crowd into an "Allahu Akbar" chanting frenzy. At the 2005 general election, Oona King, a hard working, popular and talented black Labour MP, lost her Bethnal Green & Bow seat to the SWP-Respect Party's George Galloway, a man best known for brown-nosing Saddam Hussein and last seen prancing around the Celebrity Big Brother house in an ill-advised scarlet leopard (no weapon of mass destruction concealed there!). Admittedly it was a single-issue protest vote against the Iraq war, likely to be reversed at the first opportunity, but it has made Muslims aware of their political muscle. Seizing the opportunity to win votes among politicised, geographically concentrated and expanding Muslim populations, SWP-Respect has had no qualms over discarding inconvenient policies like the "gay rights shibboleth". Electorally speaking, it was a no-brainer.

Ken Livingstone, meanwhile, continues to shamelessly court the radical Muslim vote. As London Mayor, this is the man who staged a press-call so he could be photographed kissing and cuddling Yusuf Al Qaradawi, who condones suicide bombings in Israel because the Palestinians have no tanks or planes with which to answer Israeli aggression. The aggrieved Beeston bombers could be excused on much the same basis. Let's hope that after shedding tears for the victims of 7/7 on the steps of Trafalgar Square, in front of 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.jesusandmo.net](http://www.jesusandmo.net)



# isoned chalice for freethinkers

world's television cameras, Ken retired to consider his misjudgment.

It seems unlikely. His widely reported Jew-baiting, in the form of crass comments to Jewish news reporters and businessmen, make Jade Goody's bullying of Bollywood actress, Shilpa Shetty, on this year's *Celebrity Big Brother*, pale into insignificance, yet not a squeak of protest was heard from the British Left about that. His flat refusal to apologise to the Jewish community, together with his very public schmoozing of anti-gay Islamists, seems to be part of a deliberate, if hardly subtle, strategy, to court the radical Muslim vote. A dangerous game this may be, for an atheist, anti-racist, gay-friendly, pro-feminist, but it all makes perfect electoral sense.

For socialists, the future in London probably does still rest with a bickering "rainbow alliance" of often tiresome minorities, but from here on in, atheists will have to accept that the foundation of that alliance is going to be faith-based and largely, vociferously, Muslim. This is an extremely bitter pill for secular humanists, who are also socialists, to swallow. Of course, socialism is now just a distant folk-memory for the cheerfully secular working classes, but even the most lumpen of the proletariat can still quote Marx's dictum "Religion ... is the opium of the people". Nonetheless, the British Left can't get enough "faith" these days, particularly Islamism. Not convinced? Just take a look at IslamophobiaWatch.com, a website set up by white, middle class, Wolfie Smith-wannabes from the remnants of the imploded Workers' Revolutionary Party, who have turned themselves from campus revolutionaries into simpering cheerleaders for Hizb-ut-Tahrir and other Muslim extremists. In fact, this wacky website really has little to do with Muslims at all, but is, rather, just a way of settling old scores in the "I'm-more-barking-than-you" internecine squabbles of the far-left. Hence, even Maryam Namazie stands accused of being an "anti-Muslim racist".

This is not the first time that the British Left has got it so badly wrong – it nearly always does. Let's take a look at their Top Ten big mistakes, in reverse order. At number 10, it's backing trade union militants in the 1970s, ushering in eighteen years of unpleasant Thatcherite rule. At 9 it's backing Argentinian claims on the Falkland Islands. At 8 it's schmoozing Sinn Fein-IRA at the height of its murderous bombing campaign. At 7 it's supporting Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe's 1980 elections. At 6 it's supporting Arthur Scargill's suicidal handling of the 1984/5 miners' strike, while at 5 it's abandoning immigration controls altogether. At 4 it's applauding Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler, and at 3 it's the Socialist Workers' Party

decision to become the pro-Islamist SWP-Respect. Not quite making it to the top spot at number 2 is the Revolutionary Communist Party turning up at Gay Pride 1990 to tell gay men that AIDS was just a bourgeois hoax, while straight in at number 1 it's the loony-left feminists who attended last year's anti-war rally with placards saying "We Are All Hezbollah Now".

None of this should surprise anybody. Like obdurate, attention-seeking adolescents, lefties relegate reason and substitute knee-jerk oppositional extremism in its place. Why support a fair and sensibly managed immigration policy, when an open-door policy is so deliciously irresponsible? Why celebrate successfully assimilated Muslims, or ex-Muslims, when there are aggressive Muslim radicals to ally with instead? Left-wingers must be cock-a-hoop, having stumbled upon a constituency of support that hates this country almost as much as they do. No doubt these troublesome Trots fondly imagine that the resulting crises in our creaking infrastructure, public services and council tax burden will precipitate a socialist uprising. Believe me, it won't. Worryingly, the BNP has already proved itself rather more adept at fine-tuning its policies to chime with contemporary popular sentiment. A YouGov poll in April 2006, presenting BNP immigration policies "blind" to its correspondents, found between 59 percent and 77 percent supported them (falling 11 and 3 points respectively when the source of those policies was revealed). This should be ringing alarm bells for the Left – but it isn't.

So what is a freethinking libertarian to do? I should explain here, that I do, actually, have a lot of sympathy for sane socialism, the kind that connects with ordinary people and is built upon British traditions of fairness, openness, social responsibility and mutual reciprocity between citizens, with a shared sense of national identity and pride.

Moreover, after reading Adorno & Horkheimer's *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, some years ago – as good a critique of Western consumer capitalism today, as when it was written in 1944 – I almost joined the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), which, in addition to being Britain's only serious socialist party, is the only party in Britain that has insisted upon atheism as a condition of membership since it was established in 1904. The trouble with Marxism, though, is not its analysis of society, but its recipe for changing it. However well-intentioned, socialism always seems to go drastically wrong whenever it is put into practice, which tells us that liberal democracies do, in fact, work pretty well, oscillating as they do between centre-right and centre-left parties, checked by an independent judiciary and free press.

In London, the Conservative Party's fortunes had already begun to revive at the time of the last General Election, largely as a result of Londoners tiring of multiculturalism and the Qaradawi-kissing antics of our postmodern communist mayor, Ken Livingstone. This trend looks set to continue, with "natural" Labour voters like me voting Conservative for the foreseeable future (Gordon Brown as PM is an equally unpalatable prospect). For many of us, during the 1970s and 1980s, it was the political Left that was truly libertarian, pro-freedom and groovy; it was the political Right that was authoritarian, censorious, and uncool. Today, the reverse is true. Lame-brain lefties are the Mary Whitehouses of our age. If the Oz trial or the *Gay News* blasphemy trial were re-run today, the self-appointed defenders of decency would doubtless be a vanguard of nannying left-wingers, feminist blue-stockings and other finger-wagging dullards.

Compromised humanist groups, like GALHA, have also lost credibility by firmly hitching themselves to the pro-faith bandwagon operating out of Livingstone's City Hall – that curious, but aptly-formed, glass bollock perched on the bank of the Thames next to Tower Bridge. Via its close association with IDAHO UK (the International Day Against Homophobia), to which the mayor cynically lends his support, as well as the GLA's "LGBT" forum, GALHA is now obliged to conform to a narrow multiculturalist agenda that proscribes, or curbs, hostile criticism of minority religions.

Of the controversy surrounding the mayor's Qaradawi welcome, the sphinx-like Derek Lennard, a former GALHA chairman, will only say: "There are compelling reasons for both positions" (letter, while still chairman, Oct 2005). The truth is, political patronage fosters insidious self-censorship and the danger posed to freedom of expression is obvious. For libertarian secular freethinkers, socialism has, indeed, become a poisoned chalice.



Mayor Livingstone and Yusuf Al Qaradawi



**U**nder the heading "Good News: Atheism On the Rise in Europe" atheist writer and artist Tommi Aviccoli – in a feature in *Beyondchron*, San Francisco's alternative online daily – observed "there's no doubt that the political influence of a church that once placed kings on their thrones and sent conquistadors off to new lands to add souls to its ranks (and slaughter them in the process) has greatly declined in European countries these days.

"The once faithful routinely practise birth control, as evidenced by the slowing birth rates in Western European countries. In open defiance of church teaching, abortion is legal in most of Europe, as is divorce. For a church hierarchy hell-bent on maintaining control of the masses, it gets worse: there's now legalized gay marriage in three countries: Spain, the Netherlands and Belgium."

"In a front-page story, the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that European church attendance has fallen to about 20 percent. On top of that, only 75 percent of Europeans identify as Christian ... In 2003, *Time* Magazine noted that while Catholicism is still the largest of the Christian sects on the continent, the number of people who admit to being Catholic fell 30 percent since 1978 ...

"[European] atheists are more determined than ever to spread the gospel of non-belief. Recent forums sponsored by atheist groups in Caen, France and London, drew 500 and 2,000 participants respectively. Britain's National Secular Society, which dates back to the 1800s, has seen its membership double to 7,000. France's leading atheist, Michel Onfray, has issued his own manifesto, *Traité s'athéologie*, a bestseller in his own country as well as in Spain and Italy.

"There's even an atheist group for Muslims. It was started in Cologne by Mina Ahadi, an immigrant from Iran. Ahadi says that her group, The National Council of Ex-Muslims, has as its core ideology a simple statement: "We don't believe." For her efforts, Ahadi has received death threats and is forced to travel with a body guard.

"Unfortunately, it's not time for atheists to declare victory. The battle to free humanity from religion will be 'a difficult one', as Terry Sanderson, head of England's National Secular Society told the *Wall Street Journal*.

"It's a struggle that's been going on in the European world at least since the ancient Greeks, who coined the term 'atheos', or 'without God'.

"In 1966, a *Time* Magazine cover asked the question that philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had answered affirmatively a century before: "Is God dead?" Perhaps the question now is, "When are people going to realize it?"

Perhaps never, if mere indifference to religion is allowed to prevail. Live and let live is an admirable trait in modern Western democracies, but, as we know to our cost, this *laissez faire* attitude has been taken as a sign of weak-

ness by religious forces who most certainly do not embrace tolerance or democracy, and have used it most successfully to fertilise fanaticism throughout the West. But, thanks to the trenchant writings of atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who show no fear of exposing religion and the religious to criticism and ridicule, a growing number of people have been fired up to the idea that it's OK – even imperative – to "come out" as atheists, and to vigorously challenge the forces of superstition.

Even in conservative, ultra-polite Canada, the message is getting through, according to *Globe and Mail* writer Christopher Dreher.

He points out that, in the past year or two, "a clutch of high-decibel books by scientists has ignited the passions of non-believers. Oxford evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, the best-known battle cry of unrepentant atheism, has been No 1 on the *Globe and Mail's* non-fiction bestseller list for the past seven weeks. He joins past anti-theist bestsellers such as US neurologist Sam Harris and Canadian cancer specialist Robert Buckman.

"The books' popularity is partly due to their timing, which coincides with popular anxiety about the worldwide growth in both Islamic and Christian fundamentalism, which has arguably resulted in increased terrorism and war. There is also a backlash against evangelical campaigns opposing gay marriage, stem-cell research and teaching evolution. A range of people are frustrated by the religious influence in politics..."

Earlier this year the largest international secular-humanist organisation, based in Amherst, New York – the Centre for Inquiry, with branches across America, South America, Africa, Europe and Asia – established its first Canadian centre in Ontario, and there are plans to open a CFI in Vancouver later in 2007.

"The Dawkins thing has gotten a lot of play because it's brash and bold and a little disquieting, but atheism is only part of the story," explained Austin Dacey, executive director of the CFI in New York and the group's representative to the United Nations.

The CFI is intended to be a place not just for lectures, but for an eclectic list of activities, from a science book club to less-cerebral pursuits such as yoga for freethinkers and "magic for sceptics".

There's a Sunday-morning meeting to discuss different aspects of humanism, and a monthly spaghetti dinner – where, instead of a traditional grace, the lauded deity is the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a lampoon concocted a few years ago in response to the Intelligent Design movement's attempts to derail evolutionary teaching in Kansas schools.

The centre is also organising social services, such as a regular meeting of Secular Organizations for Sobriety, which is an alternative to Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous. Another programme, Religious Recovery, tries to ease the transition for people

# GOD IS

## But when will pe

who are leaving organised religion.

According to 2001 census figures, nearly five million Canadians identify as having "no religious affiliation," compared with 13 million Catholics and eight million Protestants. That's a 44-per-cent increase since the 1991 census figures. In 1971, less than one per cent of the population claimed no religion.

### ANNE SUMNER draws together reports from Canada and Australia which chart the rise of New Atheism

But it was not until the late 1990s that humanist groups were granted the right to perform legally recognised wedding ceremonies. (Other non-believers remain critical of this right being restricted in some provinces to certified humanists, and not more generally available.)

"We're aggressively eager to expand our efforts to Canada and we're devoting considerable efforts to that end," said D J Grothe, programme director at the CFI in Amherst. "We've identified Canadian leaders and we're matching that leadership with financial and promotional resources."

Grothe grew up an evangelical Christian. He heard about the CFI while in Bible college and got involved with the organisation during graduate school.

"We're really experiencing a growth spurt now, more now than ever before in our history" he said. "More and more people coming out of the woodwork in North America, asking what they can do. It's a result of looking around and seeing what happens when people are motivated by untested religious dogmas as opposed to prizing science and its outlook."

That belief in the primacy of science is one of the things that led Paul Kurtz to found the Centre for Inquiry, of which he remains chairman. "There's a great vacuum out there," he said about the surge in interest. "People feel beleaguered, alone, isolated and surrounded by a kind of theocratic culture. The rational and humanistic alternatives resonate with a lot of people."

The new centre is an important moment for Canadian humanism, according to Gary Bauslaugh, who is the current Humanist Association of Canada's president and editor of *Humanist Perspectives* magazine.

He said the group "has been well-meaning but not terribly effective in the past," noting it was historically orientated toward debate



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## people realise it?

rather than action. "We want to appeal much more widely to critical-thinking Canadians and across North America. There are literally millions of people in Canada who think like we do but don't label themselves humanists. We think there's common cause."

At the forefront is a relatively new group of humanist activists – university students. Until a few years ago, humanist groups tended to comprise mostly older individuals, but it's starting to pick up momentum with a younger crowd. In the non-religiously affiliated population in the 2001 census, 40 per cent were 24 years old or younger.

The new executive director of CFI-Ontario, Justin Trottier, founded the first secular humanist group at the University of Toronto just 18 months ago. Since then, he and other student activists (including his sister, Alex) have founded CFI affiliates at campuses across the country, including Carlton, McGill and Waterloo – a dozen new groups in all over the past year.

A similar groundswell against religion is also manifesting itself in Australia. Writing in Melbourne's *Sunday Age*, Thornton McCamish described how, on Palm Sunday, atheist Dr John Perkins drove out to the Careforce Church in Mount Evelyn to tell its congregation that everything it believed and held dear about God was, sad to say, mistaken and even dangerous.

"It wouldn't be everyone's idea of a fun night out", McCamish observed. "Finding himself in similar circumstances, Australian arch-atheist Philip Adams once described himself as 'a lion thrown into a den of Daniels'."

"And the scene did appear set for a mauling: the modern community hall-style building can hold 1,000 and the debate had sold out within 20 minutes of tickets going on sale. But there was no blood spilt. The Careforce house band belted out a few numbers, including John Lennon's Imagine ("Imagine there's no heaven, and no religion too..."), and then for nearly 90 minutes a mostly Christian audience listened intently while Christianity and atheism went ten heartfelt rounds on stage. There was gracious applause at the end.

"This slightly odd event is part of a much wider phenomenon: the emergence of newly energised atheism centred around Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. An unapologetic and even contemptuous attack on faith, the book has caused a storm in the US where it has been camped on the *New York Times* bestseller list for five months.

"Dawkins' is just one of at least half a dozen popular books preaching an anti-religious mes-

sage that have appeared in the past year or so. There are more to come, too. Connoisseurs of the heretical will be salivating at the prospect of Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, which is due in May.

"This swelling of atheist literature is a reaction to a worldwide rise in fundamentalist religion. But in kicking back at extremism, the bestselling atheists don't discriminate between mainstream faith and the loony fringe. It's religion itself they object to.

"Dawkins hopes to eradicate faith entirely. This immodest project has put the high-profile English biologist at the vanguard of what's being called – inevitably – "evangelistic atheism".

"Dawkins has been on the cover of *Time* magazine. He even appeared on TV show *South Park*, where he was, as he himself grumblingly described it, 'portrayed as a cartoon character bugging a bald transvestite'.

"Popular atheism is not new – Bertrand Russell's classic *Why I Am Not a Christian* was written more than 80 years ago – but the emphasis on mass conversion to common sense might be.

The "Beyond Belief" forum, at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California late last year, resembled, the *New York Times* reported, "the founding convention for a political party built on a single plank: in a world dangerously charged with ideology, science needs to take on an evangelical role, vying with religion as teller of the greatest story ever told."

"It's also unrepentantly trenchant, eschewing the delicacy conventionally observed in religious discussion. 'I'm utterly fed up with the respect that we – all of us, including the secular among us – are brainwashed into bestowing on religion,' Dawkins has said. And so say an increasing number of thinkers for whom the fundamental absurdity of all religious belief has become non-negotiable. In a swingeing philippic against Islamic fundamentalism published in the *Observer* last year, Martin Amis wrote: 'Today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief – unless we think that ignorance, reaction and sentimentality are good excuses.'"

If this seems unnecessarily trenchant, says English philosopher A C Grayling, who has contributed his own irreligious tract, *Against All Gods* (2007), to the bookshops, remember that religion started it. "Politeness and restraint have been banished by the confrontational face that faith now turns to the modern world," Grayling writes. "In the face of the growing volume and assertiveness of different religious bodies asking for preferential treatment, secular opinion has hardened."

But edging Australians into anti-religious activism might still prove a difficult mission.

In her book *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics*, Marion Maddox argues that in Australia's "exceptionally secular culture" religion is still

welcome, "but mainly as something we approve of for others, rather than participate in ourselves".

It may be true that fewer Australians attend church than ever, says Dr Carole Cusack, chairwoman of the department of studies in religion at the University of Sydney, but Australians still view being religious positively. "If somebody says they're religious, it means they have principles and morals."

The reverse seems to apply to atheists. "I think if you just say 'I'm an atheist'," says Dr Cusack, "people assume that you despise religion. People somehow think atheism is linked to being derisory."

Nearly 60,000 copies of Dawkins' book have sold in Australia, but it's hard to say whether it's producing a generation of atheist converts. However, it does seem to have galvanised existing atheists. Dawkins can take some credit for the Melbourne Atheist Meet-up Group, which was set up in June last year and now has some 60 members. One of its founders, Andrew Rawlings, an atheist activist, says *The God Delusion* was "very influential" in the formation of the group.

On Australia Day this year, 10 members of the group established an "atheist presence" outside a Catch the Fire Ministries prayer rally at Festival Hall.

There was a small scuffle when one rally participant tried to knock a copy of *The God Delusion* out of an atheist's hands, but no one was hurt. Probably no one was converted, either. Most of the Christians, says Rawlings, seemed not so much angered by the atheists as concerned for their souls.

Spreading the word against God has never been a priority for Australia's more established atheist groups. The Atheist Foundation of Australia, which provided Dr John Perkins for the Careforce Church debate, has been in existence for 37 years. Its most important functions, says its president, David Nicholls, are to promote secularism, and to argue that the indoctrination of children with irrational religious ideas is dangerous, and that indoctrinating children into a belief in eternal damnation is actually a form of abuse.

Still, Nicholls has high hopes for the new atheism. "Anyone who reads Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and doesn't start questioning their faith really has not got a hold on reality," he says.

Melbourne philosopher Tamas Pataki is soon to add another book to the growing pile of popular atheistic literature. His *Against Religion* is due out next month, but he has no interest, he says, in being part of "some movement to defeat or repel religion". He too sees the boom in atheist thought as a reaction to the rise of fundamentalism. "But I think what intellectuals find more offensive than Islamic fundamentalism is probably what's happening in George Bush's America, and the influence

(Continued on page 12)



# Joseph Symes twenty years' fight in Australia

NIGEL Sinnott and his fellow Australian free-thinkers are to be congratulated on publishing Joseph Symes' *My Twenty Years' Fight in Australia* which first appeared in 1906 as a series of nine articles in *The Freethinker*.

Joseph Symes, whose origins were in Dorset, had been a Wesleyan preacher. He joined the National Secular Society in 1876 and was elected a vice-president in 1877. He emigrated to Australia in 1884 and remained there until 1906.

The Melbourne Secularists had written to Charles Bradlaugh asking if he could recommend a lecturer who could come and settle in that city. A collection of £100 was raised for him and he set sail on the ill-fated *Lusitania*. He decided he had a "double task to perform – to finish the emancipation of my own people and to show them they must demand and secure the full rights of citizens, though they were Freethinkers..."

The freethinkers had not charged for their lectures but Symes decided to do so. The cler-

## God is Dead

(Continued from page 11)

of the Christian right."

The particular stridency of the new atheism in America probably reflects a stronger sense of embattlement among scientists there – Dawkins's book speaks directly to controversies over stem-cell research and teaching creationism in schools – and also to the greater role religion plays in public life.

David Nicholls admits that religion doesn't have nearly the cultural power here that it does in the US. "But, having said that, we now have many parliamentarians expressing religious views in an attempt to be either truthful to themselves or to catch the religious vote which they think is out there. I think it's a very dangerous path that we're treading. A democratic society shouldn't take the risk."

But the new atheism, observes McCamish, is about more than defending secular political arrangements: it's about sweeping away all religion with the firm broom of reason, and doing it fast. "Global religions are global tribes," argues John Perkins. "People pretend that there's not religious conflict ... There are too many people out there who have access to very powerful weapons whose beliefs are inconsistent with the beliefs of other people with equally powerful weapons."

What atheism believes it offers is the only universal alternative to dangerous unreason. "There seems to be a kind of darkening of the world in many ways," Pataki says. "We're becoming more politically conservative and morally regressive, and at periods like that in the history of civilisation, religion and superstition always come to the fore."

gy were furious and demanded the government stop him. Meanwhile Symes had started his own paper, the *Liberator*, which soon had 20,000 readers. After being elected the Freethinkers' president, he was sued by an "obscure individual" named Benn for charging money on Sundays. The Justice, Sir Hartley Williams, decided against Symes.

**TERRY LIDDLE on *My Twenty Years' Fight in Australia*, Joseph Symes, Proxima Thule Press/Council of Australian Humanist Societies/Atheist Foundation of Australia, paperback, 50pp. £3 plus postage from Freethought History Research Group, 83, Sowerby Close, Eltham, London, SE9 6EZ.**

Symes continued to lecture. Again threatened with prosecution, he fell ill with fever. Although ill he appeared before Acting Chief Justice George Higinbottom who "disgraced the Bench he occupied". He was tried three times, the jury disagreeing with the judge, and the government issued a *nolle prosequi*.

The government now decided to stop the *Liberator* by deciding that two sureties in the same of £400 each would have to be found to

prevent the paper publishing blasphemy and sedition." Bradlaugh had defeated this legislation in Britain but it still applied in Victoria. "My paper", he said, "was spreading truth, light, and liberty; and therefore the parsons and their obedient tools in government did their best to crush it." The jury decided against Symes but imposed the lowest possible fine. An appeal failed. Fined about £125, Symes replied that his estate consisted of a sick wife, a cat and a dog.

The Hall in which Symes lectured from 1884 to 1888 was sold. Symes now, like William Morris, came into conflict with the anarchists in his own ranks. Symes was evicted from a new hall, the trustees taking him yet again to court and the Freethinkers now met in a YMCA hall!

Australia entered an economic crisis but despite years of poverty Symes managed to keep the *Liberator* going. However, he had to face new lawsuits and, impoverished, was forced to give a Bill of Sale on his furniture, microscope and books.

They fell into the hands of Edwin Ripper who prosecuted Symes over an article attacking him in the *Liberator*.

## Christian Crusaders Caption contest winners



WE asked you to devise some song titles that may have been included in this album of Christian songs.

The winner is Ken Moore of Shropshire. His suggestions were: *All things slight and fanciful*; *Were you there when they crucified my Ford* (accompanied by the Essex Constabulary Choir); *Hark, the perishing Anglicans sing*; *Gentle Jesus, mead or mild*, and *Onward Christian dingbats*.

He receives Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker*.

The two runners-up are J A Deamer of Kent and Marie Anderson of Wiltshire, who receive a year's subscription, plus a *Jesus and Mo* cartoon collection. Mr Deamer's entries were *How sweet the name of Dawkins sounds (to a non-believer's ear)*; *Backward Christian soldiers*, and *Now thank we there's no god*. Ms Anderson's were *Jesu joy of man's perspiring*; *Courage beer, bro' makes you stumble*, and *Jerusalem the golden, with milk and MONEY blessed*.

## Don't You Believe It!

NSS member and regular contributor to the *Freethinker*, John Radford, has produced an amusing new book *Don't You Believe It! Some things that everybody knows, that actually ain't so*.

John has gone back to look at the things that have become part of our everyday assumptions and beliefs and found out the truth. For instance – we all know that King Alfred burnt the cakes, right? Well, did he? And what were cakes, anyway, in those days? And, of course, every idiot knows that Columbus discovered America. But let's have a closer look and then reconsider.

Did the Druids build Stonehenge? How many words do Eskimos really have for snow? And Charles Darwin invented the idea of evolution – or so you thought.

Beautifully researched and written in a light-hearted fashion, this is the kind of book you can dip into when you've got a spare moment, and it's bound to elicit cries of Well, I didn't know that! The cheeky illustrations are done by Donald Room. Buy it from the NSS shop for £9.95 plus £1 p&p or by post from NSS Books, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

All money raised through sales of this delightful book will be donated to either Amnesty or the NSS (according to the buyers' choice).



OF the ten stories in the *Los Angeles Times* of March 15, 2007, that the newspaper packaged in a format that enabled web browsers to e-mail them, the third-highest number of e-mailings was for a column by Sam Harris headlined "God's dupes," with the subheading, "Moderate believers give cover to religious fanatics – and are every bit as deluded."

It can reasonably be assumed that every person who chose to pass the column on to someone else, by a method as traceable as e-mail, was either a non-theist or was in agreement with at least some of Harris's statements. Furthermore, the large number of e-mailers is evidence that the pretence that non-theists constitute as few as six percent or even 14 percent of the American population is unmitigated propaganda.

In fact non-theists make up 33 percent of all Americans, more than Catholics at 29 percent or Baptists at 22 percent, or all other religious denominations combined. While those figures will be disputed until such time as non-theists participating in surveys feel safe enough to come out of the closet and admit that they don't believe in Mother Goose or an imaginary friend in the sky, the writings of such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins are showing signs of encouraging them to stand up and be counted.

Harris cited the Democrat Pete Stark from California who became the first openly nontheistic Congressman in American history (although there have been closet non-theists, such as John F Kennedy). It is just a matter of time before Americans' reluctance to risk the social and economic consequences of offending that nice Mr God is recognized as a holdover from 1940 and 1941, when it was considered impolite to offend that nice Mr Hitler.

Harris wrote that, "Mythology is where all gods go to die, and it seems that Stark has secured a place in American history simply by admitting that a fresh grave should be dug for the God of Abraham – the jealous, genocidal, priggish and self-contradictory tyrant of the Bible and the Koran."

Not surprisingly his words triggered outraged responses from braindead god addicts who do not recognize their deity as the most sadistic, evil, mass-murdering psychopath in all fiction, and incompetent responses from ignoramuses who have no awareness that their Bible is the most obscene paean to evil ever written, with the Koran a close second and *Mein Kampf* a far distant third.

Among the former is the following: "So the godless horde strikes again? This guy is Satan in the flesh, and he knows what he writes is a lie. One day, his knee, to [sic] shall bow..." Persons who really think Harris is wrong do not express such paranoia. It is addicts who at some level recognize that he is right who react with pathological terror.

"Why do these chumps write such blasphemy?" Anyone who considers "blasphemy" (insulting something that does not exist) a valid concept would be right at home in the Taliban's Afghanistan or Torquemada's Spain.

# Sam Harris v the brain-dead

"I feel sorry for Harris that his opinion is so negative toward Christianity." Did the writer of those words feel sorry for Winston Churchill that his opinion was so negative toward Nazism? I personally feel sorry for all god-worshippers, because their ignorance is forever. The eternity of bliss they purchase with a lifetime of masochism does not exist. And when they die, they are never going to learn that, because they will be totally, permanently, irreversibly *dead*.

## WILLIAM HARWOOD examines the fall-out following Sam Harris's latest assault on religion

"No, no. I think he's on to something. I know that I, for one, wake up every day and work tirelessly for the coming of a totalitarian theocracy." My own response to what was clearly intended as a joke is, "Many a true word is spoken in jest." Certainly the talking chimpanzee in the White House and his Republicanazi Gestapo are working tirelessly to turn America into a totalitarian theofascist tyranny.

"The devil exists, [sic] he needs people just like Sam Harris; [sic] to delude others. To scoff at the idea of heaven and hell. To allow the devil free passage into the hearts and minds of his readers; at the same time telling them 'there is no devil because there is no God.' But the devil has Sam by the short hairs. The devil owns many once prestigious news outlets and his fishwraps. Those are almost all in the devil's domain today. Most of the entertainment industry is his." Does the term "conspiracy freak" mean anything to this guy? And anyone who believes in the Christian devil, who (with God's permission!) tortures taboo-breakers with flamethrowers for billions of years in an underworld Auschwitz that can only be described as a sadist's wet dream, is projecting onto his imaginary playmate the hatred of the human race he sees in the mirror.

"This tripe is so far from reality that it calls to mind John 8:44 (NIV) You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire." [punctuation sic] I have one question for that particular commentator: What color is the sky in your world?

Among the uninformed comments are these: "Harris says: 'Books like the Bible and the Koran get almost every significant fact about us and our world wrong.' Obviously he's never

read the Bible nor has anyone bothered to correct him. The Bible said that the life of a human being was in his blood long before science recognized that fact." Newsflash: The life of a human being is no more "in his blood" than it is in his brain, his lungs, or any other vital organ. And while it is true that the Bible contains the quoted statement, it elsewhere equates the life with the breath. And those assertions are written in such a way as to make them incompatible.

The same writer alleges, "The Bible said that the Earth was round while people were still thinking it was flat." In that allegation is clear proof that the writer has himself never read a Bible, or at least never read one with his brain in gear. There are about 60 stories in the Bible that assume a flat earth, and fourteen of them are so unambiguous that they could be true if and only if the earth is flat (*Where Is George Washington Now That America Really Needs Him?* Booksurge, 2007, pp. 95-97).

Then there was the apologist who tried to rebut Harris's criticism of religion by quoting from his Bible. That is analogous to rebutting a criticism of Nazism by quoting from *Mein Kampf*. Anyone who cannot grasp that circular reasoning (trying to prove something is true by starting from the assumption that it is true) is not a valid procedure, should give serious consideration to a brain transplant.

Sam Harris, and likewise Richard Dawkins, are making an increasing percentage of the population realize that religion is not a harmless delusion like alien abductions. Whereas such delusions as alternative medicine, astrology, Scientology, mediums and ghost whisperers, hurt only the suckers gullible enough to swallow them, religion is at this moment contributing to the extermination of the human race by encouraging overpopulation, air and water pollution, and ethnic hatred, by persuading believers that a *deus ex machina* will intervene to save us in the last act. A member of Ronald Reagan's cabinet, and the current president of Iran, are both on record as expressing the conviction that the second coming of their respective imaginary playmates is going to occur within their own lifetimes. Why preserve planet earth as a human habitat if the world is coming to an end anyway?

While Sam Harris's article might strike some readers as mere opinion rather than observable fact, the comments of his detractors are the ultimate proof that he is right. If enough people listen to him, and let the world know that there are more of us than there are of them (defining "them" as adherents of any one denomination, such as Catholics or Baptists), the status of non-theists as North America's (and the UK's) most discriminated-against minority, previously held by Jews, Irish, Catholics, Blacks, and gays, all of whom have now gained legal (if not *de facto*) equality by vigorously campaigning for basic human rights, will go the way of the Ku Klux Klan and Martian canals.



## Anti-Semitism

AS I have previously said, canons of anti-Jewish prejudice change every few decades. However alive and virulent it may be in the Islamic world, the classic hook-nosed, dishonest international conspirator is largely moribund in the West. Modern anti-Jewish prejudice is now common among pseudo-intellectuals, in universities and even among *Freethinker* readers. It consists of baseless accusations of war-mongering by the only Jewish state in the world, of lack of civil rights, forcible expulsion of Arabs, racism and even colonialism.

David Simmonds (*Points of View*, April) speaks of Irgun and the Stern Gang, whose activities were directed entirely against the British occupying forces and their betrayal of their pledge to allow Jewish immigration. Eventually they succeeded in forcing the British out.

But the allegation of wanton expulsion of Arabs was only invented 15 years after the British had departed, and after the 1948 war.

How could such a thing possibly have happened? The British had disarmed the Jews and armed the Arabs who outnumbered the former by 200 to one. Where were the contemporaneous reports of the alleged expulsion?

Why do your correspondents make no mention of the deliberate, brutal dispossession and expulsion of Jews from Arab lands in greater numbers than the Arab refugees in the aftermath of the 1948 war?

Arabia is large and oil-rich. Why has it done nothing to assist and absorb Arab refugees? Israel at once admitted the Jewish refugees.

Ken Baldry (in the same issue) remarks about welcoming Jews driven out from their chosen homeland by fear of death are among the most anti-Semitic I have ever heard.

Israel is a Jewish state as France is the national homeland of the French people. That

is not to say that there are not many Brits and other non-French living there and enjoying full democratic rights.

The need for a Jewish homeland was and is much greater. Sixty years ago six million Jews were hideously murdered because there was no homeland to admit them.

David Simmonds seems not to understand that the security has reduced Palestinian murders by nine-tenths – the first duty of a government is to protect its inhabitants from being murdered.

He mentions the Saudi plan. All Zionists must be suspicious. Why did the Saudis and other Arabs not recognise Israel before its 1967 victories? Is it not because its borders were indefensible and by inducing Israel to accept them again it would facilitate plans to destroy her? Arafat's purported recognition of Israel was not accompanied by any cessation of violence. It was accompanied by Arabic broadcasts saying that his objective of destroying Israel remained.

There is no threat to Lebanon or Palestine. Both Arab and America are working for the establishment of a peaceful Palestinian state.

Why cannot *Freethinker* readers think freely and consider facts, not prejudice?

In 1936, the Jewish Agency for a Palestinian Arab state was set up. They voted for it again in 1947 when the UN proposed it. Israel worked for it in the aftermath of their tremendous victory in 1969, and Israel supported and still supports the Road Map for peace, unlike Palestine. And it even vacated occupation in 2000 to implement the Road Map, but continued violence by Palestinians made re-entry necessary. Will a Palestinian state necessarily be terrorist?

How speedily did Israel accept peace overtures from Egypt and Jordan? Just as soon as they were made. Come off it, Graham Livingstone. Have some respect for facts.

DEREK WILKES  
London

I HAVE read with sadness and dismay the correspondence on Israel and anti-Semitism. In my opinion, I think that one should try to view the present human drama in the context of its human history.

Zionism was not born out of a military adventure, or financial greed, or for a colonial conquest, or as part of an imperial strategy.

Zionism was born in impoverished Russian ghettos where for generation after generation since time immemorial Jewish children and adults, at Passover, were reading words of hope saying "... today we are here suffering, but next year we'll be in Jerusalem ..." And suffering they were because pogrom after pogrom their lives, their women, their belongings were destroyed, threatened and humiliated.

The first Zionists were idealist non-religious Jews, who went to till uncultivated land, in communal properties where no one profited financially.

Of course two wrongs don't make one right.

I believe that the day enough Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs will distinguish their nationhood from their religion, they will be able to move constructively towards achieving peace.

Because, whereas we all know our human limitations and are aware that we make mistakes, religions reveal absolute truths from sources which can make no mistake.

And peace between different nations and different cultures requires compromises and the will to modify previous set positions.

DAVID IBRY  
London

## Dogmatic aspirate

IN last month's *Points of View*, William Harwood pontificates, with almost religious fervour, on the form of the indefinite article preceding a word beginning with the letter H. He decrees that the "a" should become "an" only when the initial H of the following word is silent. But in fact "an" is also to be preferred when the first syllable of the following word is unstressed, even though the aspirate is sounded.

For instance, one naturally writes "a humanist" but "an humiliation", so as to make it easier to say when read aloud. As proof-reader for the *Freethinker*, I follow that natural spoken usage.

BARBARA SMOKER  
Bromley

I READ the article *God's Advocate*, by Jack Hastie, in the February issue of the *Freethinker* and found it interesting. Apart from writing "the apple tree" instead of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (this is as common as saying that Jonah was swallowed by a whale instead of a great fish) I could not fault it.

The April issue contains a letter from a William Harwood of Canada, in which he bitterly complains that Hastie used capitals for the first letter of God – and linked pronouns – claiming that this is "substandard English" and indefensible.

If Harwood's education was solely in Canada, then perhaps he was taught thus. However, in the pre-war UK (when Britain was much more of a Christian country than it now is) this use of capitals was a convention; and it has been carried on after WWII. The practice was to have capitals only when referring to the Christian God. The alternative would have been to have written "Christian god" every time, and this would have been very cumbersome.

More nit-picking was to follow when Hastie was severely castigated for his writing "an historical document" and Harwood described this as "simply fatuous". I cannot speak for Canada but in the UK we were taught to use "a" before an aspirate if the accent came on the first syllable, and "an" if it did not: accordingly we wrote "a hostel" but "an hotel". So, in my book, Hastie was correct.

## Big spring boost for the *Freethinker* fund

*FREETHINKER* subscribers proved enormously generous between January 23 and April 23, 2007, contributing a total of £961.00 to the *Freethinker* fund. We would like to thank the following for their donations:

A Abbas, T Bell, G R Bigley, P Blakeley, F Bond, T Boyce, H R Browning, A Burnett, J Cairns, R W Coleman, G Colling, J C Dalgety, S Dick, R L Driscoll, F Evans, I R Finn, D C Fraser, I Gegan, A Gore, P Hadfield, A Hamilton, T Harrington, J Hazan, M Henderson, D C S Hutchison, B Jenkins, B Jordan, D Kirkland, B Layfield, S Littlemore, M Lofmark, J McMillan, B McNorton, A J McQuaid, J A Markey, G S Mellor, J Nugent, K Partington, I Payne, R C Pearce, J J Penn, S Penoyre, G Petruczok, D Pincham, D Pollak, J R Rees, S Rose, L Sage, W H Simcock, R G Tee, S Trent, A Watson, I E West and D Yong.



I know that many folk now say and write "a hotel", but I take this to be probably transatlantic influence, when so many people in the UK slavishly copy everything the USA does, and we now pronounce KILOmetre as kiLOMetre and insist on saying "it has been proven" instead of the correct "it has been proved".

At any rate, surely the *Freethinker* should be concerned with weightier matters than giving space to folk correcting (or trying to correct) some contributor's grammar.

C A M AITCHISON  
Glasgow

I AM flattered that William Harwood (*Points of View*, April) read my piece, *God's Advocate*, even though he didn't understand it.

In defence of my capitalisation of adjectives and pronouns – I also capitalised Trinity, Incarnation and Resurrection and referred to "the Buddha" – I had thought it self-evident that, when somebody who clearly doesn't believe in revealed religion, parodies its conventions, he does so in order to take the mick. What else does Harwood think I was doing – showing respect?

About parapsychology I wrote, "If its experimental methods are sound and its handling of chance statistically correct, it proves..." I consider that, in the hands of its most rigorous practitioners, its methods are valid, but I did write "if." However my main point was that *even if* parapsychology is a valid discipline, it doesn't help the cause of revealed religion at all. This seems to have escaped Harwood.

If he had concentrated on my main argument instead of pedantically nit-picking at trivia, such as the use of "an" before "h", he might have understood me better.

JACK HASTIE  
Scotland

### Archelaus, not Antipas

PAUL Albrecht (*Points of View*, March) indeed caught me in a typo. I identified the king referred to in Luke 19:12-27 as Antipas. It should have been Archelaus. Luke's source for his addition to what he found in the Q gospel was Josephus's *Jewish War*, 2:1-7. Luke's treatment of the Josephus passage is spelled out in *Mythology's Last Gods*, page 333. For a breakdown of the gospel authors' sources, see my two-volume, *The Fully Translated Bible* (Booksurge, 2006).

WILLIAM HARWOOD  
Canada

### Pub syndrome

I WAS interested in Denis Watkins' letter concerning "Pram Syndrome" (*Points of View*, April) because I seem to suffer from the opposite problem in that whatever I happen to be looking for at any particular time is nowhere to be found. An example of this is "Pub Syndrome". When I am on a long car journey and decide to start looking for a pub in which to find some refreshment and other necessities

of life every conceivable type of eating establishment from posh restaurants to burger vans in lay-bys seems to have vanished from that particular region of the countryside. Now I realise where I've been going wrong – if instead I'd sought some spiritual refreshment, assorted men in frocks in the form of vicars, imams and gurus would have been popping out of the hedgerows in abundance.

I have never understood why people who believe in phenomena such as levitating virgins, blood atonement and possession by devils, to name but three, are supposed to be particularly qualified to pronounce on matters of ethics and morality. Indeed, I suspect one of the main reasons such characters become god-botherers in the first place is they know that once ordained into the mysteries of priesthood or whatever they will then be able to spout the most obfuscated twaddle and still be guaranteed to be taken seriously by the majority of their audience.

DINAH FOWERAKER  
Bristol

### Slogans

I GET rather angry when I receive your envelopes, with your magazine. It slinks through my letter box instead of boldly falling on my carpet with a resounding clatter.

I am of course complaining about the lack of a logo or slogan on the back or front of the envelope.

Surely you must realise that there are over a billion humanists and atheists in the world. A logo on your envelope would tell the world of our growing power. We are the *doers* (on their feet) not the *don'ts* (on their knees.) I offer the following:

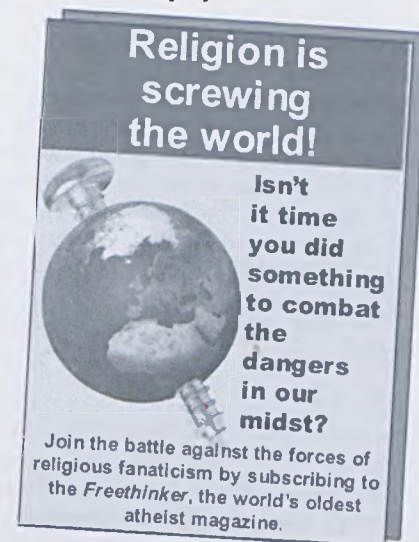
- Humanism more powerful than prayer. Come join the true power of the world
- We drive the world forward in science, technology and progress
- The atheist is a real man, not half a man on his knees
- The law should be taught to children in school, not religion. This will stop the emergence of so much crime.

As a writer of short stories and three novels, I'm looking for a publisher, preferably a humanist or atheist. My current novel is about the Spanish Civil War. Is there a humanist writers' group? Or any individual near me who can evaluate my work? I live between Wimbledon and Croydon. I'm told my stories are excellent.

DOUG BEGG  
London

• **Editor's note:** The cost of postage and envelopes involved in the monthly mailing of the *Freethinker* is substantial. Having envelopes printed with a slogan may add an unnecessary cost the process, and, to my mind would have no significant impact on increasing the circulation of the *Freethinker*. I should point out that last year we printed a small leaflet entitled *Religion is Screwing the World*, which has been very

successful in recruiting new readers. Packs of 100 of this leaflet are still available at £3.50 inclusive of p&p.



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Sheffield





## Events & Contacts

**Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Programme available.

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, June 5, 7.30pm. Elaine Ansell: *My Thoughts on Thought for the Day*.

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, May 8, 7.45pm. Taped interview. *John Humphreys and the Archbishop of Canterbury*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Harrow Humanist Society:** Meetings second Wednesday of every month (except July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977. Our next meeting will be the AGM on May 9th followed by a discussion: *Is Humanism a Recipe for Happiness?*.

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, June 7, 8pm Mark Richards: *The Other Lewis Carroll*. Thursday, July 5, 8pm. Bob Cant: *From the Wolfenden Report to Civil Marriage*.

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

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

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

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

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

[scotland.org.uk](http://scotland.org.uk)

**Glasgow Group:** 07010 704776, [glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk).  
**Highland Group:** 07017 404779, [highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, 3-7 Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, May 15, 7.30om. Jeff Tee: *Humanist Ethics: A Critique*.

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

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, May 17, 8pm. David Porter: *The Challenge of the Esoteric*.

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

**Northants Secular & Humanist Society:** For information contact Maggie Atkins on 01933 381782.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, June 6, 8pm. Speaker and subject to be announced.

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

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

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or e-mail [edward@gwinnell.orange-home.co.uk](mailto:edward@gwinnell.orange-home.co.uk)

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

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

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

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

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

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