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The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

Jonathan Edwards leaps from faith

Olympic gold medallist ditches
Christianity after realising that the Bible
is "not literal truth but literal falsehood"

JONATHAN Edwards, the golden boy of Christianity who retired from athletics in 2003, has ditched God. In a report in *The Times* in June, journalist Matthew Syed revealed that, "Having left his sport as a dyed-in-the-wool evangelical, Edwards is now, to all intents and purposes, an atheist."

"Edwards' faith", wrote Syed, "was never an optional add-on. It has been fundamental to his identity – something that has permeated every fibre of his being – since his trips to Sunday school in the company of his devout parents; since he went to a Christian youth camp in North Devon and devoted his life to Jesus, tears streaming down his cheeks and his face glowing with divine revelation. Since he decided to risk everything to follow God's revealed path, moving to Newcastle in 1987 to become a full-time athlete in the belief that his preordained success would enable him to evangelise to an unbelieving world; since he withdrew from the World Championships in Tokyo in 1991 because his event was scheduled for the Sabbath.

"By the time Edwards retired from athletics in 2003, he had established himself as one of Britain's most prominent born-again Christians. He soon landed the job of fronting a landmark documentary on the life of St Paul and also secured the presenting role on the BBC's flagship religious programme, *Songs of Praise*. He looked to have made the transition to life after sport with a sureness of touch that eludes so many professional athletes. Perhaps this was another advantage of his bedrock faith in God.

"But even as he toured the nation's churches with his BBC crew, Edwards was confronting an apocalyptic realisation: that it was all a grand mistake; that his epiphany was nothing more than self-delusion; that his inner sense of God's presence was fictitious; that the decisions he had taken in life were based on a false premise; that the Bible is not literal truth but literal falsehood; that life is not something imbued with meaning from on high but, possibly, a purposeless accident in an unfeeling universe."



"I never doubted my belief in God for a single moment until I retired from sport," Edwards told Syed. "Faith was the reason that I decided to become a professional athlete, in the same way that it was fundamental to every decision I made. It was the foundation of my existence, the thing that made everything else make sense. It was not a sacrifice to refuse to compete on Sundays during my early career because that would imply that athletics was important in and of itself. It was not. It was always a means to an end: glorifying God.

"But when I retired, something happened that took me by complete surprise. I quickly realised that athletics was more important to my identity than I believed possible. I was the best in the world at what I did and suddenly that was not true any more. With one facet of my identity stripped away, I began to question the others and, from there, there was no stopping. The

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THE love/hate relationship Christians have with the internet never ceases to astound me. On the one hand, they enthusiastically embrace the web to peddle their asinine beliefs – not to mention some unspeakably tacky religious products – while on the other they spend a great deal of time and energy wingeing and wringing their hands over “objectionable” material on the internet.

From these concerns have sprung a variety of Christian-based, Christian-funded internet “nanny” technologies designed to shield our eyes from “undesirable” sites.

Some of these “net nannies” are honest enough to flog their dubious services under the “Christian values” banner.

One such provider is Totalnetguard, which states “You can increase Internet safety for your kids with our Christian Internet filter. Imagine never having to worry again about what your children are looking at online. Imagine a family-safe Internet that doesn’t compromise your Christian family values, bla...bla...”

Other companies are less than forthcoming. Three years ago, Watchdog, based in New Zealand, was awarded a contract by the Ministry of Education to provide internet filtering services for state and state-integrated schools.

Soon afterwards, Paul Litterick, a New Zealand atheist, revealed in his Fundy Post newsletter that Watchdog was a Christian outfit “of the hardcore variety” which supports organisations like NZ’s Focus on the Family (an off-shoot of James Dobson’s anti-gay and anti-abortion US-based organisation.)

Nowhere on its website does it reveal its links with the Christian right. Litterick, however, provided evidence showing that soon

after Watchdog was awarded its contract, all manner of sites, ranging from the anarchistic to the atheistic and the gay, became impossible to access from school computers. Furthermore, Watchdog launched a new service enabling people to denounce sites they disapproved of, and have them added to Watchdog’s rapidly-increasing block list.

**Freethinker editor
BARRY DUKE looks
at ‘internet nannysm’**



Organisations like Watchdog have proliferated all over the world, and accounts are given daily of how people using computers in schools, colleges, universities and libraries have been blocked from seeing a myriad of sites that are neither objectionable nor pornographic. Filtered computers will, for example, block safe-sex advice sites, but allow sexual abstinence ones. Try accessing an atheist site, and you will be directed to a plethora of anti-atheist propaganda sites.

I was, therefore, not in the least bit surprised to learn that the *Freethinker* website had been added to a database of “objectionable” websites currently being assembled by a Christian monitoring service, the Net Authority.

Its own website states that “The Net Authority is an organisation dedicated to the removal of offensive material from the Internet. The online world is teeming with pornography, depravity, blasphemy, and all kinds of hate propaganda. It is our mission to define a set of guidelines to which all information posted on the Internet must adhere, and to hold responsible those who would knowingly break those guidelines.”

Among these guidelines are “Thou shalt not

post materials concerning bestiality, including inter-racial relationships. God did not intend different species or races to intermingle sexually. Any content that contradicts this natural law, directly or indirectly, is strictly forbidden.”

An example of an offensive website is one that contains “Children’s Dinosaur Stories”. The Net Authority says “You might think that a site that contains stories about dinosaurs for children would be innocent – but let’s stop and think about that for a moment. If you read the Bible (you should, it’s great!) you know that dinosaurs never actually existed, and that God put those fossils and bones there to test our faith in Him. While the stories themselves may not contain any offensive material, the simple fact that they are about dinosaurs may cause a child to question his faith in the one true God. By blaspheming, this site is in violation of the Internet Acceptable Use Policy and should be added to our database.”

I realised that the *Freethinker* site had fallen foul of the New Authority when I received an e-mail saying:

“This website has been investigated by Net Authority, and has been found to be in violation of the Internet Acceptable Use Policy by posting the following kinds of content:

- Pornographic material
- Hateful material
- Blasphemy
- Offensive political material
- Bestiality and/or inter-racial relationships.

Bestiality? I was beside myself with rage. Immediately accessed www.netauthority.org and went straight to its database to see what other organisations had fallen foul of this arrogant, self-righteous, interfering outfit.

And that’s when I smelled a rat. Denounced by the public in the 40 or so on-line page database were organisations ranging from the United States Patent and Trademark Office to Haringey Council in London.

My first thought was that the site was being abused, and understandably so, by people so incensed by Christian internet nannyism that they were using it to point the finger at any and every site they could think of, thereby making a nonsense of the whole Net Authority exercise.

In a way, I was right. People adding sites to the database like those operated by organisations as diverse as the Labour Party and the Los Angeles Police Department had, no doubt, done so in a bid to sabotage the Net Authority.

Ah! But what they did not realise it that the Net Authority itself is a highly sophisticated and incredibly clever mickey-take of genuine Christian free-speech gaggers.

I take my hat off to mikeycomics.com, which, I later learned, had devised this ingeniously convincing parody of pukka Christian net guardians. My guess is that’s it’s only a matter of time before the Net Authority get blocked by genuine internet Jesus jockeys.

Abuse victims get a record payout from the Catholic Church in the US

THE Roman Catholic Church in America is bracing itself for a series of damning revelations after the Los Angeles archdiocese agreed a record payment over sex abuse. The church in the city last month agreed a £325-million payout to more than 500 victims of alleged sexual abuse by priests.

This dwarfs the previous highest payout of £60-million by a Roman Catholic diocese since the clergy sexual-abuse scandal erupted in Boston in 2002, and it takes to more than £1-billion the total paid out by the Catholic church in America since 1950, with LA paying about one quarter of that.

Leading lawyer for the alleged victims in the city, Ray Boucher, said the settlement also calls for the release of confidential files on priests which could reveal how the church covered up abuse.

“Transparency is a critical part of this and of all resolutions,” he said.

Had the case gone to trial, lawyers planned to put Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, in the uncomfortable position of testifying about his church’s response to abuses dating from the 1940s to the 1990s.

In a recent letter to parishioners, Cardinal Mahony said the church would be selling an administrative building and was considering the sale of about 50 other properties to raise funds for settlement. Since 2002 nearly 1,000 people have filed similar abuse claims against the church in California alone.

A report commissioned by the church in February 2004 said more than 4,000 Roman Catholic priests in the U.S. had faced sexual abuse allegations in the last 50 years.

Several religious orders in California have also reached multimillion-dollar settlements in recent months, including the Carmelites, the Franciscans and the Jesuits.

Danish Muslim group loses cartoons libel case

A Muslim group last month lost a libel case against the leader of a Danish anti-immigrant party who had accused its members of treason for publicising blasphemous cartoons of the "holy prophet".

A court ruled that Pia Kjaersgaard, leader of the Danish People's Party (DPP), did not libel the Islamic faith community when she accused some of its members of treason for travelling to the Middle East to publicise a Danish newspaper's publication of the drawings, which caused a worldwide uproar in 2006.

The court said the term "treason" was not libellous because it was used extensively in public debate. It ordered the plaintiffs, a loose network of Danish Muslim organisations representing 50,000 members, to pay Kjaersgaard 40,000 Danish crowns (£3,700) in costs.

In September 2005, the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons of Mohammed, which were later reprinted elsewhere and provoked outrage among Muslims.

Three Danish embassies were attacked and at least 50 people were killed in rioting in the Middle East and Asia. Most Muslims regard any depiction of the Prophet as offensive.

Now a fatwa is threatened

"We are very disappointed with the verdict and are considering an appeal," said Kasem Ahmad, a spokesman for the Muslim group. He added that the group would issue a fatwa, or religious edict, against *Jyllands-Posten* if it did not receive an apology from the paper, or if the paper is acquitted in a pending court case brought against it by Muslim groups. "It's too early to give any details of the fatwa," Ahmad said. "The fatwa is the last step and will also satisfy Muslims in the Middle East. Until now nobody has had to answer for insulting our prophet. We have no choice but to ask for a fatwa. No Muslim will ever forget that the prophet was insulted".

Jyllands-Posten was acquitted in the city court of Aarhus last year, but the Muslims appealed the decision to a higher court.

Jyllands-Posten editor, Flemming Rose, said: "Muslims have sued the paper's editor-in-chief Carsten Juste and me for defamation. Anything but acquittal will be a sensation, and the same goes for the European Human Rights

Court, which in recent years has widened the limits of acceptable speech. Islamic Society has said that they also want an apology from the paper. In a similar case in France the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* was acquitted in March after having published two of *Jyllands-Posten's* cartoons and one of their own.

"Apparently, Muslims do not want to accept that the cartoon crisis is a thing of the past. They are basically notifying the public: 'we do not accept secular law, we want *sharia* imposed, and if you don't obey, we will take our case to clerics in the Muslim world to pass a legitimate verdict against the blasphemers.'"

The radical Danish Muslim cleric who orchestrated the world-wide protest against the cartoons – Abu Laban, a strong supporter of Osama bin Laden and a man deeply in favour of establishing a Taliban-like Caliphate in the Muslim world – has since died, aged 60. His place has been taken by Mostafa Chendid.

Asked whether Muslims should accept *Jyllands-Posten's* acquittal, Chendid said: "Next question. I don't want to discuss it anymore. I am just saying that there are exceptions to every rule. And if these cartoons have insulted 1.4 billion Muslims, then..."

Council of Europe calls for blasphemy law abolition

THE Council of Europe says religious groups should be protected from violence but not from criticism – and blasphemy laws should be abolished everywhere.

The Council passed a resolution last month calling on member states to repeal all laws relating to blasphemy. It also said that religious groups must accept that in a free society their activities and doctrines cannot be protected from criticism and open examination.

The only restrictions on public debate about religion should be dictated by public-order concerns and incitement to hatred and violence, the Council resolved.

The resolution, which was passed with a large majority in Strasbourg, said that "criticism of religious groups should be tolerated in democratic societies". However, the Council put a limit on religious criticism and freedom of opinion: it was not allowed to incite hatred, disturb the public order or be targeted at members of religious groups.

The NSS has been active in lobbying the Council of Europe on freedom of expression, and its Director, Keith Porteous Wood, chaired a Council of Europe session on this topic at the French Senate as part of the process which led to this excellent outcome.

Keith commented: "Freedom of expression is the bedrock of democracy, indeed of our civilisation. The Council of Europe stands out among international organisations in recognising the potential damage to freedom of expression from religion and not caving in to the

huge pressure for massively extended blasphemy laws. If only the United Nations and, to a lesser extent, the European Union were farsighted in this respect."

Earlier in the month, the 2007 award for Distinguished Service to Humanism was presented to Keith at the General Assembly of the International Humanist & Ethical Union in Turin. IHEU said: "The award recognises his tireless work for secularism and humanism over many years, both in the United Kingdom and on the international stage."

Awarding him the prize, IHEU president Sonja Eggerickx, said: "This year it goes to a man who has worked tirelessly for secularism and humanism over many years, both in his own country and on the international stage. Keith Porteous Wood recruited politicians and journalists, coordinated with scientists and policy makers, and travelled frequently to Brussels to push forward the secular/humanist agenda. He moved the organisation into the mainstream: from one which was associated in people's minds as a group that denounces religious faith into one that promotes equal treatment and which opposes religious privilege and special pleading.

"The NSS's campaigns against bishops in the UK Parliament; against Prime Minister Tony Blair's publicly funded Academies; and against the closed nature of BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* are examples."

Ms Eggerickx said: "Over the years, Keith has been a great friend of IHEU and with his

legal training and background, he has been consistently helpful with advice and practical assistance to us."

Keith said: "I'm thrilled and honoured to have been given this award.

There is still much to do to slow the encroachment of religion into European political institutions; with the recent renewed manipulative posturing of the Vatican we have to be ever-vigilant."

Efforts to encourage the Council of Europe to adopt a distinctly secular ethos seem to be paying off. In a report to the Council of Ministers, Luis de Puig, the special rapporteur on culture, science and education at the Council of Europe, urges that all countries of Europe embrace a separation of state from religion. He says that although religious bodies have a role to play in a democratic society, it must not be a special or privileged role. When intervening in political or social debates, religions must take their place as members of civil society along with all the other interest groups. There is no longer any justification for giving religion special rights.

Keith commented: "We couldn't have asked for anything better than this report – and we're gratified to see the NSS's role has been acknowledged."



Vatican issues a product recall alert

ROME – Pope Benedict XVI restated Tuesday what he had said were the “defects” of Christian faiths other than Roman Catholicism, prompting anger from Protestants who question the Vatican’s respect for other beliefs.

– Ian Fisher, New York Times, July 11, 2007

This news item prompted Timothy Noah, of *Slate Magazine*, to pen the following:

NEWS FROM THE HOLY SEE

Office of Information and Public Affairs
Vatican City, Rome

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Vatican Recall Hotline: (800) ASK-RATZ
July 10, 2007

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI today announced a voluntary recall of the following consumer products. Consumers should stop using recalled products immediately unless otherwise instructed.

Name of Products: African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Amish, Anabaptist, Anglican, Baptist, Calvinist, Christian

Science, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Huguenot, Jehovah’s Witness, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Mormon, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Puritan, Quaker, Seventh-Day Adventist, Shaker, and Zwinglian Christian sects (frequently labelled “Protestant”).

Name of Orthodox Products: Albanian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Czech Orthodox, Cypriot Orthodox, Estonian Orthodox, Finnish Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Latvian Orthodox, Macedonian Orthodox, Montenegrin Orthodox, Polish Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Slovak Orthodox, and Ukrainian Orthodox sects (frequently labelled “Eastern” or “Oriental” Orthodox).

Manufacturer: The Devil (listed on the New York Stock Exchange as “Angel of the Bottomless Pit,” “Beelzebub,” “Belial,” “Dark Prince,” “Evil One,” “Fallen Angel,” “Foul Fiend,” “His Infernal Majesty,” “Lucifer,” “Mephistopheles,” “Mr Applegate,” “Mr Scratch,” “Prince of Darkness,” “Satan,” and “Tempter”).

Hazard: Can fail to achieve salvation on contact.

Incidents/Injuries: Widespread reports of salvific malfunction and consequent exclusion from the Kingdom of Heaven. Users complain of being rerouted to Purgatory and in a few instances to the Fiery Pit.

Cause: Because Jesus Christ subsists only in the Catholic Church of Rome™, adherents to other faiths that self-advertise as Christian must rely on infrequent guest appearances. Although He is omnipresent, He can’t be everywhere at once.

Sold at: A complete list of retail outlets has been unavailable to the Church for the past five centuries. We continue our efforts to compile one and will post it online when we can.

Manufactured in: Wittenberg, Germany; Istanbul, Turkey; Alexandria, Egypt; Boston, Mass.; Palmyra, New York.

Remedy: Consumers should desist adherence to the abovementioned sects, now proven unreliable, and transmit their souls to the Catholic Church of Rome™.

For those who are already deceased, and therefore ineligible for salvation, the Church has commenced discussions about reopening Limbo, which the Vatican decommissioned in April.

foundations of my world were slowly crumbling.”

Edwards retains the earnest intensity that was his hallmark when he gave talks and sermons at churches up and down the country. He is a serious person who regards life as a serious business, even if he is now unsure of its deeper meaning. But why did someone with such a penetrating intellect leave it so long to question the beliefs upon which he had constructed his life? “It was as if during my 20-plus-year career in athletics, I had been suspended in time,” he says.

“I was so preoccupied with training and competing that I did not have the time or emotional inclination to question my beliefs. Sport is simple, with simple goals and a simple lifestyle. I was quite happy in a world populated by my family and close friends, people who shared my belief system. Leaving that world to get involved with television and other projects gave me the freedom to question everything.”

“Once you start asking yourself questions like, ‘How do I really know there is a God?’ you are already on the path to unbelief,” Edwards says. “During my documentary on St Paul, some experts raised the possibility that his spectacular conversion on the road to Damascus might have been caused by an epileptic fit. It made me realise that I had taken things for granted that were taught to me as a child without subjecting them to any kind of analysis. When you think about it rationally, it does seem incredibly improbable that there is a God.”

Would Edwards have been as successful a sportsman had he been assailed by such doubts?

Edwards’ leap from faith

It is a question that the world record-holder confronts with bracing candour. “Looking back now, I can see that my faith was not only pivotal to my decision to take up sport but also my success,” he says. “I was always dismissive of sports psychology when I was competing, but I now realise that my belief in God was sports psychology in all but name.”

“Believing in something beyond the self can have a hugely beneficial psychological impact, even if the belief is fallacious,” he says. “It provided a profound sense of reassurance for me because I took the view that the result was in God’s hands. He would love me, win, lose or draw. The tin of sardines I took to the Olympic final in Sydney was a tangible reminder of that.” (Edwards was referring to the afternoon of September 25, 2000, when he was making his way to the triple jump final at the Olympic Stadium in Sydney. In his kitbag

were some shirts, spikes, towels – and a tin of sardines. He had chosen the sardines to symbolise the fish that Jesus used in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. As he entered the stadium, he offered a silent prayer: “I place my destiny in Your hands. Do with me as You will.” A few hours later he captured the gold medal, securing his status as one of Britain’s greatest athletes.)

The upheaval of recent months has not left Edwards emotionally scarred, at least not visibly. “I am not unhappy about the fact that there might not be a God,” he says. “I don’t feel that my life has a big, gaping hole in it. In some ways I feel more human than I ever have. There is more reality in my existence than when I was full-on as a believer. It is a completely different world to the one I inhabited for 37 years, so there are feelings of unfamiliarity.

“There have also been issues to address in terms of my relationships with family and friends, many of whom are Christians. But I feel internally happier than at any time of my life, more content within my own skin. Maybe it is because I am not viewing the world through a specific set of spectacles.”

“The only inner problem that I face now is a philosophical one,” Edwards says. “If there is no God, does that mean that life has no purpose? Does it mean that personal existence ends at death? They are thoughts that do my head in. One thing that I can say, however, is that even if I am unable to discover some fundamental purpose to life, this will not give me a reason to return to Christianity. Just because something is unpalatable does not mean that it is not true.”

Quotable quote

AN Islamic regime must be serious in every field. There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humour in Islam. There is no fun in Islam.

– The late Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of Iran

'Tarts' cancer jab will ruin lives

THE use of a new vaccine which prevents cervical cancer has been condemned by a Christian prayer and lobby group, Christian Voice. In a recent statement, CV said "Gardasil is almost 100 percent effective against Human Papilloma Virus, the main cause of cervical cancer, which can be fatal, and genital warts. It is now being prescribed in Britain, with calls for the 'wonder drug' to be administered wholesale to school-girls.

"Cervical cancer charity Jo's Trust has called for a nation-wide programme of vaccination in secondary schools to be launched by the end of the year, even though no tests have been done on girls of that age and long-term side-effects are as yet unknown."

Stephen Green added: "The best way of not getting cervical cancer and genital warts is to stay a virgin and marry a virgin. Why don't these officials want young people to do that? Why don't we raise their expectations and ours and treat them with some respect?"

"I expect school health outreach workers from Primary Care Trusts and the like will be giving Gardasil to young girls behind their par-

ents' backs. Since the vaccine works best before the onset of sexual activity, they will be treating these girls, to put it bluntly, like tarts, saying they are sexually incontinent, lacking in self-respect and the basic morality required to keep their virginity.

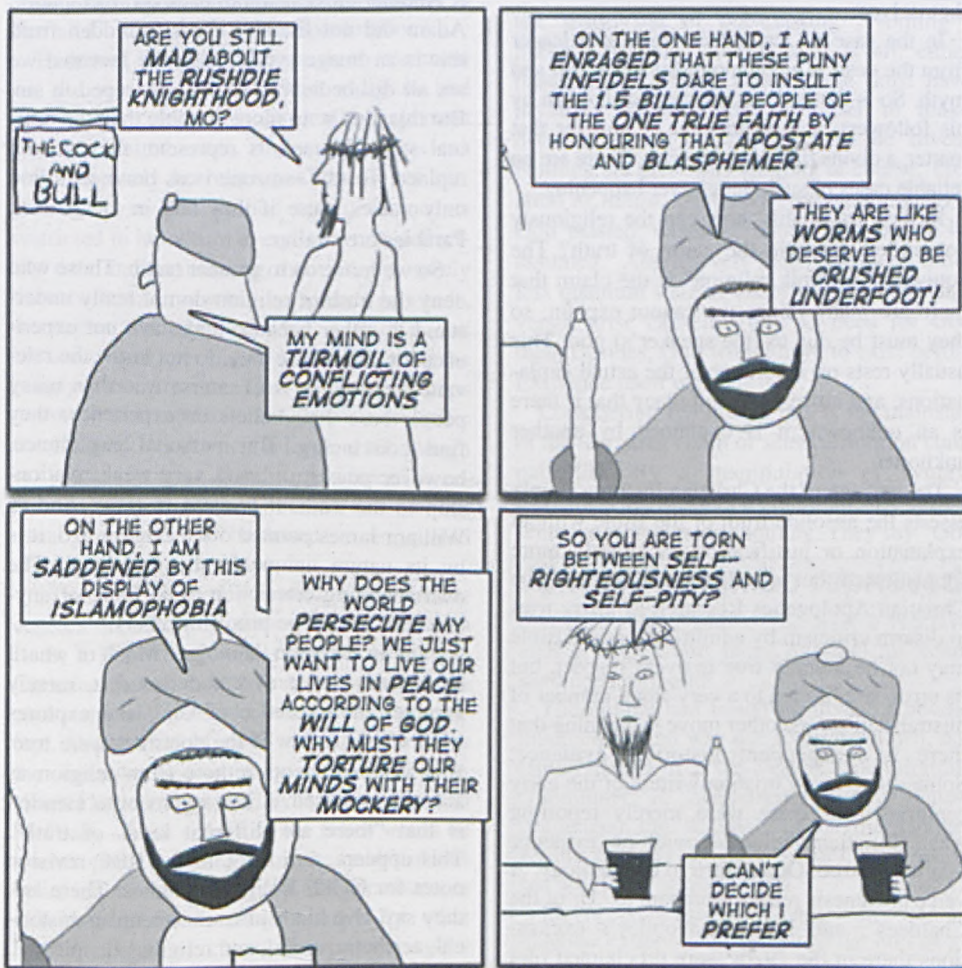
"The message is one of despair, disrespect and low expectations. Anyone giving this drug to a girl is telling her: 'I think you are a slag'.

"But it is also irresponsible and will raise promiscuity, teenage pregnancy and, worst of all, infertility. Young women will be thinking they have more protection than they actually have. No-one will bother to warn them that they are not protected against Chlamydia and that even condoms offer barely any protection against sexually-transmitted diseases either. Chlamydia is already affecting one in ten teenagers. That figure is set to rise as a result of Gardasil, and infertility will rise with it.

"I have a horrible feeling that as all the targets to do with teenage sexual activity are based around pregnancy, those in power won't care if more young people become infertile, because they won't figure in the pregnancy statistics.

"Gardasil is going to leave misery in its wake."

Jesus and Mo



Three 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

Council of Ex-Muslims issue their manifesto

THE recently formed Council of Ex-Muslims has issued a manifesto saying that "no one should be pigeonholed as Muslims with culturally relative rights nor deemed to be represented by regressive Islamic organisations and 'Muslim community leaders'."

The manifesto adds: "Those of us who have come forward with our names and photographs represent countless others who are unable or unwilling to do so because of the threats faced by those considered 'apostates' – punishable by death in countries under Islamic law.

"By doing so, we are breaking the taboo that comes with renouncing Islam, but also taking a stand for reason, universal rights and values, and secularism.

"Whilst religion, or the lack thereof, is a private affair, the increasing intervention of and devastation caused by religion and particularly Islam in contemporary society has necessitated our public renunciation and declaration. We represent a majority in Europe and a vast secular and humanist protest movement in countries like Iran.

"Taking the lead from the Central Council of Ex-Muslims in Germany, we demand:

1. Universal rights and equal citizenship for all. We are opposed to cultural relativism and the tolerance of inhuman beliefs, discrimination and abuse in the name of respecting religion or culture.
2. Freedom to criticise religion. Prohibition of restrictions on unconditional freedom of criticism and expression using so-called religious 'sanctities'.
3. Freedom of religion and atheism.
4. Separation of religion from the state and legal and educational systems.
5. Prohibition of religious customs, rules, ceremonies or activities that are incompatible with or infringe people's rights and freedoms.
6. Abolition of all restrictive and repressive cultural and religious customs which hinder and contradict woman's independence, free will and equality. Prohibition of segregation of sexes.
7. Prohibition of interference by any authority, family members or relatives, or official authorities in the private lives of women and men and their personal, emotional and sexual relationships and sexuality.
8. Protection of children from manipulation and abuse by religion and religious institutions.
9. Prohibition of any kind of financial, material or moral support by the state or state institutions to religion and religious activities and institutions.
10. Prohibition of all forms of religious intimidation and threats."

Those of a religious persuasion generally assert that their beliefs are “true”. Often, the only true ones. The more sceptical of us question or deny such claims. For most of the human race, the supernatural has simply existed alongside the natural. A farmer chooses the right season and the right soil, and prays to the right deity, all for the same reason, to make the crops grow. The question of truth does not arise.

Philosophers, however, ask what it means to say that something is true. Their answers are not conclusive. But two main views prevail, which see truth in terms of either correspondence with the facts, or coherence, that is with other related propositions. Two minority views are that truth is what works (pragmatic view), or the ‘post-modern’ idea that anything is true if it is accepted as being true (which seems to lead to the *impasse* that nothing certain, or even probable, can be said at all). A derivative is that a religion is “true for its adherents”, but this is just another way of saying they believe it.

It is easy to show that religions do not match up to any of the first three. There is, for example, no evidence that prayer (as opposed to believing in prayer) has any effect at all on recovery from illness. Or that deities intervene to make things happen otherwise than they would by natural causes. So religion is not pragmatically true. It does not work, at least in this straightforward sense. Nor is it coherent. The two religions currently most familiar to us, Christianity and Islam, are both riddled with inconsistencies large and small.

Allah is all-knowing and determines everything that happens, including what we do. Yet at the same time we are responsible for our actions, and will be punished if these do not accord with his will. The Christian god, as has so often been pointed out, must be simultaneously all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving. Yet he allows unending suffering to occur, not only through human action but through natural causes (illness, disasters and so on) which he must have been able to prevent. It is simply not possible to make coherent sense of this. Hordes of minor examples can be found. For example, St Luke’s Gospel goes to great lengths to show that Joseph was descended from King David, and thus his son could be a Royal saviour. But simultaneously Jesus is shown to be the son of God, not of Joseph at all.

The Bible and the Koran do not correspond to facts. This is more obvious in the Bible, which is largely presented as a narrative, that is history, whereas the Koran is a series of revelations, mainly concerned with God’s instructions to the human race. It does take over some of the alleged events of the Christian Old Testament, which was given its present form in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, and is a selection from a large body of myths, legends, poems, purported chronicles and so on, variously recorded, re-written, edited and translated over centuries. Very little can be considered to have any sound historical basis. The events

of the New Testament were closer in time to those who wrote about them, but this too is extremely patchy and unreliable. The evidence is presented in detail by, for example, Robin Lane Fox in *The Unauthorised Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible* (1991), and Geza Vermes in *The Passion* (2005) and *The Nativity: History and Legend* (2006).

However, both Christianity and Islam rest ultimately on what are alleged to be true records of particular historical facts. These are, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the revelation of God’s message to Mohammed via the angel Gabriel. Few if any historians would accept the evidence for these as convincing. First, there is effectively none outside the holy writings themselves. Second, those writings are partial and inconsistent, and recorded, mostly from oral tradition, some time after the events. Third, the events are of kinds that are frequently reported, but need no supernatural explanation. For example, Mohammed is said to have heard the voice of Gabriel while meditating in a cave. Hearing voices is by no means unusual, especially in similar circumstances. Voices are often experienced as coming from an external source and as proclaiming a message. They are often interpreted in terms of the individual’s beliefs and desires. There is no evidence that they originate from anywhere than apart the hearers themselves.

In the case of Jesus, the return of a leader from the dead is a commonplace of legend and myth. So is the god who is sacrificed, eaten by his followers, and resurrected. And for that matter, a divine birth and miracles. There are no reliable cases of such things ever happening.

In the face of this, how can the religiously committed maintain the claim of truth? The equivalent of “folk religion” is the claim that there are many things we cannot explain, so they must be due to (the speaker’s) god. This usually rests on ignorance of the actual explanations, and always on the fallacy that if there is an unknown, it is explained by another unknown.

The website of the Christian Institute simply asserts the absolute truth of the Bible without explanation or justification. A slightly more sophisticated but equally weird site of the Christian Apologetics Research Ministry tries to disarm criticism by admitting that the Bible may not be literally true in every respect, but its errors are limited to a very small number of mistranslations. Another move is claiming that there is independent historical evidence. Some quote non-Christian writers of the early centuries. But these were merely reporting what Christians believed, with no evidence that it was true. Others turn to archaeology. A verse in Genesis relates Abraham to “Ur of the Chaldees”, and Leonard Woolley’s excavations there in the 1920s were proclaimed (not least by himself) as confirmation. But Woolley had uncovered Ur, not Abraham, who remains a figure of legend. Later archaeology has done

The Untruth

no better, and is not likely to.

Then there is the idea that the Bible or the Koran cannot be wrong but we can be wrong in our understanding of them. They have to be interpreted. Unfortunately, the interpreters seldom agree, and the texts themselves contain contradictory statements. The Book of Proverbs commands parents to beat their sons. Some Christians take this literally, but most, fortunately, do not. But which is right? The faith does not tell us.

JOHN RADFORD argues that religion is not true either in a general or any special sense

An extension of this by some Christian theologians is that God has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ, but since we can never understand this mystery, re-interpretation must continue indefinitely. This does at least mean that theologians will never be out of work, but is hardly convincing.

Another move is to fall back on “metaphor”. Adam did not literally eat a forbidden fruit, this is an image symbolising the fact that we are all disobedient to God and steeped in sin. But this idea is no more credible than the original story. Metaphors represent, they do not replace. To say someone is as brave as a lion only makes sense if they are, in fact, brave. Parables are similar.

So we move on to another tactic. Those who deny the truth of religion do not really understand it, either because they have not experienced it or because they do not know the relevant theology. It is of course true that many people base their beliefs on experiences they find convincing. But personal experience, however powerful, has a very weak relationship to the truth. It is often in error. And as William James pointed out a century ago, it is by its nature unique to the individual. The overwhelming conviction of St Paul, or anyone else, cannot be proof for others.

I am no expert in theology. Much of what I have read, as far as I understand it, merely assumes the existence of God, and explores what would follow if the doctrines were true. And it often seems remote from religion as actually practised. A last argument to mention is that “there are different kinds of truth”. This appears, curiously, in the BBC revision notes for GCSE Religious Studies. There are, they say, five kinds of truth: scientific, historical, aesthetic, moral, and religious or spiritual. This is misleading. Distinguishing scientific and historical truth suggests that there may be others, but in fact these two are essentially the

h of Religion

same, according to the criteria suggested earlier. Aesthetic “truth” is really value, or a statement about emotions aroused. We all know that *Hamlet* is not historically true. Rather, its characters exhibit thoughts and feelings that correspond to ours. Religious “truth” seems to

HAVING just read an excellent rebuttal of Alistair McGrath’s booklet, *The Dawkins Delusion*, criticising Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, by the Sheffield Humanist Society, in which they comment on various specific misquotations of Dawkins and others by McGrath, I am tempted to add some rather more generalised comments myself.

I feel that I already have a relationship with Prof McGrath because he so kindly mentioned me by name on page 272 of his previous book with the hopeful title *The Twilight of Atheism*.

While still euphoric at having been thus immortalised, I should point out that I was contrasting boring-but-true rational humanism with entertaining-but-false Christianity.

McGrath evidently took this as an attack on humanism by me, but I was actually illustrating the pointlessness of a religious system which substitutes entertainment for reason. Is that all Christianity is – mere pantomime?

However, my main purpose is to comment on the quarrel over whether religion and science are compatible. Evidently they must be, in a limited sense, if some scientists can simultaneously be religious. This is not surprising if, in this limited sense, science is restricted to humdrum everyday work, collecting data and formulating theories; but surely there comes a time when, as science proceeds, it reaches the edge of what is known and becomes more speculative – at which point the religionists introduce the God-of-the-gaps notion as if it were a contender for a scientific theory itself, despite no evidence at all; though in typical Christian fashion, “evidence” is re-defined so as to fit the Christian scheme, but usually turns out to be based on antiquated arguments from ignorance.

There are several scientists with variable degrees of religiosity, among them Sir Martin Rees, a “Christian” who does not believe in Christianity, but nevertheless, according to his own statement, goes to Church as a tribal custom. Stephen Gould came up with NOMA, or the non-overlapping magisterial approach, which I believe is rejected by both Dawkins and McGrath – quite rightly, as the result would be a schizophrenic separation of the holder of this belief into two non-communicating personas, or different individuals altogether. On the other hand, if a belief in compatibility tries mixing the scientific and religious approaches, it will pollute both the science and the religion. Did Life and the Universe arise entirely naturalistically,

be partly aesthetic. The Bible is largely fiction, but some of it is rather good fiction. Moral “truth” is statements of what some people have considered right. “Thou shalt not kill” would be agreed by most people in the world (as surveys show), though often with exceptions. But it is not a truth. It is a judgment, and is no more (or less) valid if it is supposed to emanate from an imaginary being. The spiritual aspect of religious “truth” seems to mean personal experience, as above. A final dodge is to fall

The McGrath Delusion?

or did God (somehow) do it?

These are mutually incompatible, unless you re-invent the meaning of compatibility.

For instance, the term “naturalistic”, has been twisted to include action by God, and Nature becomes re-defined as “supernatural”.

World creation myths generally state that God or the gods created the “world” (which includes the whole universe if they have that concept in mind) either *ex nihilo* – from “nothing” – or from a prior primeval chaos. It is not usually asked where “Nothing” came from, nor, especially, who made the primeval chaos.

Could God one day have decided to make the world out of pre-existing “Nothing”? Surely “Nothing” cannot exist at all, either timelessly or within time. So he must have invented Nothing first in order to make Something out of it. What did he invent Nothing out of? – why Nothing of course; creation *ex nihilo*. Not very convincing, even if God existed, which of course first has to be assumed. Alternatively there “exists” a timeless quantum state of chaos out of which universes arise causelessly – no need for God then. Besides, God would have to exist before Existence itself existed.

Considering Evolution; this is the mainstay of the Christian claim of science/religion compatibility. By a manipulation of syntax, Christians put together a grammatically correct sentence which means nothing. They say “God

‘Sacred’ Shambo reprieved

SACRED bull Shambo has won a reprieve after a High Court judge quashed his death sentence last month.

The animal had tested positive for bovine tuberculosis and was due to be put down, but Hindu monks from the Skanda Vale religious community, in Llanpumsaint, west Wales, challenged the decision under the Human Rights Act and the holy bullock’s execution has now been stayed.

David Anderson QC, who represented Shambo’s supporters, described the bull as an animal of “considerable religious importance” and claimed that the community believed killing him would desecrate the temple.

back on the blessed word “revelation”. Religion is true because it has been miraculously revealed to us. This deserves a separate discussion, but in the end it seems to boil down to unquestioned belief. Which is where we came in.

Religion, I argue, is not true either in a general or any special sense. But I don’t suppose that will be the end of it.

• John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.

made evolution”, and then claim that they are fully modern up-to-date progressive believers in evolution.

But if evolution is all disorganised and accidental, which they have to claim it is, in order to justify their assertion that it therefore it did not produce us – because we are specially created by God – then it must, according to their definition of it, be a random chaotic causeless process, whose only directional properties appear to be an increase in overall complexity, resulting in large brains and intelligence, and creatures rather like us.

At a lower level of description, biologists will rightly point out that evolution is not random at all, but that all living things are fine tuned to each other and to the environment by natural selection.

But ultimately the process appears to be overall random because of random changes in the environment, with periodic catastrophic events which change the whole course of evolution, randomly. If evolution was re-played it probably would not produce us, but might produce intelligent giant squids instead; and we would all be worshipping an “Architheusismorphic” God.

In order for God to create chaotic evolution out of pre-existing order of some kind, like an Idea in the Mind of God, he would have to turn all Creation myths on their heads – so that whereas the Abrahamic religions insist God created the world *ex nihilo*, or out of chaos, now believers appear to be saying that he created evolutionary chaos out of what? – order?

In their goal-post shifting activities – something which McGrath seems to admire, if only because poor atheists have to keep shooting at a moving target – thinking believers, even Catholics, are obliged to officially accept evolution, but only of the physical body, and have to invent “ensoulment” to try and prop up the dogma that God did at least do something somewhere along the line, by inserting a soul at some point, and presumably continuing to sustain it, as if it was not good enough to look after itself.

When religious scientists can freely enquire into nature without having a pre-conceived notion that they are exploring “God’s Universe”, and that at some point he will appear and say “I did it” – then we might be able to take such schizophrenics with a pinch of salt, and just get on with doing the science.

– Reg le Sueur

Muslims, we are told, constitute the most disadvantaged minority group in the UK, and many commentators across the political spectrum feel that it is incumbent on us, the host nation, to do more to help them out of poverty, and bad housing, and into work. And we must engage, much better than we do at present, with disaffected Muslim youth in particular, as they make up around a third of the Muslim population.

Furthermore, we must stop referring to the current wave of terrorism and planned terrorist acts as “Islamic” or “Islamist” or “Muslim” terror, as this only marginalises the alienated even more, and fuels further discontent, not to mention temper tantrums on a seismic scale.

But what few, if any, public figures will come straight out and say is that you cannot engage the unengageable.

Muslims are a sizeable minority in the UK – around 1.6 million. But there are many other groups who, despite retaining their distinctive identities, have eased themselves comfortably into our liberal Western democracy, embraced the best of our values, and, as a consequence, are excelling in just about every field of endeavour. They are highly valued contributors to our country – not a drain on our resources.

The success of these groups – be they Hindu, Sikh, Jew or Chinese – stems directly from the fact that their beliefs do not actively militate against integration (or even engagement with the host nation) in the same intractable way that Islam does.

To get some measure of Islam’s attempts to keep its adherents completely quarantined from the “sins” and the “dangers” of non-Islamic host cultures, I spent the best part of an entire day trawling Islam’s most sophisticated website, **Islamonline.net**, which has the slogan “Allah Almighty knows best”.

The site is renowned for its comprehensive “fatwa bank,” detailing, in question-and-answer format, everything that is *halal* (acceptable) or *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. New fatwas are added each day.

At the end of this sometimes amusing, but mostly depressing and tedious exercise, it became abundantly clear to me that Islam treats its adherents like tremulous, insecure children who cannot be allowed to function without having the *minutiae* of their lives scrutinised by some nit-picking imam, mufti, sheikh or scholar, who then pronounces whether this action or that is *halal* or *haram*.

If the thousands of “ask the imam” questions posed are genuine – and I have no reason to believe they are not – they reflect such a degree of uncertainty, trepidation, fear, guilt, ignorance and paranoia that one is left feeling that Islam is far more of an obsessive-compulsive disorder than a religion.

Hundreds of questions concerning eye-glazingly trivial issues jostle for the attention of the all-male panellists on the site. Here is a typical example: “*Is it permissible [in Islam] for a*

man to remove hair from the chest, back, and between the eyebrows?”

Where else but in Islam does one need to seek religious clarification over an issue as trite as this?

The answer?

Brother, first of all, we’d like to say that we are impressed by your question, which emanates from a thoughtful heart. May Allah Almighty help us all adhere to the principles of this true religion, Islam, and enable us to be among the dwellers of Paradise in the Hereafter, Ameen.

As for your question, Dr Rif’at Fawzi, professor of Shari’ah at Cairo University, states:

There is no evidence from the Qur’an or the Sunnah that forbids cutting short the hair from the chest and back; but the removal of hair from these parts may be considered a form of imitating women, something forbidden according to the hadith: “May Allah’s curse be inflicted on women imitating men and vice versa.” As for women, it is permissible for them to remove hair from these parts because it causes them harm.

As for removing the hair from between the eyebrows, it is lawful, because it is not part of the eyebrows. But as for plucking the eyebrows, it is forbidden and not permissible in Islam, according to the Hadith: “May Allah’s curse be inflicted upon women who pluck their eyebrows, and women hired to do this.”

Questions such as these, and the answers they elicit, are the stuff of pure comedy.

But many of the fatwas dished out stop being amusing when you consider how negatively they are likely to impact on Muslims’ relationships with their non-Islamic hosts.

Let me begin with something as simple as music, which weaves its way in and out of our lives in a myriad ways. When it is music of our own choice it is pleasurable, but when it leaks out of iPods or is piped down the telephone line or into a lift it can be an irritating intrusion. But we tolerate these annoyances, because – for better or worse – that’s what we do.

For Muslims, however, music is generally *haram*, because Imam Abu Haneefah – one of four famous Imams of jurisprudence (80AH-150AH or 699-767 AD) “detested singing and considered it sinful”, according to a piece posted on **Islamicweb.com**. “As for his disciples, they have explicitly confirmed the prohibition of listening to all musical amusements and pastimes, including wind instruments ... all types of tambourines, hand drums ... and even the striking of sticks. They have asserted that such actions constitute disobedience to Allah and that the performer of such action is sinful. They have further stated that it is incumbent upon the Muslim to struggle to avoid listening to such things, even if he were passing by or stationed near them (without any wilful intention). Abu Haneefah’s closest disciple, Abu Yoosuf, stated that if the sound of musical instruments and amusements were heard coming from a house, the house could be entered without permission

How Islam mili interaction anc

of its owners and the noise silenced.”

That passage – dare one say it – would have been music to ears of those fanatics who targeted Bali nightclubs five years ago, killing and maiming hundreds, and those who tried to detonate a car-bomb outside a club in central London in June. These places were targeted *precisely* because of their music and alcohol content, and because men and women were

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE argues that you cannot engage with the unengageable

associating freely with one another.

Last month, Johann Hari, the *Independent* columnist, wrote of first encountering the radical Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir on the streets of East London. “At the Brick Lane Festival – a glorious burst of Hindu and Sufi Muslim music and laughter – they handed out leaflets telling Muslims they should not be present because the event contained ‘alcohol, dancing and free-mixing of sexes’. One Muslim girl snapped, ‘But those are all of my favourite things!’”

To be fair, some Islamic authorities take a less harsh line on music. Here is an “enlightened” view from Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, a senior lecturer and an Islamic scholar at the Islamic Institute of Toronto: “What is commonly known as Western music is associated with sensuality, lust, and greed, all of which are diseases of the soul, so we cannot approve of listening to music with such an association. But if you’re able to single out and isolate music or songs with noble and pure messages and themes that ennoble the soul and spirit, you may listen to them as an occasional outlet provided that this does not distract you from the remembrance of Allah or performing your obligatory duties.”

Another issue that puts Muslims in direct conflict with their host society is alcohol. We know that Muslims are not allowed to drink, but Islamonline makes it clear that they should also have no truck with people who do drink, or with places that serve drink.

Alcohol, whether we like it or not, is at the heart of every aspect of social activity in the West, and, in the UK, hotels, bars, restaurants, clubs, etc, are among the main providers of employment. But, because Muslims are told that it is *haram* to be involved in the serving of alcohol, those of a more pious nature – ie the

Facilitates against and integration

majority – are forced to deny themselves employment in these service industries, as indeed they are in places like supermarkets or off-licences.

This from Dr Sano Koutoub Moustapha, professor of jurisprudence and its principles at the International Islamic University, Malaysia: “Alcohol is considered the mother of all sins and impurities ... All in all, Muslims are not allowed to sell or buy or drink or even facilitate the process of selling or buying or transporting alcohol.”

And from Dr Monzer Kahf, a “prominent” economist and counsellor: “Eating in halal restaurants that sell alcohol is permissible as long as you don’t share the same table with a person who drinks. It is, however, shameful for such restaurants to offer halal meat side by side with alcoholic beverages.”

Similarly, Islamonline makes it clear that it is *haram* for taxi-drivers to transport passengers carrying alcohol, and that, wherever possible, they should avoid transporting people to or from *haram* venues such as bars, casinos, nightclubs and the like.

Muslims are also forbidden to drink non-alcoholic beer and wine. In response to a questioner who asked about these beverages, Islamonline provided this answer: “Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beers and wines are *haram*. Once the beer or the wine is produced, alcohol is extracted from it to make it non-alcoholic. Never is 100 percent of the alcohol removed. The Islamic principle is that if the whole of a thing is *haram*, the part of it is also *haram*.”

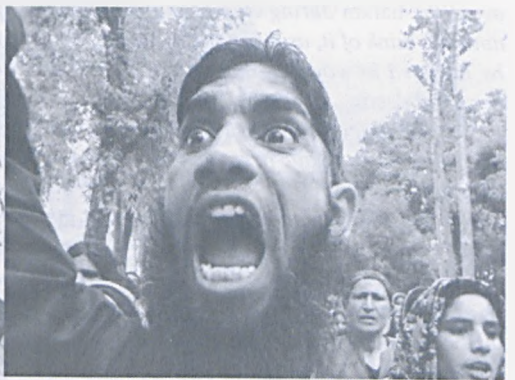
The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, adds this: “Our position is that non-alcoholic beer is not *halal*. Our position is based on the premise that (1) It is drunk as an alternative to something which is *haram*, that is, alcoholic beer, and (2) The culture of wine and beer drinking which the drink entails is non-Islamic and, therefore, *haram*.”

“Therefore, based on the principle of blocking the doors to transgression in Islamic jurisprudence, non-alcoholic beer is *haram*.”

After reading this, a mischievous thought popped into my head. Alcohol might well have prevented the Iraq war. If the drunken imbecile George W Bush had not swopped the demon drink for God – and had done the world an enormous favour by bladdering himself into an early grave – the catastrophic invasion of Iraq would never have occurred, and thousands of Muslim lives would have been saved.

But, as Islamonline insists, “Allah Almighty knows best.”

The banking industry – which employs mil-



He has become the face of Muslim fury: an angry young man whose bushy beard and fiery-eyed scowl take centre stage at nearly every anti-Western demonstration in Indian Kashmir. For months he was known only as “Rage Boy”, but last month Middle-East Online revealed that he is Shakeel Bhat, 31. The man’s face has become so familiar that he’s even inspired “Rage Boy” merchandise, including T-shirts and sweatshirts showing him in full cry. The slogan on one T-shirt reads: “Someone I love blew up a bunch of Infidels and all I received was this wretched, blood-soaked T-Shirt”. One internet blogger juxtaposed his image with that of “Animal”, asking whether Bhat was, in fact, the Muslim world’s answer to the shaggy, shouting, drum-bashing puppet of The Muppets fame. “Whatever I do, I do for God,” said Bhat. “I can’t resist injustice. I protest for all the oppressed Muslims in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan.” Although not a Shi’ite Muslim, he says his inspiration is Iran’s late revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

lions in the West – is another potential source of conflict between religion and employment. While Islam does not frown on Muslims taking a job in a bank, it does stipulate that a Muslim must avoid being involved in any aspect of interest charging.

Here’s a question posed by a Muslim in the US. “My parents have recently heard from an eminent sheikh that one should not even eat in the house of one who works in a bank or is involved in *riba* [bank interest] as this is the equivalent of eating *haram*. As a result of this, for example, my parents have taken to not going to my uncle’s house (a very close family member) as his house is all built on *haram*.”

And here is the answer: “First of all, we’d like to clarify that there’s no doubt that *riba* or interest is *haram*. However, a Muslim is permitted to work in a conventional bank as long as he or she does not prepare, write, sign or be a witness to *riba* contracts. Also, eating in the house of a person who is working in a bank or dealing with *riba* is not prohibited.”

Dr Monzer Kahf, an economist and counsellor added: “There is no doubt that *riba* is one of the gravest of sins... It is worse than adultery; as the Prophet said in an authentic *hadith*. On the other hand, we have to be clear and put every thing in its right perspective. Nowhere in the *Qur’an* or the *Sunnah* or the recorded *fiqh* of all schools of *fiqh* do we find that we are required to boycott a person who deals in *riba*. We are required to keep advising him or her to quit the *haram* occupation.”

That last sentence is repeated time and again in Islamonline. It is used, for example, in answer to a Muslim who was in a quandary over his job as an internet café manager in the US. He was concerned that people were using his computers to enter chat-rooms, and to look at pornography. He was advised to tell his customers not to use chat-rooms or view “objectionable” material, and to throw them out if

they refused. The bottom line was that his job itself was *haram*, and his best solution was to quit it. Islamonline does not like the internet, insisting that it is mainly in the control of “innovators”. Innovation, apparently, is a dirty word in Islam.

The cumulative effect of endless fatwas which declare that this occupation or that is *haram* is that vast areas of employment are effectively put beyond the reach of Muslims, and may go a long way to explain why, of all the minority groups in the UK, Muslims suffer the greatest from unemployment. Muslim leaders, of course, never see it from that perspective, and wrongly attribute this sorry state of affairs to “Islamophobia.”

Add to that the huge number of social strictures placed on young Muslims, and you have a recipe for frustration, fury, jealousy, resentment and hatred.

Which neatly brings me round to the most vexatious subjects in Islam: sex, sexuality and nudity. It’s an issue questioners return to time and again, and the answers given serve only to deepen frustration, ignorance, guilt and confusion – and, of course, reinforce prejudice.

One question, though, that had me laughing out loud was: “Are we allowed to masturbate during Ramadan? Does it break the fast if we do it?” The short answer I would have given, were I a mufti, would be “No, you silly wanker, unless, of course, you happened to swallow your semen.”

The real answer was this: “Ramadan is the month of mercy, forgiveness and seeking protection from the hellfire through various acts of worship. It is a special month in the sense that we are supposed to make the best use of our time to draw closer to Allah the Almighty by doing good deeds and staying away from bad deeds ... that is why a Muslim should not only

(Continued on p10)

avoid the haram during Ramadan, but should not even think of it, as he or she is supposed to be involved in worship and increasing his or her good deeds.

"As far as masturbation is concerned, we are required to avoid it at all times and not only in Ramadan."

Another Ramadan question that amused me was "During fasting I get a very dry throat. Are we allowed to swallow our own spit a little?" The answer was yes, but it was preceded by the inevitable windy guff about the question coming from "a thoughtful heart", when, in truth it had clearly sprung from an empty head.

The masturbation question would, I imagine, have elicited a number of disapproving clucks among the Islamonline's panel of bearded "experts", but I guess the following – "how do I deal with homosexual friends?" – must have blown fuses all over its network. Here's the answer: "First of all, it should be clear that Muslim scholars are in agreement and have reached consensus – based on what has been revealed in the Qur'an and what has been authenticated in the Prophetic Sunnah – on prohibiting both gayness and lesbianism because in each of the two actions there is an assault on the humanity of a person, destruction of the family and a clash with the aims of the Lawgiver, one of which is the establishment of sexual instincts between males and females so as to encourage the institution of marriage."

Dr Muzammil Siddiqi, president of the Fiqh Council of North America, added:

"We should deal with them in the same way we deal with any people who are involved in alcoholics (sic), gambling or adultery. We should have deep repugnance to their acts and we must remind and warn them. Those who insist on this lifestyle consider it legitimate and feel 'gay pride'. We should not associate with them and should not take them as friends. We should certainly avoid those people."

And this from Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the "moderate" Muslim buddy of London Mayor Ken Livingstone. "Muslim jurists hold different opinions concerning the punishment for this abominable practice. Should it be the same as the punishment for fornication, or should both the active and passive participants be put to death? While such punishments may seem cruel, they have been suggested to maintain the purity of the Islamic society and to keep it clean of perverted elements."

When confronted with nudity, or partial nudity, Muslims – who are taught from infants to be deeply ashamed of their naked bodies – are required to avert their gaze. Islamonline says this is virtually impossible in certain circumstances, and advises the faithful to avoid places where one is likely to encounter such "sin".

It bluntly declares "Don't go to the beach. Beaches and amusement parks attract many skimpily dressed people. Try to avoid such places. Instead, visit mountain areas, forests, and so on, which are vast and remote and where not so many people congregate in one

place. Such places are also more enlivening for the spirit. Another alternative to beaches and amusement parks is interesting museums, where you will have plenty of other things to look at than half-naked bodies.

Museums? This puzzles me. Islam's irrational antipathy towards art, and sculpture in particular, goes back centuries. In 1193, the son of Saladin, Al-Aziz Uthman, tried to demolish the Great Pyramids of Giza, Egypt, because they were an affront to Islam. The reason why we can still visit them today is because the task at hand proved so big that he eventually gave up the attempt. He did, however, manage to inflict visible damage to Menkaure's Pyramid, the smallest of the three.

A while back, an attack on statues at a museum in Cairo by a veiled woman screaming, "Infidels, infidels!" shocked the outside world. She had been inspired by Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, who quoted a saying of the prophet Mohammed that sculptors will be among those receiving the harshest punishment on Judgment Day. Al Qaradawi agrees that "Islam prohibits statues and three-dimensional figures of living creatures" and says that "the statues of ancient Egyptians are prohibited."

In the *Brussels Journal* (May 15, 2007) someone writing under the name "Fjordman" said: "As a European, I fear for the future of the Louvre in Paris, the National Gallery in London, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. There is every reason to believe that they will end up the same way as the Bamiyan Buddhas. Although it may not happen today, tomorrow or even the day after tomorrow, sooner or later, pious Muslims will burn these works of art, and doubtless consider it their sacred duty.

"Muslim immigration now threatens many of the masterworks of the Western tradition of art – the most inventive and groundbreaking mankind has ever seen – with annihilation. History will never forgive us for our cowardice and stupidity if we allow these treasures to be destroyed just because we think history is boring or don't want to say anything unfashionable about other cultures.

"The official reason given by Muslims for why non-Muslims are not allowed to visit the cities of Mecca and Medina is because they might damage or destroy the Islamic holy sites. But since Muslims have a proven track record of more than a thousand years, from Malaysia to Armenia, of destroying non-Muslim places of worship or works of art, perhaps we should then, in return, be entitled to keep Muslims permanently away from our cultural treasures?

Back to nudity. Islamonline also sounds a warning about visiting parks. "This doesn't mean never taking the kids out to enjoy the slides and see-saws or having barbecues there. It does mean, perhaps, having activities on days that are cooler, or at times when the sun is not as hot and intense. This way, the prime

Muslims vs

time for sunbathing has passed, and most people either leave or feel cool enough to put some more clothes on."

Here I must declare an interest. On sunny summer days, whenever I have some leisure time, I like nothing better than to hit Brighton's main nudist beach. I find it relaxing and pleasurable – except, occasionally, on those days when groups of Muslim youth "accidentally" discover the secluded area, and stand gawping and making deprecatory remarks about the sun-bathers, who, by and large, ignore their hostile stares, or their childish giggles. Occasionally an irate naturist, usually a woman, will tell them to "fuck off".

Ex-Muslim Abul Kasem writes prolifically about Islam, sex and sexuality. In one essay posted on the internet, he sets out "to expose the hypocrisy, double standard, unfairness, absurdity and sheer irrationality of Islam when it comes to sex." He also examines the barbaric rules that Islam inflicts on innocent people for having a simple sexually satisfying relationship whether married or not.

"If you ever thought that Allah gave you sexual organs for your use as per your desire, then perish that thought. From birth to death, from adulthood to old age, from house to desert, every aspect of the use of your very own private part is controlled by innumerable, mindless, cruel and oftentimes utterly despicable Islamic rules written in the *Shari'a*, the so-called divine laws of Allah."

The late Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's spiritual leader, introduced the death penalty for homosexuality, but bizarrely saw nothing wrong in a man sodomising a very young female, even an infant. This is one of his fatwas. "A man can marry a girl younger than nine years of age, even if the girl is still a baby being breastfed. A man, however, is prohibited from having intercourse with a girl younger than nine, but other sexual acts such as foreplay, rubbing, kissing and sodomy are allowed. A man having intercourse with a girl younger than nine years of age has not committed a crime, but only an infraction, if the girl is not permanently damaged. If the girl, however, is permanently damaged, the man must provide for her all her life. But this girl will not count as one of the man's four permanent wives. He also is not permitted to marry the girl's sister."

Khomeini also wrote in his book *Tahrirolvasyleh* (fourth volume, Darol Elm, Gom, Iran, 1990): "A man can have sex with animals such as sheep, cows, camels and so on. However, he should kill the animal after he has his orgasm. He should not sell the meat to the people in his own village; however, selling the meat to the next-door village should be fine."

The oddest question on the site – and one

vs infidels

which, to my mind, best illustrates how deeply mired Islam is in superstitious bilge – came from someone called Nancy in Egypt, wanting to know whether it was possible for a man to marry a Jinni.

Never having come across a Jinni (except in fairy-tales), this question pulled me up short. But thanks to a fatwa issued by Sheikh M S Al-Munajjid, a “prominent” Saudi Muslim lecturer and author, I was soon to be enlightened.

“Allah Almighty has created certain creatures, some of them are known to us and some of them are not ...

The Qur’an and Sunnah indicate that Jinn exist, and that there is a purpose for their existence in this life, which is to worship Allah Alone with no partner or associate. Allah Almighty says: ‘And I (Allah) created not the jinns and humans, except they should worship Me (Alone).’ (Adh-Dhariyat: 56)

Scholars are in disagreement over the difference between Jinn and demons. Some of them say that the word Jinn goes far to encompass the Jinn as well as the demons. The word also includes believing and unbelieving Jinn.

“The world of the Jinn is an independent and separate world with its own distinct nature and features that are hidden from the world of humans. Jinns and humans have things in common, such as the ability to understand and choose between good and evil. The word Jinn comes from the Arabic root meaning ‘hidden from sight’.

Allah has created different types of Jinn. Among them are some who can take on different forms such as dogs and snakes; some who are like flying winds with wings; and some who can travel and rest.

“Every individual among the sons of Adam has a Jinn who has been appointed to be his constant companion.

“The Jinn live where we do live on this earth. They are mostly to be found in ruins and unclean places like bathrooms, dunghills, garbage dumps and graveyards. Hence the Prophet taught us to take precautions when entering such places.

“Some Jinns are Muslims and some are non-Muslims.

“Saying Bismillah (in the Name of Allah) before entering one’s home, eating or drinking, and having intercourse will keep Satan from entering the house or partaking with a person in his food, drink and sexual activity. Similarly, mentioning the name of Allah before entering the toilet or taking off one’s clothes will prevent the Jinn from seeing a person in a state of undress, or harming him.”

Getting to the nub of the question, the Sheikh says jurists define marriage as “a contract that makes it lawful for a man to make love to a woman without there being a lawful prohibition to this marriage.” A lawful prohi-



bition here refers to marriage to another man or to a hermaphrodite, a polytheist woman, a closely related woman, or a female Jinn (Jinni).

Marrying a Jinni “may result in bringing forth a child having Jinn characteristics”, which is a good reason for not permitting such a union, he added. Another “expert” pointed out that, because Jinn were essentially shape-changers, they might conceivably also change sex, so a man marrying a Jinni risks finding himself in an illicit union with a male, should the Jinni suddenly wake up one day brandishing a penis.

If Islamonline and sites like it have any value at all, it is to offer proof to us infidels that Islam is not merely out of step with civilised Western values – it is out of step by centuries.

If all the time spent by Islamic professors and Imams and sheikhs and mufti mulling over trivia like eyebrow plucking and masturbation and Jinn, and how to avoid facing Mecca when taking a dump on the moon, were put to better use, the Islamic world would not be wallowing, as it does now, in a morass of ignorance and stupidity, violence and sectarianism. It is nothing short of tragic that the pinnacle of the Islamic world’s technological achievements in the 21st century are suicide bomber belts and bicycles designed to hide the lowers portions of women.

To dignify such a pitiful, pathological, obsessive religion with respect, and to make efforts to accommodate its never-ending demands, is to invite catastrophe. Furthermore, it does a terrible disservice to the many thousands of Muslims who would like nothing better than for us to help them exit Islam and enter the *real* world, where interminable whining and periodic bouts of rage are indulged in only by spoiled sprogs and spotty adolescents, who soon get the message that if they don’t stop grizzling we’ll



What could be more natural than children playing naked on a nudist beach? Or more unnatural than this ludicrous obscenity of a swimming costume designed for Muslim women?

soon give them something to grizzle about.

But give Islam an inch, and you can be certain it will seize the whole nine yards, as Ophelia Benson, of the website Butterflies and Wheels, made clear in this eloquent and passionate paragraph written after the latest tantrums thrown by infantile flag- and effigy-burning Islamaniacs when Salman Rushdie was knighted:

“Along with not giving them an inch it’s crucial that we keep explaining to them and to the fans of inch-giving why we are not giving them an inch and why they have no right to an inch and why they have no legitimate grievance about their non-receipt of an inch. We have to keep explaining loudly and softly, briefly and at length, rudely and politely, and always lucidly. We have to keep on and on and on doing it until they get the point. ‘No inch is forthcoming because you have no, *repeat no*, legitimate claim to an inch. Now go away.’”

The Christian Bible tells us quite a bit about heaven. Recently, several books have appeared on the subject, telling us what heaven is and is not like.¹ In this article, I shall focus on a discussion by Richard Swinburne, and some passages from the Bible, and argue that the conception of heaven contained therein is incoherent. That is, I want to show that these beliefs cannot all be true together, hence they make this concept of heaven incoherent.

First, the inconsistent beliefs. The first belief that Christians entertain about heaven is that once we are in paradise all of our wants will be satisfied.² Swinburne says "*Heaven is a place where people enjoy eternally a supremely worthwhile happiness.... Basically a man's happiness consists in doing what he wants to be doing and having things happen that he wants to have happen.*"³

Again, "*A man will only be happy if he has no conflicting wants; if he is doing what he wants to be doing and wants in no way to be doing anything else.*"

Thus we will be perfectly happy in heaven in that all our wants will be met. The second belief that Christians entertain about heaven is that they will not be the only person there, but that there will be an indefinite number of people there, and we will be reunited with our loved ones (presuming they manage to go to heaven also).⁴ Swinburne says "*According to Christian tradition heaven will also comprise friendship with good finite beings, including those who have been our companions on earth.*"⁵

I maintain that these two beliefs lead to an inconsistency. The inconsistency is based on the idea that rational people will inevitably have some conflicting wants, thus everyone cannot have all of their wants met. Consider the following case: Joe DiMaggio was famously married to Marilyn Monroe, and he had exclusive access to her love and affection. Eventually, they became divorced. Later, Arthur Miller married Marilyn Monroe, and he had exclusive access to her love and affection. They also got divorced. Now suppose that Joe DiMaggio, Arthur Miller, and Marilyn Monroe are all saved, and all go to heaven. In such a situation it would be rational and natural for Joe DiMaggio to want to be reunited with his loved ones. That would no doubt include a rational desire to be reunited with Marilyn Monroe, his former wife.⁶ This want will be a want to have exclusive access to Marilyn's full love and affection for eternity. However, Arthur Miller will rationally want the same thing. Now Joltin' Joe and Artie cannot both have exclusive access to Marilyn's love and affection for all of eternity.⁷ Therefore, Joe and Arthur cannot both have their rational wants met, even in paradise. Since anyone with a little imagination can multiply such examples indefinitely, I conclude that the concept of a heaven or paradise where everyone's rational wants are met is incoherent.

I will now consider various ways that one might try to wriggle out of this inconsistency. First, it might be said that Marilyn Monroe should decide which husband she wants. But that will still leave us with either Joe or Arthur with an unsatisfied want.

Second, it might be suggested that God could so arrange things that this would not happen. Maybe he could produce a Marilyn *doppelgänger*, or a twin Marilyn. In fact, if anyone else wanted Marilyn, God could produce several simulacra of the diva. The trouble with this suggestion is that it is rational for both Joe and Arthur to want and love the original Marilyn, and not to want an exactly similar duplicate Marilyn.⁸ This seems contrary to what really loving someone involves.

A third suggestion is that an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God could arrange our psyches so it is not the case that two people ever want the same thing exclusively when both cannot have it. The world of paradise would be so arranged by God that people never had conflicting wants, and never wanted the same thing when this was impossible to attain.

Now this sounds like a very good world indeed. However, I am not sure that many Christians would like the idea that God causes all or some of our rational wants. This seems to give God too much control and authority over how we should live our lives. By causing us to have and not have certain rational wants God seems to be too paternalistic.

Another suggestion is that maybe we would be all-knowing in heaven so we can know what to want and what not to want so that no two people would ever have conflicting wants. This would make us perfect beings, like God himself. And that is exactly the trouble. I do not think that Christians who believe that we would be perfect human beings in paradise, also believe that we would be gods, or that we would share one of God's properties. I am quite certain that no one knows what a perfect human being is, but whatever it may be, it is not one that can be all-knowing.⁹

Of course, we could take a hard line and say that everyone will have to learn to get along in heaven, otherwise God will kick them out. But this does little to satisfy both wants when both wants cannot be satisfied. It only says that we are vicious people if our wants continue to conflict with the wants of others. It does not remove the incoherence.

Ben DeVan has suggested the possibility that what we mean by a "rational want" is not what a rational want will be in heaven. In heaven everything will be all right because there will be a new sense of "want" that we cannot now understand.

This is the old saw that when in trouble say that it is beyond our understanding. I agree that we really do not know what we are talking about when we say what heaven will be like, but why all the books telling us what heaven is like? We may not be able to say what heaven is like or make any sense out of it. It seems to follow that we should be silent. But people are not going to be silent about heaven, so they are going to have to use language that we can understand. If not, heaven-mongers are going to have to admit that we cannot have any idea what we are talking about.

Tom Wedsworth has called my attention to a biblical passage that has some affinity to the case I gave. It says that there will be no marriages in heaven, and that we will all be (like) angels.¹⁰ I

An incoherent con

take this at least to mean that people who are married on earth will not have a marriage relationship in heaven. Ben DeVan has told me that, instead of marriage, we will have a much more intimate relationship with everyone in heaven, thus making it a true paradise.

THOMAS W SMYTHE, of the Department of Philosophy/English at North Carolina Central University, turns his eyes towards heaven

Everyone will love everyone equally. Of course, we cannot imagine this, nor do we know what it is like, but we are reassured that everyone will love everyone else and everyone will be happy. There will be no preferential treatment in heaven.

This seems incompatible with the whole concept of the good life here on earth. We marry for a close, intimate relationship, and a lifetime companionship with one person. We give preferential treatment to our family members and the ones we love. For God to make us give this up for "something better" that we cannot now understand, strikes me as untoward in the extreme. A close, intimate, and meaningful relationship with one other person, or family member, is much richer, and the same deep, intimate relationship cannot be had with billions of people. It does not even make sense. This is a twisted utilitarian notion of heaven where everyone should be loved and benefited equally by everyone else. One may not want to be in any such "better situation" imposed by a divine being. One can love one's wife and family more than any other people, and if it is not like this in heaven, and we are like "angels" that do not prefer our wife and family to anyone else, then heaven is not worth wanting.

As against this, someone may argue that rationality involves an agent preferring to do what is best, and to so amend their desires as to seek what is best. It follows that if someone now does not desire a marriageless state, that does not entail anything about what it would be right for a person to desire after death. This does not show that marriage will be the best state in heaven where we have very different desires and occupations.

This argument presupposes that there is a preferable and coherent conception of heaven without marriage, and that this would be better for us whether we now like it or not. It presupposes that our current desires could be replaced by better ones, even though our present wants are rational. The burden of proof is on the heaven-monger. Exactly how is it supposed to be better for someone not to love their wife and family more than any other people?

Let me pause here at the tail-end of this paper to ponder what I have and have not shown. I have shown that to conceive of heaven as a place where all our desires are met, as Richard



concept of heaven

Swinburne and others do, leads to incoherence because of the fact that people have wants that conflict in the sense that they cannot all be satisfied. One can quibble about my examples, but other examples are easily forthcoming. What I have not shown is that this is the only way to make heaven desirable. I cannot say what makes heaven desirable other than satisfying human wants. However, I do think that it is possible to reconceive what it is that makes heaven preferable to the alternatives. We can go on reconceiving and reinterpreting forever. I do not think that people can agree on what constitutes a paradise or ideal order. But I cannot defend that here.¹¹

References:

1 Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, (Tyndale Publishing House, Inc., 2004); Harry Blamires, *Knowing the Truth About Heaven and Hell*, (Servant, 1988); Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Ch. 11, (InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 257-279; Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Hearts Deepest Longing*, 2nd edition, (Ignatius Press, 1989); Peter Kreeft, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven*, 2nd edition, (Ignatius Press, 1989); C S Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Ch 10, (Harper Collins, 1940); Jerry Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, (N.: Oxford University Press, 2002). I do not wish to critique the extant literature. I only cite some of it to give evidence of the popularity of writings on heaven. I want to point to just a couple of problems.

2 Psalms 145:4 says "Take delight in your Lord, and he

will give you the desires of your heart". Psalms 145: 16 says "Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing". Finally, Psalms 145: 19 says "He fulfills the desire of all who fear him, he also knowest their cry, and saves them".

3 Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell", in David Shatz, ed., *Philosophy and Faith: A Philosophy of Religion Reader*, (McGraw-Hill, 2002), pp. 299-305.

4 There is not much explicitly about this belief that one can be reunited with their loved ones in heaven in scriptures. In Hebrews 11:35 it says "Women received their dead by resurrection; but other (men) were tortured because they will not accept release by some ransom, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection". The phrase about a woman receiving her dead can mean her family members or loved ones. From this, it is reasonable to believe that it is not restricted to a single gender.

In addition, there is plenty of scriptural evidence that people are often saved, and presumably such people can be reunited with their family members who are saved.

5 Swinburne, *op cit*, p. 301.

6 For a good discussion of what it takes for wants to be rational, one can consult Richard B Brandt, *The Theory of the Good and the Right*, especially Chapters 7 and 8 (Prometheus Books, 1998). Following Brandt, I shall take it as an approximation that a desire is "rational" when it survives maximal criticism by facts and logic. An agent has a "rational desire" when they would have a desire to have that desire taking into account all of the relevant information in their specific situation. That is, the agent is cognitively mature, fully informed, logically consistent, and prefers that particular want, all things considered.

7 I am assuming the "love and affection" Joe and Arthur have toward Marilyn is not necessarily "carnal desire", although Marilyn no doubt was a sex symbol; thus the disadvantage of the example. It is worth noting that *eros* need not mean sexual or carnal desire, although it does indicate a physical attraction that flares up quickly, and is passionate.

It also indicates wanting to know more and share more, to have a soul-mate. It need not be erotic. So the reader need not assume there is sex in heaven.

8 See Robert Kraut, "Love De Re", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, ed. by Peter French, et. al., Vol. X, 1986, pp. 399-412, who argues that loving someone X entails not wanting any exactly similar X, but wanting the unique individual X as such. Loving X entails regarding X as irreplaceable and non-substitutable.

9 Perhaps Jesus was a perfect human being, and was also the most perfect being possible. We could be morally perfect, in the sense of being without sin. However, it is not clear to me that a morally perfect being could be less than all-knowing. Being all-knowing is not sufficient to make us divine, but it would share one attribute of God, and this is impossible for us.

10 (Matthew 22:23-30) "On that day Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came up to him and asked him: 'Teacher, Moses said, 'If any man dies without having children, his brother must take his wife in marriage and raise up offspring for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and deceased, and, not having offspring, he left his wife for his brother. It went on the same way also with the second and the third, until through all seven. Last of all the woman died. Consequently, in the resurrection, to which of the seven will she be a wife? For they all got her.'" In reply Jesus said to them: "YOU are mistaken, because YOU know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God; for in the resurrection neither do men marry nor are women given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven".

11 William P Alston has told me in correspondence that he thinks it is misleading to conceive of heaven as a "place". It is more like a condition that constitutes a fulfillment of God's plan for us. But this needs to be spelled out with much more care. I would like to thank William Hasker for some helpful comments. It has not been my intention in this paper to provide a systematic discussion of the tradition of the beliefs about heaven.

Socialism

IN his letter (*Points of View*, July) Diesel Balaam writes "Socialism is not a 'science': it is a flawed 19th-century guesswork overlaid with a discredited pipe dream." But he is wrong about that.

Socialism has been identified with Labour and Communism as morality has been identified with religion, but these associations are not inseparable; they came about through social/historical events and developments over centuries.

Socialism is classless and older than urban civilisation. It is the strong desire for reform that permeates all societies everywhere. It is a movement against inhumanity, corruption, injustice from whatever quarter: governments, armies, religions, bureaucracy, commerce, criminals, dictators, the avaricious, the unscrupulous, and other oppressive elements. It is for the wellbeing of all peoples and all life, everywhere, and has no political allegiances, though many parties claim it for their own as religions claim morality exclusively, though it existed before institutionalised religion. Morality and socialism belong in the social sphere and are over and above all religions, races, nations, classes, parties. They are natural partners, complements of a fair society.

Socialism, or whatever it may be called, has existed and will exist, woven into the fabric of all societies, institutions and workplaces as a broad civilising movement, especially where people suffer injustice, violence, exploitation, deprivation and wretchedness;

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where societies are low in morale and moral awareness. It is the social conscience, the sense of justice, truth and harmony.

W K HARPER
Stoke-on-Trent

GRAHAM Livingstone suggests that Respect woos "moderate Muslims" (*Points of View*, July 2007). "Moderate" is an epithet that concerns politics, not religion (where the word would be "mainstream"), and it is political Islam specifically (not "Muslims" in general) that the SWP allied with. It is only within this context of the Islamic right that their main allies are "moderate", in that they advocate political rather than violent jihad in pursuit of *shari'a* law.

Where does one begin then with left-wing criticism of this right-left alliance? The SWP could have appealed to fellow left-wing Muslims (or even "mainstream" religious Muslims), but instead sought out the Muslim Association of Britain, an elitist group which shares the values of the Muslim Brotherhood – the same Brotherhood that was once described by deceased SWP guru Tony Cliff as "clerical-fascist". MAB believe in *shari'a*, including the death penalty for apostates. Understandably, the handful of SWP members from a Muslim background did not stay around long – though the alliance of course presented no such problems for white unbelievers and paper Anglicans. During the brutal bombardment of Iraq in 1991, the British

left demonstrated, and heard comrades from the left in the Middle East speak from the platform; with most of the Arab world complicit in the assault, the Islamic right was nowhere to be seen.

How things have changed. It is not just that we are now led in prayer from the protest platform, shouting out the greatness of God; nor have Middle Eastern leftists just been excluded in case they give offence to the SWP's new allies on the Islamic right. At a recent NUS conference the SWP's student wing actually walked out when Houzan Mahmoud, a Marxist feminist Iraqi, took the stage! Her sin is that she is a left-wing Muslim who resists both the occupation and the rise of violent Islamism. Even Tariq Ali was booed by the Islamic right at the massive anti-war demonstration in 2003.

The new politics is represented by people like Dr Mohammed Naseem – a member of Respect's National Council, and Respect parliamentary candidate for Birmingham Perry Barr in 2005. Naseem was far and away the party's biggest donor in the general election, and is also an executive member of the Islamic Party of Britain – a party that would impose the death penalty for witnessed acts of homosexuality. Gay rights are now a "shibboleth". Then there is Yvonne Ridley, right-wing journalist now a supporter of hostage beheading videos and private schools. And anti-abortion MP George Galloway, who – like Ronald Reagan before him – compared the butchers of Muslim trade unionists and

(Continued on p14)

women to the French resistance.

This alliance between the middle-class white left and the middle-class Islamic right remains baffling. The patronising take-me-to-your-leader element has always been there; and groups like MAB have always had money.

However, producing placards and funding full-timers to hijack the groundswell of anti-war feeling does not make the SWP "the left". The real left may be found among the people that these political hobbyists have so shamefully betrayed.

PETER MCKENNA
Liverpool

Parody?

NO reasonable person could read Jack Hastie's article and recognize that his capitalizing of adjectives and pronouns was intended to be parody. Despite his commendable motivations, I reiterate that the practice is indefensible. To the reader who accused me of objecting to the capitalizing of "God" as a proper name, perhaps his/her issue of the *Freethinker* was not identical with the one I received, which contained nothing of the sort.

On the issue of "a" and "an", when educated persons can dispute my position, I concede that the matter is open to interpretation.

As for Mr Hastie's continued belief that "in the hands of its most rigorous practitioners [parapsychology's] methods are valid", that is correct. What he apparently does not realize is that all persons who have used rigorous, valid methods have achieved only negative results or statistically insignificant results. All seemingly plausible claims of positive results have been evaluated by CSICOP and found to be based on flawed methodology, experimenter bias, and incompetent statistical interpretations. I refer him to articles on the subject in *Skeptical Inquirer*. Or he could check pages 164-169 of *The Disinformation Cycle* (Booksurge, 2006). If Mr Hastie was making a point that "escaped" me, or that I "didn't understand," then it was not very well made.

WILLIAM HARWOOD
Canada

Repentance

IN last month's *Points of View*, John Eoin Douglas asks on what grounds the RC Church will deny the sacraments to Catholic politicians who, having refused to vote against abortion, repent in the confessional, while showing leniency to serial murderers and priestly paedophiles.

The answer is that, in order to escape excommunication, the penitent must have "a firm purpose of amendment". Thus, the politicians fail to qualify unless they are willing to promise to vote the other way next time a vote is taken on the same issue. Far be it from me to defend the Church, but at least it is consistent on that score.

As for Fiona Weir's objection to "an humiliation" while accepting "an hotel", that really

is inconsistent. Maybe it is simply because she is more used to seeing "an hotel" than the comparatively unusual "an humiliation". Thinking back to my example ("a humanist" but "an humiliation"), perhaps a more convincing one would have been "a history" but "an historian".

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Sacred bull

SHAMBO the "sacred bull" makes a pathetic sight in your photograph (*Freethinker* June 2007). He stares at us with his painted forehead, something stuck on each ear and a garland round his neck. He would normally be grazing with the rest of the herd, "But he does not appear lonely," said Swami Suryananda. "He is adapting to his new lifestyle as an international superstar."

We have only the Swami's opinion about how Shambo feels and how successfully he is "adapting" to his "new lifestyle as an international superstar" – whatever that means to a bull.

Cattle are herd animals. Sticking a garland on the beast and fantasizing about it being "sacred" are no substitute for its own kind. Whether Shambo's feelings, if they could be known, would make any difference, I doubt. This is about religious belief and animal welfare isn't in with a chance. One faith venerates a bull as sacred, another cuts its throat and lets the blood drain to provide meat acceptable to their faith. Yet another religion declares dogs to be "unclean".

The idyllic, animal loving, menagerie around Shambo, and the sweetness and light of his guardians, wasn't quite the picture presented by his human neighbours on S4C. These farmers spoke of being frightened by being surrounded by a crowd of Shambo's supporters, being forced off the road and being unable to sleep because of devotees of the bull driving past at all hours. Sometimes they were woken by people who were lost and wanted to know where to find Shambo. A nearby farm has become unsellable as a result of the furore.

There are farming families who had to slaughter herds of cattle, including children's pets, as a result of the BSE policy. Shambo has tested positive for TB. He has to piss and he has to crap and he has to breathe and the inherent dangers from disposing of the waste products of his body will be increased by the crowds now looking for the Swami, the bull and the temple.

Meanwhile, I read in a *New Scientist* report (June 16), that Sudipta Seal, at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, reported that drops containing chemicals, "commonly used to polish glass and remove grease" were being tested on the eyes of rats and rabbits for toxicity before being used as a catalyst to "remove grime from oven walls."

This was reported in a short item as if "dripping oven cleaner into the eye" of sentient animals was so routine as not to merit a reaction. The researchers discovered, by chance, that the same chemical might be helpful in treating glaucoma.

Shame the rats and rabbits are not sacred to some religion. Stick a religious label on something and the rules change and, whatever the Swami and his friends may think, not necessarily for the benefit of the animals.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Poles apart

THE Editor is "sceptical" (July *Freethinker*, page 2) about claims that the Catholic Church in the UK is experiencing an influx of young Polish immigrants. It does not square with his experience. Those he has spoken to do not seek to hide their disdain for the Catholic Church.

Where does he meet these young Poles? Mainly, we may presume, in the Brighton gay bars and cruising areas that he frequents, and perhaps also the sex-shop where he works. Hardly the places to find a representative sample, one might think!

Had he gone instead to the huge former Methodist Church at Ealing Broadway, now dedicated to Our Lady Mother of the Church, he would find a vibrant congregation of Polish Catholics of all ages, many of them young, served by a staff of six clergy, with several thousand attending Mass each Sunday. If all the paid-up, card-carrying atheists, humanists and secularists in Britain were gathered together in one place, they would be dwarfed in number by the practising Catholics in just one London Borough. Galling, isn't it?

DAN O'HARA
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

Editor replies: *It appears that, in re-embracing the irrational, Dan O'Hara has lost his ability to understand simple English. Nowhere did I claim that I was sceptical about the Catholic Church in the UK experiencing an influx of young Poles – I said I was sceptical about "the vast number of fresh recruits they are claiming" – an altogether different proposition.*

Furthermore, if there was a Turner prize for drawing the wrong conclusions, Mr O'Hara would be a top candidate for an exhibition at the Tate Modern. His suggestion that people who reject faith are only to be found in "gay bars, cruising grounds and sex shops" is as ludicrous as it is offensive, and has a distinctly unpleasant whiff of homophobia about it.

But, hey, bigotry and vindictiveness go with the territory when one goes paddling with the pious and the puritanical.

Just for the record, I very rarely frequent bars of any sort – and, thanks to the smoking ban in public places which has been in place since July, there is now more chance of finding me in a mosque or a synagogue than

in a pub or club.

Lastly, having been in just three consecutive long-term relationships over the past 40 years, I don't feel the need to frequent cruising grounds either.

Galling, isn't it?

To catch a clergyman

IN reply to Dan O'Hara (*Points of View*, July), I hardly think my daughter was "even dimly" concerned about a concept as arcane as "the sacramental nature of the marriage vows". She just wanted her special day with her friends around her. When I described her as "not a fully paid-up atheist" all I meant to imply was that, like most young people, she hadn't devoted much systematic thought to a subject whose practical significance is not obvious to her.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

Jerusalem

THE programme on BBC4 on 8th July was the latest flyer pushing *Jerusalem* as the anthem to be used at sporting events for contests involving an England team. Blake's words are completely unacceptable to atheists. The answer to the question posed in the first verse is "no". The line "Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand" can only mean that a theocracy is to be enforced by violence.

As a BHA celebrant I was asked to take a non-religious wedding ceremony but the couple wanted *Jerusalem* sung by all. I demurred and so was dropped by them.

Both the NSS and the BHA should be putting the case against the adoption of this song to represent England at every opportunity.

ROBERT TEE
W Yorks

God's wrath

THE recent floods in England were a sign of God's displeasure, according to the Bishop of Carlisle, who obviously has a hot line to God, as nobody else was informed.

Mainly, he told us, God was displeased with us because of our tolerance of homosexuals. So the homes that were flooded must have belonged to homosexuals. This gives us a good reason to celebrate and not to award any compensation or offer help to those who have suffered as a result of God's displeasure. To do otherwise would be to frustrate God's will.

My warning to you – not the Bishop's – is, don't share your home with a homosexual if you want to keep your feet dry.

FABIAN ACKER
London

I READ that the Bishops of Liverpool and Carlisle are convinced the recent flooding was Gods punishment for our sinful ways.

The mind boggles at the heinous activities the residents of Hall Bar must have been up to. Are we to assume that those of us that avoided the floods are in Gods good books?

This seems a bit strange for readers of this

journal with of course the one exception. Or is it perhaps that the Bishops are in the wrong institution.

ALAN WATMORE
Gwynedd

Homoeopathy

C A M Aitchison (*Points of View*, July) falls into the trap of equating qualifications with credibility when he refers to the credentials of homoeopaths. I am reminded of young earth creationists with geology PhDs, the "intelligent design" guru Michael Behe, a biochemist, or Dr Gerardus Bouw, the PhD astronomer who thinks the earth is motionless at the centre of the universe.

Having a string of letters after one's name is helpful but does not completely immunise one from crackpottery. However, when there is a clear consensus in the academic community that a particular belief is bollocks, with a minority of adherents consistently unable to produce enough evidence to change the consensus, then the odds are that the belief really is bollocks.

Now, without wishing to get drawn into the relative merits of the various forms of alternative medicines on offer, which range from the reasonable (herbalism) to the completely barking (reflexology), I will state that homoeopathy is definitely at the barking end of the spectrum.

There is a conspicuous absence of quality and replicable studies demonstrating its efficacy (and I mean "quality and replicable", as opposed to the flawed and unrepeatable efforts so far conjured up). But this is to be expected as preparations that contain absolutely no active ingredient whatsoever can hardly be expected to have any effect beyond placebo. And I should know because I have a PhD in chemistry, so there.

DR STEPHEN MORETON
BSc, PhD, CChem, MRSC
Warrington

The Regensburg Row

ALLOW me a comment on Professor Radford's piece (*Freethinker*, June) on the Pope's speech at Regensburg last year, a speech which elicited the usual woofings and threatenings from Muslims – a reaction which (sadly) had the effect of getting some kind of "apology" from the Pope.

Contrary to Prof Radford's assertion, the Pope's reference to Manual II Paleologus was not something which was extraneous to the speech. Indeed, the Pope described the Emperor as "erudite" and ended with yet another favourable reference to him. The Emperor's point was the Pope's point: that Islam condones forcible conversion. Your readers may get access to my more exhaustive thoughts on this matter on the Social Affairs Unit website.

My main concern, though, is with Professor Radford's sad and defeatist conclusion – offered, perhaps, as a jokey comment, but not really very funny. He invites public figures to

avoid rows with and threats from Muslims by urging them not to "mention" Mohammed. Perhaps, then we should offer no comment on the most recent shriekings from that quarter, ie those connected with Sir Salman Rushdie: HUSH! Or with the cold-blooded "honour" (honour?!) murder of a daughter by her father: HUSH! Or with the poll which found that 25 percent of British Muslims (that is 500,000 people) believe that the British Government carried out the London bombings: MORE HUSH!

Is Professor Radford scared? Or is it that "freethinking" atheists are so sure of the deep silliness of all religions that they cannot comprehend, or are just not interested in, the view that there are significant differences between them? Whichever, not much "free" in the "thinking" about such matters.

DR JON GOWER DAVIES
Newcastle

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

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, September 4, 7.30 pm. Michael Irwin: *33 Years of Work at the UN*.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information and programme: 01494 771851.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

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

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

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

Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings every second Wednesday of the month (except July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, September 6, 8pm. Dr Michael Kehr: *Reminiscences of a GP*.

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009.

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

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

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com.

Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk and Fens. Tel: 07811870215.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Howard Kimberley 01982 551736

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, August 1, 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

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. Monthly programmes on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or e-mail edward@egwinnell.orangehome.co.uk

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

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

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

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

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

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