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# The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

## Another devout Christian ditches his delusions

Leading US journalist  
finally discovers that religion  
poisons everything

AS A deeply committed Christian, journalist William Lobdell wanted nothing more than to report on religious affairs for *The Los Angeles Times*. He “wanted to report objectively and respectfully about how belief shapes people’s lives”, and believed that along the way “my own faith would grow deeper and sturdier”.

After years of lobbying for the job he most wanted, he was finally made a religious columnist. But in the eight years that followed, “something very different happened”, and earlier this year, in a lengthy piece in *The LA Times*, Lobdell explained how he finally came to ditch his religious beliefs.

Lobdell became a “born-again” Christian at the age of 28.

“I began praying each morning and night. During those quiet times, I mostly listened for God’s voice. And I thought I sensed a plan he had for me: to write about religion for *The LA Times* and bring light into the newsroom, if only by my stories and example.

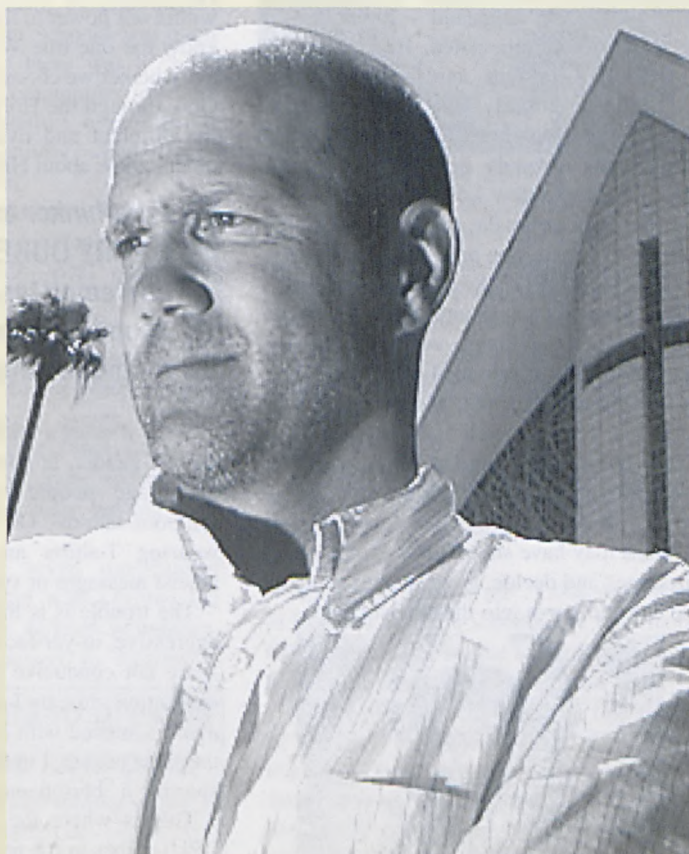
“My desire to be a religion reporter grew as I read stories about faith in the mainstream media. Spiritual people often appeared as nuts or simpletons.

“In one of the most famous examples, the *Washington Post* ran a news story in 1993 that referred to evangelical Christians as ‘largely poor, uneducated and easy to command’.

“Another maddening trend was that homosexuality and abortion debates dominated media coverage, as if those were the only topics that mattered to Christians,” Lobdell said.

In 1998 *The LA Times* appointed Lobdell to write “Getting Religion”, a weekly column about faith in Orange County.

“I felt like all the tumblers of my life had clicked. I had a



William Lobdell

strong marriage, great kids and a new column. I attributed it all to God’s grace.

“First as a columnist and then as a reporter, I never had a shortage of topics. I wrote about an elderly church organist who became a spiritual mentor to the man who tried to rape, rob and kill her. About the Orthodox Jewish mother who developed a line of modest clothing for Barbie dolls. About the hardy group of Mormons who rode covered wagons 800 miles from Salt Lake City to San Bernardino, replicating their ancestors’ journey to Southern California.

“Meanwhile, Roman Catholicism, with its low-key evangelism and deep ritual, increasingly appealed to me. I loved its long history and loving embrace of liberals and conservatives, immigrants and the established, the rich and poor.

“My wife was raised in the Catholic Church and had wanted me to join for years. I signed up for year-long conversion classes at a Newport Beach parish that would end with an Easter eve ceremony ushering newcomers into the church.”

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WAY back in the middle of the last century, I strongly advised a friend not to get tattooed. I had no objections to tattoos as such, and actually thought them rather cool. But in this instance Gavin wanted to declare his everlasting commitment to Susan in the form of an inked bicep linking their names. I insisted that a period of cool reflection was needed – if not a formal engagement to the love of his life – before he poodled off to the local parlour.

The predictable happened – rather sooner than Gavin, or I, anticipated. He went ahead with the tattoo, and as soon as the dressing came off, he proudly displayed it to his beloved. She was horrified. A committed Christian, she strongly believed that tattoos were sinful, and threw Leviticus 19:28 in his face: “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD” (King James version).

Thus dumped – and quite unable to find a substitute Susan – Gavin was left with the choice of having it removed or covered over with something less embarrassing. That’s how he acquired a rather butch black panther.

I was reminded of the Gavin episode after seeing the abomination below, and got to thinking about the problems devout, inked Christians may have should they ever come to their senses and decide, as so many people do these days, to move into the atheist camp.



In such instances, designs like these are bound to be extremely embarrassing. I think atheists should drum up funding for a chain of religious tattoo-removal parlours.

Then a question arose in my mind. If Leviticus condemns tattooing, why do religious people have the damned things done?

Because they have found a loophole.

The Leviticus prohibition, according to **Religioustattoos.net**, has been widely “misinterpreted”.

“Leviticus 19:26-31 deals with pagan practices and God’s prohibitions against adopting those practices. In verse 28, God is warning the Jewish people about a pagan practice at funerals, where pagans would mutilate/mark themselves to appease their false gods. The pagans hoped that by cutting themselves and marking images/symbols of idols on their bodies, they would obtain favour in the afterlife from their false gods, both for themselves and for those who had just died.”

The website then deduces: “It is beyond doubt that tattoos are NOT sinful and that

Christians expressing their faith with some ink under their skin have NOT succumbed to Satan’s wiles (at least, not because of the tattoos). Yet, let us remember that just because we are allowed to be tattooed, doesn’t mean that this is what is best for everyone ...

“Finally, it’s important that Christians realise that Jesus doesn’t want us to hide our faith or keep our faith to ourselves. Just the opposite. He commands us to do everything within our power to let our brothers and sisters know the one true Word, the Good News ... So, whether we choose stone tablets or tattoos, God, through the Holy Spirit, lets us discover the different and dynamic ways we can let others know about Him.”

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE contemplates the abomination of religious tattooing**



Well, if what’s good for the goose is good for the gander, is now not the time for us to encourage people to start sporting anti-religious tattoos? Or, at the very least, begin wearing T-shirts and button badges with atheist messages or symbols?

The trouble is is that slogans – particularly aggressive, in-ye-face declarations of impiety – are not conducive to engagement with the opposition. Just as I would cross the road to avoid someone with Jesus inked on his chest, the same person, I imagine, would shun me for sporting a “blasphemous” tattoo or symbol.

This is where the Invisible Pink Unicorn (IPU) comes to the rescue.

The Invisible Pink Unicorn is the goddess of a spoof religion created to skewer genuine religious beliefs. The IPU is paradoxically both invisible and pink. These attributes are intended to satirise the contradictions in the properties that the delusional attribute to God.

The IPU is commonly used to highlight the fallacious or arbitrary nature of supernatural beliefs by, for example, replacing the word “God” in any theistic statement with “Invisible Pink Unicorn”.

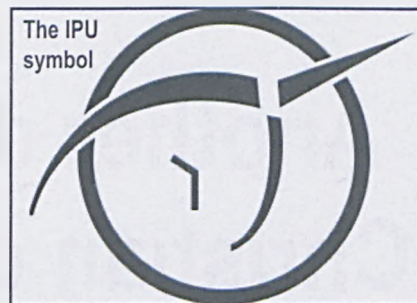
The point of this silliness is to prod theists into remembering that their pronouncements are likely to be viewed by atheists as having all the credibility and seriousness of atheists preaching about the IPU.

It goes without saying that there are no actual believers in this mock goddess, but it has become commonplace, especially on atheist websites and on-line discussion forums, to feign belief in her both for the sake of humour and as a form of attack against theistic belief.

I reckon that the IPU logo is intriguing enough for people to stop you and ask what it symbolises – thereby providing an excellent opportunity for advancing the atheist cause.

Some, of course, are dismissive of the IPU, preferring the FSM (Flying Spaghetti Monster)

which is neither invisible nor pink, but is invoked to equal, if not greater, effect. The official FSM website, originally set up to take the mick out of Intelligent Design proponents in Kansas, is crammed with hilarious contributions from both intellectuals and barely-literate nutjobs.



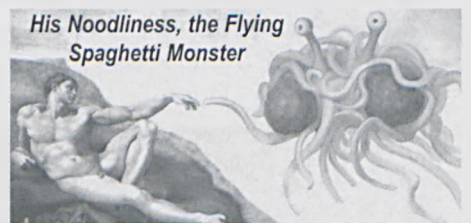
First, this from FSM “Pastafarian” Sebastian Wren, PhD: “At one time, I believed as the Aztecs did, that the universe was created by two gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca who attacked and ripped apart Hungry Woman to create the universe.

“Then I believed, as the Moriori do, that the universe was created when Papa and her husband Rangi hugged and bore children, and were subsequently separated by their son Tane who let light shine between them.

“However, my views have been swayed by the substantial evidence that the earth and universe were actually created relatively recently by the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I am firmly convinced that the evidence supporting this depiction of the origins of life, the universe, and everything, has many of the trappings of science, and I therefore support the inclusion of FSM creation evidence in the Kansas science curriculum and standards.”

Then this from a worried and confused individual called Cinta: “I read your website and I am very concerned about something. I consider myself a good Christian and I have read the Bible many times (not like some of the so-called Christian people who post to your website and just yell and say stupid things). So I am familiar with most parts of the Bible, but in no place that I have seen is there any reference to pasta or a being that resembles your flying spaghetti monster. God created man, and man created pasta, but if it was any different than that, there would be a reference in the Bible. So I am worried that perhaps your religion is not based on real evidence that God wrote. God bless.”

One thing is certain: whatever differences exist between IPU believers and FSM devotees, these will *never* lead to the sort bloody skirmishes that typify *real* religions.





# Archbishop's defence of faith schools described as 'madness' by the National Secular Society

THE Archbishop of Canterbury has rejected the idea that church schools "indoctrinate" children as the Government backs an expansion of faith-based state education.

According to an Associated Press report, Dr Rowan Williams said it is important that children understand what it feels like "to share convictions of faith".

But teachers and secular campaigners criticised *Faith in the System*, the joint document backed by ministers and faith groups.

Dr Williams said: "The more that religious schools form an integral part of our overall educational provision, the better the chances of educating all students sensitively in what it actually feels like to share convictions of faith. Church of England schools are proud of their distinctive ethos. They offer not a programme of indoctrination, but the possibility of developing a greater level of community cohesion through the understanding of how faith shapes common life.

"This matters for the lives of individuals, whether they are believers or not – because the failure to understand how faith operates leaves us at sea in engaging with our neighbours at local and global level."

But Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, described the Government proposals as "plain madness".

He said: "Separating children on the basis of religion cannot possibly encourage social cohesion. Academic research confirms that the best time to break down racial and religious barriers is in primary school.

"It is a sure-fire recipe for separation and future conflict to encourage children to think of themselves primarily as being of a particular religion, rather than encouraging them to concentrate on what we all have in common."

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said school staff were concerned over the way faith schools operate.

"We question why schools, in which the majority of funding comes from the state, should, as the Government proposes, nurture young people in a particular faith," she said. "Surely, the job of schools is to nurture children and young people as individuals and as responsible and compassionate global citizens. The promotion of a particular religious viewpoint should remain the province of religious groups."

Meanwhile, *The Times* reported last month that public opposition was hampering plans to expand the number of state-funded Muslim

schools. Mohamed Mukadam, the chairman of the Association of Muslim Schools, was quoted as saying that while there was a "huge demand" in the Muslim community for more state schools, local Muslim organisations encountered "a lot of negativity" when proposing to set up new schools.

The perception that Muslim schools could be a breeding ground for fundamentalists makes negotiations with local authorities "quite difficult", he said.

Dr Mukadam, the headteacher of the Madani High School in Leicester, a state secondary, added that the Muslim community in Britain was still relatively young. Muslim leaders in Britain had first concentrated on establishing mosques, but now second and third-generation Muslims were turning their attention to schools.

At present there are seven state-funded Muslim schools in England, with a further 115 in the independent sector. At least 30 independent schools have expressed an interest in

## Richard Dawkins to present Secularist of the Year prize

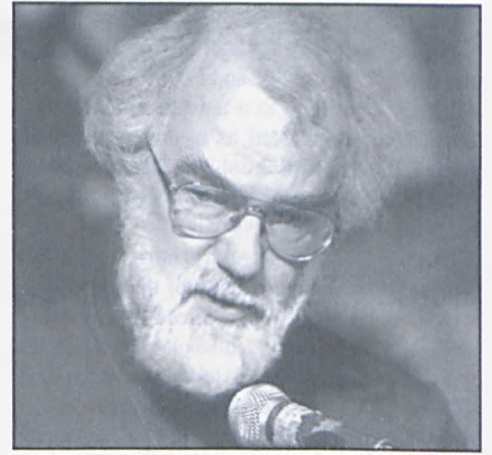
BEST-SELLING author and leading biologist Richard Dawkins will present this year's NSS Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year.

Professor Dawkins is author of *The God Delusion*, the book that has caused tremors around the world with its forthright attack on religious beliefs. This month he ripped into "alternative medicine" and psychic mumbo-jumbo in a Channel 4 series *Enemies of Reason*.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "We are thrilled that Richard Dawkins will be with us for this increasingly prestigious event."

The winner of the £5,000 Irwin prize will be announced on Saturday October 20, 2007, at a lunch at a central London venue.

Those nominated for the prize are Johann Hari, columnist on the *Independent*; Oliver Kamm, journalist and commentator; Mina Ahadi, Founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Germany, which prompted the formation of similar groups around Europe, including one in the UK; Sam Harris, for his book *Letter to a Christian Nation*; French philosopher Michel Onfray; Matthew Parris, *Times* columnist and commentator; Peter Tatchell for work on human rights from a secularist perspective; and Kenan Malik, for consistent defence of free speech.



moving into the state sector.

"There's a huge demand for faith schools. We are confident that in the fullness of time, more faith schools can be established," he said.

Dr Mukadam was speaking at the launch of *Faith in the System*, which follows a government retreat last year on plans to force new religious schools to take a quarter of their intake from pupils of other religions or those with no affiliation.

It also comes at a time when schools are facing a new statutory requirement to promote cohesion and integration in their local communities.

About one third of the 21,000 state schools in England are faith schools, the vast majority Christian. Of the 48 that are non-Christian, 37 are Jewish, seven Muslim and two Sikh.

Critics of faith schools claim that they can be divisive and socially selective. But the Right Rev Stephen Venner, acting chairman of the Church of England board of education, said that many parents regarded a school's faith links as a "kitemark of quality".

Ed Balls, the Children, Schools and Families Secretary, said that he wanted to remove "unnecessary barriers" to the creation of more faith schools. He was particularly keen to see more joint faith schools, run by more than one religious community.

Talks are already under way for the creation of a new academy school in Oldham, backed jointly by the local mosque and the Church of England. "Such a school – the first here and possibly in the world – would be a significant 21st-century addition to the wider family of faith schools," Mr Balls said. He added that in future all new academy schools would have to give at least 50 percent of their places to pupils of other faiths or of none.

He denied that there was any contradiction between government equal-rights policies and most Christian and Muslim teaching that homosexual practice is wrong.

New guidelines designed to stamp out homophobic bullying, to be published next week, would insist that all schools refrained from stigmatising homosexuality. He also emphasised that faith schools would be bound by a strict new admissions code and must not discourage applications from poor families.





In 2001, about six months before the Catholic clergy sex scandal broke nationwide, the dioceses of Orange and Los Angeles paid a record \$5.2 million to a law student who said he had been molested as a student at Santa Margarita High School in Rancho Santa Margarita by his principal, Monsignor Michael Harris.

Without admitting guilt, Harris agreed to leave the priesthood. As part of the settlement, the dioceses were also forced to radically change how they handled sexual abuse allegations, including a promise to kick out any priest with a credible molestation allegation in his past. It emerged that both dioceses had many known molesters on duty. Los Angeles had two convicted paedophiles still working as priests.

"At the time, I never imagined Catholic leaders would engage in a widespread practice that protected alleged child molesters and belittled the victims. I latched onto the explanation that was least damaging to my belief in the Catholic Church – that this was an isolated case of a morally corrupt administration," said Lobdell.

But later, his doubts began growing. "After interviewing the victims, scores of them, I discovered that the term 'sexual abuse' is a euphemism. Most of these children were raped and sodomized by someone they and their family believed was Christ's representative on Earth. That's not something an 8-year-old's mind can process; it forever warps a person's sexuality and spirituality.

"Many of these victims were molested by priests with a history of abusing children. But the bishops routinely sent these clerics to another parish, and bullied or conned the victims and their families into silence. The police were almost never called. In at least a few instances, bishops encouraged molesting priests to flee the country to escape prosecution.

"I couldn't get the victims' stories or the bishops' lies – many of them right there on their own stationery — out of my head. I had been in journalism more than two decades and had dealt with murders, rapes, other violent crimes and tragedies. But this was different – the children were so innocent, their parents so faithful, the priests so sick and bishops so corrupt.

"I sought solace in another belief: that a church's heart is in the pews, not the pulpits. Certainly the people who were reading my stories would recoil and, in the end, recapture God's house. Instead, I saw parishioners reflexively support priests who had molested children by writing glowing letters to bishops and judges, offering them jobs or even raising their bail while cursing the victims, often to their faces.

"On a Sunday morning at a parish in Rancho Santa Margarita, I watched congregants lobby to name their new parish hall after their long-time pastor, who had admitted to molesting a boy, and who had been barred that day from the ministry. I felt sick to my stomach that the people of God wanted to honor an admitted child molester. Only one person in the crowd,

## Religion poisons everything

(Continued from p1)

an Orange County sheriff's deputy, spoke out for the victim.

"On Good Friday 2002, I decided I couldn't belong to the Catholic Church. Though I had spent a year preparing for it, I didn't go through with the rite of conversion."

Lobdell next turned his attention to the machinations and the greed of some of America's most powerful pastors – and his doubts increased.

"I met with my former Presbyterian pastor, John Huffman, and told him what I was feeling. I asked him if I could e-mail him some tough questions about Christianity and faith and get his answers. He agreed without hesitation.

"The questions that I thought I had come to peace with started to bubble up again. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God get credit for answered prayers but no blame for unanswered ones? Why do we believe in the miraculous healing power of God when he's never been able to regenerate a limb or heal a severed spinal chord?

"In one e-mail, I asked John, who had lost a daughter to cancer, why an atheist businessman prospers and the child of devout Christian parents dies. Why would a loving God make this impossible for us to understand?

"He sent back a long reply that concluded: 'My ultimate affirmation is let God be God and acknowledge that He is in charge. He knows what I don't know. And frankly, if I'm totally honest with you, a life of gratitude is one that bows before the Sovereign God – arguing with Him on those things that trouble me, lamenting the losses of life, but ultimately saying, *You, God, are infinite; I'm human and finite.*'

"John is an excellent pastor, but he couldn't

### Woman who killed preacher husband freed

MARY Winkler, a 33-year old mother of three from Tennessee, has been freed from prison seven months after being convicted of the manslaughter of her preacher husband Matthew, pastor at the Fourth Street Church of Christ in the town of Selmer.

During her trial, Winkler described a hellish ten-year marriage during which her husband struck her, screamed at her, criticised her and blamed her when things went wrong. She said he made her watch pornography and wear "slutty" costumes for sex, and that he forced her to submit to sex acts that made her uncomfortable.

Winkler's in-laws have now initiated a £1-million law suit against Winkler, a drycleaner worker, for the unlawful shotgun killing of their son.

reach me. For some time, I had tried to push away doubts and reconcile an all-powerful and infinitely loving God with what I saw, but I was losing ground. I wondered if my born-again experience at the mountain retreat was more about fatigue, spiritual longing and emotional vulnerability than being touched by Jesus.

"And I considered another possibility: maybe God didn't exist."

Toward the end of his tenure as a religion reporter, Lobdell travelled to Nome, Alaska.

"I had come from Southern California to report on a generation of Eskimo boys who had been molested by a Catholic missionary. All of the now-grown Eskimos I had interviewed over the past week had lost their faith. In fact, several of them confessed that they fantasized daily about burning down the village church where the unspeakable acts took place."

In the summer of 2005, he covered the story in Oregon of an unemployed mother – impregnated by a seminary student 13 years earlier – who was trying to get increased child support for her sickly 12-year-old son.

At a court hearing, the boy's father, Father Arturo Uribe, took the witness stand and confidently offered the court a simple reason as to why he couldn't pay more than \$323 a month in child support. "The only thing I own are my clothes," he told the judge.

"His defence – orchestrated by a razor-sharp attorney paid for by his religious order – boiled down to this: *I'm a Roman Catholic priest, I've taken a vow of poverty, and child-support laws can't touch me.*"

The judge ruled in favour of Uribe, then pastor of a large parish in Whittier. After the hearing, when the priest's attorney discovered Lobdell had been present, she ran back into the courtroom and unsuccessfully tried to get the judge to seal the case.

"I could see why the priest's lawyer would try to cover it up. People would be shocked at how callously the church dealt with a priest's illegitimate son who needed money for food and medicine.

"My problem was that none of that surprised me anymore", said Lobdell. He had finally come to realise, albeit reluctantly, that Christopher Hitchens was right when he said "religion poisons everything".

"As I walked into the long twilight of a Portland summer evening, I felt used up and numb. My soul, for lack of a better term, had lost faith long ago – probably around the time I stopped going to church. My brain, which had been in denial, had finally caught up.

"Clearly, I saw now that belief in God, no matter how grounded, requires at some point a leap of faith. Either you have the gift of faith or you don't. It's not a choice. It can't be willed into existence. And there's no faking it if you're honest about the state of your soul.

"Sitting in a park across the street from the courthouse, I called my wife on a cellphone. I told her I was putting in for a new beat at the paper," Lobdell revealed.



# Hindus outraged over Taunton church yoga ban

LEADERS of Britain's Hindu community have expressed disbelief and outrage at claims by two English church ministers that yoga should be banned, that it was a "sham", and that the meditative exercises are not compatible with Christianity.

"I have written to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, about the reported actions of the two men," Anil Bhanot, general secretary of the Hindu Council UK, told *Ecumenical News International*.

"These priests might appear to be advising Christians not to practice yoga because they believe it is based on a sham and a false philosophy. But what in effect they are saying is that Hinduism is a false religion."

The Hindu council's spokesperson on yoga, Amarjeet-singh Bhamra, noted: "It is very disappointing that such medieval-like irrational prejudice is still allowed to flourish in the Christian church in 21st-century multicultural Britain."



Toddlers enjoying yoga

On August 31, *The Times* reported that a children's exercise class was banned from two church halls in Taunton in southwest England because it was teaching yoga.

Louise Woodcock, who was looking for a new home for her Yum Yum Yoga class for toddlers, was turned away by the Silver Street Baptist Church and the St James' Anglican Church.

Woodcock had been using the Baptist church hall to conduct her classes, which were based on songs and simple movements aimed at relaxing small children, when the Rev Simon Farrar withdrew his consent after he discovered she was teaching yoga.

"We are a Christian organisation," Farrar told *The Times*, "and when we let rooms to people we want them to understand that they must be fully in tune with our Christian ethos".

The Rev Tim Jones of St James' Church said, "Yoga has its roots in Hinduism ... Yoga may appear harmless or even beneficial, but it is encouraging people to think that there is a way to wholeness of body and mind through human techniques".

Bhamra, one of about 600,000 Hindus in Britain, told ENI, "Yoga is one of the oldest medical systems enshrined in the Atharva Veda, the most ancient Hindu book on wisdom, and it is now at the forefront of holistic and integrated medicine in the West."

## Cardinal quits Amnesty over abortion

CARDINAL Keith O'Brien last month announced his resignation from Amnesty International following its decision to support women's right to abortion, according to a report in *The Scotman*.

The leader of Scotland's Catholics wrote to the charity's director saying he made the decision with "great sadness" as Amnesty's stance contravened the "basic right to human life". He joined as a student more than 40 years ago.

His decision follows accusations that the organisation "duped" singers Christina Aguilera and Avril Lavigne. They have both made statements opposing abortion, but are among contributors to an Amnesty CD released to raise money for survivors of the atrocities in Darfur.

The International Council of Amnesty International recently voted to back the right of women to abortion in carefully defined circumstances – for example, when their health or life are in danger or when they have been victims of rape.

But Cardinal O'Brien said that the decision had forced him to reconsider his membership.

"As a matter of conscience and with great sadness I have decided to resign from Amnesty International having first joined as a student and supported it over many decades.

"In recent years I have spoken out strongly on pro-life issues including our necessity to ensure life for the poorest people of the world and have shown my care and concern by visiting some of those poorest countries especially in Africa and Asia.

"Sadly now Amnesty International seems to be placing itself at the forefront of a campaign for a universal 'right' to abortion in contravention to that basic right to human life."

Cardinal O'Brien recently spoke out strongly against abortion on the 40th anniversary of the passing of the Abortion Act in Westminster in 1967.

He follows Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia, who has also resigned, saying the policy would divide Amnesty's membership and undermine its vital work. He had been an active member for 31 years, but said it would now be difficult for Roman Catholics to support the organisation.

John Watson, Scottish programme director of Amnesty International, said: "I'm sorry to hear that Cardinal O'Brien has decided to resign his Amnesty membership, as there are many more issues we agree on.

"I do feel I should correct his assertion that Amnesty is 'placing itself at the forefront of a campaign for a universal right to abortion'. This misrepresents our repeated statements that we are not.

"In very limited circumstances, such as if the mother's health is at risk or following rape or incest, we have accepted that women should not be left at the mercy of inadequate health services, as is the case in many countries."

### Religious comic catchphrase posters withdrawn

FOLLOWING complaints from *Little Britain* stars Matt Lucas and David Williams, and comedienne Catherine Tate, the evangelical Christian Publishing and Outreach has been forced to withdraw a series of posters featuring comic catchphrases like Vicky Pollard's "Yeah, but, no but, yeah but ..." and Tate's "Am I bovvered?". The stars said their intellectual property rights had been violated.

## Zealots torch Israel's only crematorium

ISRAEL's one and only crematorium has gone up in flames after it was torched by arsonists believed to be orthodox Jews.

After the attack on the facility, Yehuda Meshi Zavah who heads ZAKA, the orthodox group best known for collecting Jewish body parts for burial after suicide attacks, said that although he opposed any act of criminality, he was nevertheless pleased with the outcome, given his organisation's commitment to protecting the holiness of human bodies even after death.

The attack took place hours after the crematorium's secret location, on farmland outside Tel Aviv, was published in a fervently orthodox newspaper, *Kol Ha'ir*.

The blaze set off recriminations within Israel's political establishment. The orthodox Shas Party moved to have a law passed banning cremation, while left-wing parliamentarian Yossi Beilin, who himself intends to be cremated after he dies, accused the Orthodox of dragging Israel back to the "dark age".

Eli Yishai, Shas' chairman and the minister of Industry, Trade and Employment, told Ha'aretz that the bill "would put an end to those who are implementing the final solution once again ..."

Beilin, leader of the Meretz Party, countered that the bill would lead to a situation "in which civilians won't even be able to decide what will happen to them after they die."

Under the proposed legislation, anyone found guilty of cremation could be punished with up to a year in prison and a £3,600 fine.



# Mother Teresa – saint or sadist?

THE tenth anniversary of Mother Teresa's death has been marred by two revelations. The first is that she had serious doubts about the existence of God, and the second is that the Indian woman used to justify her beatification has been abandoned by nuns to poverty.

The religious doubts of the Albanian nun Agnes Bojaxhiu aka Mother Teresa were revealed in the September 3 issue of *Time* magazine, following the publication of letters she wrote.

"Although perpetually cheery in public, the Teresa of the letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In more than 40 communications, many of which have never before been published, she bemoans the 'dryness', 'darkness', 'loneliness' and 'torture' she is undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God.

In his 1995 book, *The Missionary Position*, Christopher Hitchens attacked Mother Teresa, criticising her Order's methods with patients (eg reusing needles rinsed in cold water), her unwillingness to use money wisely for the benefit of her patients and her workers, and her

practice of putting church doctrine (eg on abortion) above all else. Hitchens' unsympathetic response to the new revelations about the great lady's spiritual drought is quoted by *Time*: "She was no more exempt from the realisation that religion is a human fabrication than any other person, and that her attempted cure was more and more professions of faith could only have deepened the pit that she had dug for herself."

Keith Kissler, an American librarian and freethinker who runs *The Invisible Library* website, added this:

"Shortly after beginning work in Calcutta's slums, the spirit left Mother Teresa. 'Where is my faith?' she wrote. 'Even deep down... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness... If there be God – please forgive me.'

"Eight years later, she was still looking to reclaim her lost faith."

Her letters were gathered by Rev Kolodiejchuk, the priest who is making the case to the Vatican for Mother Teresa's proposed sainthood. He said her obvious spiritual torment actually helps her case.

"Sure", says Kissler, "she didn't really believe in God, but she's really popular so we're going to make her a saint anyway. Whatever it takes to fill those empty pews. How many other saints didn't really believe but were appropriated after



**Mother of five, Monica Besra, used by Teresa's nuns, then dumped**

their death for reasons of marketing and cajoling? Probably about as many as were just invented altogether.

"Mother Teresa, of course, deserves some of the blame. She continued to force feed the poor and sick nonsense that she didn't even believe, just so she could watch them suffer, to try and jump-start her flagging faith.

"The only thing worse than sadism wrapped in piety is sadism for its own sake."

In the same week that details from the letters appeared, an Indian woman whose "miracle" cure from cancer was instrumental in the beatification Teresa of Calcutta accused the Sisters of Charity of abandoning her to poverty.

Monica Besra, 40, became an over-night celebrity in September 1998 when she reported that she had been cured of a tumour after praying to Mother Teresa while pressing a medallion bearing the nun's image to her side.

The "miracle" was claimed as Mother Teresa's first posthumous act of healing and was cited at the ceremony in October 2003 in which the nun was beatified by the Vatican.

But Mrs Besra says she has since been abandoned by the nuns who escorted her to Rome four years ago as living proof of their mother superior's healing powers. "They made of lot of promises to me and assured me of financial help," said Mrs Besra, in her village of Dangram, 740 kilometres north-east of Calcutta.

"After that, they forgot me. I am living in penury. My husband is sick. I have to work in the fields to feed my husband and five children."

At Mother House, the Missionaries of Charity headquarters, news of Mrs Besra's complaints was greeted with concern. Sister Nirmala, Mother Teresa's successor as superior-general, said her case was being looked at.

Several groups, including her doctors, have disputed that Mrs Besra was cured by a miracle, claiming instead that her tumour disappeared as a result of conventional medical treatment.

## Jesus and Mo



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# Hate-monger Riyadh ul-Haq set to 'Talebanise'

## more UK mosques

"I HAVE met with my share of preachers who have incited hate and violence over the last several years. They range from the strident Abu Qatada and Abu Hamza to the crafty Sheikh Omar Bakri and the not-so-subtle Sheikh Abdullah el-Faisal, a Jamaican with a violent streak and once a teenage acquaintance of mine ... But Riyadh ul-Haq is not in their league. He is not a preacher of hate and certainly not a scholar who incites to violence. If so, he would have run afoul of his country's judiciary a long time ago."

THESE words were written in June of this year by Canadian broadcast journalist Nazim Baksh, following Leicester-based Riyadh ul-Haq's earlier abortive attempt to enter Canada. The Canadian authorities had apparently put too many obstacles in the way of his plans to address a conference in Montreal.

"The trouble for Riyadh ul-Haq," according to Baksh, "started when Judeoscope, a Canadian website "dedicated to shedding light on anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and militant Islam in Canada," published audio excerpts from a few of his hundreds of lectures.

"It is difficult to verify the authenticity of the excerpts and Riyadh ul-Haq himself has tried to explain three of the eleven in a lengthy interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation."

The suggestion here, of course, is that the audio excerpts may have been taken out of context.

"Out of context" is a phrase we hear more and more these days, and was most lately the basis for complaints made against the Channel 4 *Undercover Mosque* programme.

Well, here are more of the preacher's words, "taken out of context" from one of his sermons: "The verse which I recited in the beginning is from Surah al-Maidah (the 5th chapter of the Koran): that most assuredly, OF THE WHOLE OF MANKIND YOU SHALL FIND THAT THE MOST INTENSE IN THEIR HATRED AND ENMITY TOWARDS THE BELIEVERS ARE THE YAHOU – THE JEWS – AND THE MUSHRIKIN, THE IDOLATERS. Allah said it. Of the peoples of the earth, the ones that hate the Muslims the most, the ones who are bitterest in their enmity towards the Muslims, the most unrelenting, unforgiving, are the Jews and the mushrikin, idolaters in all their forms. And lest someone says that's provocative, or that is anti-Semitic, Allah, the creator of the Semites, says that. This is a verse of the Koran ... AND THE CHIEF MUSHRIKIN OF THIS DAY AND AGE, THE CHIEF IDOLATERS, ARE NONE OTHER THAN THE HINDUS."

These words, according to an investigation by *The Times*, were in a sermon given on an unknown date in which the preacher attacked

Israel, portrayed all Jews as extremists and claimed that they "are generally allowed to kill a non-Jew without fear of punishment".

Here is another excerpt "taken out of context" from another sermon.

"Muslims are the pet hate. Anything happens, the media loves to blame Muslims. Someone may suggest that, no, no, not all Muslims, only terrorist Muslims and only fundamentalist Muslims. The unfortunate thing is that IN THE EYES OF THE MEDIA EVERY MUSLIM IS A FUNDAMENTALIST, EVERY MUSLIM IS A TERRORIST. The only Muslims who are considered moderates are those who, for example, forgive me for polluting the masjid's (mosque's) atmosphere by saying this, but those Muslims who openly advocate lesbianism, those who are publicly declared homosexuals, *Muslims who don't believe in segregation* [my italics], the hijab, who feel no shame in bowing down and kissing the Pope's hand, those Muslims who feel absolutely no shame, or they don't see any sense of irony in the fact that they openly declare that Israel should be recognized as a Jewish state ..."

The media spotlight fell on the cleric again last month when *The Times* revealed that "almost half of Britain's mosques are under the control of a hardline Islamic sect whose leading preacher loathes Western values and has called on Muslims to 'shed blood' for Allah.

"Riyadh ul Haq, who supports armed jihad and preaches contempt for Jews, Christians and Hindus, is in line to become the spiritual leader of the Deobandi sect in Britain. The ultra-conservative movement, which gave birth to the Taleban in Afghanistan, now runs more than 600 of Britain's 1,350 mosques, according to a police report seen by *The Times*."

*The Daily Mail* reported that the influence of the ultra-conservative Deobandi sect, which is characterised by its total rejection of Western values, has grown to an enormous extent, and pointed out that plans for a "mega mosque" in east London by a group called Tablighi Jamaat, which is closely linked to the Deobandi movement, will come under much closer scrutiny as a result of these latest revelations.

The £100 million plan to build the "Islamic village" next to the Olympic site is already mired in controversy after intelligence services said the group was a recruiting ground for al Qaeda.

The Deobandi-controlled mosques are predominantly found in the Midlands and the

North – such as the Tablighi Jamaat mosque, which 7/7 bombers Mohammad Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer were known to attend.

But about 170 London mosques are classified as Deobandi-run compared with less than 100 run by the moderate Sufi-based Barelwi movement.

Seventeen of Britain's 26 Islamic seminaries are also run by Deobandis, producing 80 per cent of clerics trained here.

Ul-Haq, 36, who runs an Islamic academy in Leicester, gained notoriety with a series of outspoken lectures after 9/11 when he was Imam of Birmingham Central Mosque. He has since travelled the world preaching that America and its allies are seeking to wipe out Islam.

A favourite talk of his warns Muslims of the perils of befriending the "kuffar", or non-believer. He says: "The Koran teaches Muslims not to follow in the footsteps of the Jews and the Christians, yet of our own choice we decide to live, act, work, behave, enjoy and play just like the kuffar.

"Do not befriend the kuffar was Allah's warning to Muslims, and Mohammed told his companions 'to distance themselves and fear this alignment with the kuffar in every way, even to the manner of dressing'."

Castigating Muslims for observing Christmas, the cleric, in one of his sermons, said: "Muslims celebrating Christmas! It's amazing. We think that it's innocent. It's not innocent. The Christmas Eve masses are held in their churches. What do they do? They take bread and they take wine in a very formal, customary way ... They believe they are eating the flesh of Issa [Jesus]. When they drink the wine, they believe they are consuming the blood of Issa, ie the flesh and the blood of his sacrifice. Of course, it's all mumbo-jumbo."

Rich that, coming from a man representing a religion which contains more mumbo-jumbo than all other faiths lumped together.

Moderate forces within Britain's Muslim community say they are doing all they can to counter the influence of preachers like Sheikh Riyadh ul-Haq.

Ghaysuddin Siddiqui of the Muslim Parliament said: "There is no doubt the Deobandi movement became more influential in Britain's mosques in the 1990s, and this went largely unchecked.

"The situation now is of great concern as almost all Islamic extremism originates from the Deobandi thinking."

– Report by Jean Wright



Sheikh Riyadh ul-Haq



# Superstition and anxiety, the allies

IN my childhood and youth we were often reminded that Christian faith had nothing whatever to do with superstition. In the back of my mind, by my 'teens at least, I went along with the traditions of my Anglican 'tribal' community but found difficulty in identifying a border line between beliefs accepted in my own, or any other religious tradition, and the ones regarded as mere superstition.

To take a trivial example, there may be logic in avoiding some kind of risk to one's safety resulting from walking under a ladder, but I clearly remember other people suggesting that it was "bad luck" to walk under a ladder or to see one – or was it two, magpies? – or looking at some phase of the moon through glass and so on, but these people were fellow so-called Christians. They laughed about this superstition as if they were not affected by it, but they still seemed to feel uneasy about it and they avoided number thirteen.

Any religion seemed to me to be full of similar warnings and prohibitions, such as not eating meat or specific kinds of meat or of Muslim women being obliged to wear a head-covering, but I remember visiting Salisbury Cathedral in the 1930s and my mother being stopped at the door for not wearing a hat. She was allowed to proceed into the cathedral with one of her gloves balanced on her head.

Had she removed it she might have been persuaded by official disapproval that she was guilty of something, but guilty of what? Perhaps of disrespect towards the traditions of the Anglican Church, or its authority or the authority of the Dean for whom the vergers were acting, but in those days one did not

question authority, particularly in a cathedral. As with the 'n'th degree of observance of religious rules, for instance by strict orthodox Jews or Plymouth Brethren, one feels that they distance themselves from the rest of humanity. By their own decision they no longer wish to be our neighbours.

In a sense they are not living in our world, even though they can see that in reality we share it. The equally extreme Muslim interpretation seems to take such observance to the point at which everyone else must be made to observe specific rules or be killed, just as Christians did at various stages in the political evolution of Western Europe or at any other time when political leaders were able to use the propaganda of religion to help maintain their own authority.

To persuade a large number of people to be obedient to a rule it seems to be necessary first to make them anxious or afraid and then to offer a way to escape in return for loyalty to the rule enforcers, and payment of tax. The official encouragement of anxiety seems to me to be assisted by superstitious beliefs, such as the patriotism of "my country, right or wrong", in order to support the abuse practised by a political authority.

Quite apart from the politics, what is it that causes us to accept beliefs for which there seems to be no reliable evidence? I think it may be simply a desire to reduce our level of anxiety, but because we cannot be certain of everything we can choose to follow the scientific procedure of not being absolutely certain of *anything* and to be willing instead to accept a reasonable level of probability. This is the

attitude of any reasonable person and essentially the attitude of the non-theist. Religious and secular authorities suggest, and even promise us, that if we don't follow the rule something terrible or nasty or at least disappointing might happen to us.

**Reason is seriously devalued by blind obedience to rules, argues PETER ARNOLD**

Why do some of us accept this without question – is it perhaps because we lack self-confidence? Perhaps this fear is a remnant of early human development when, for instance, a solitary person risked being eaten, but when under the same threat, but in a large group, they might collectively make as much noise as possible to frighten away predators, as in the firework tradition in the Far East, or maybe the parish church bells which could also have been rung to frighten away evil spirits and reinforce a sense of community.

The English November 5th celebration has something of this tradition long after participants have ceased to care about the event it is supposed to celebrate.

On the other hand, probably we should care, because similar violent action is being used by suicide bombers – presumably to increase our anxiety, though the burning of effigies of suicide bombers is unlikely to reduce the threat or our anxiety. Clearly theirs is also a symbolic act since it is liable to kill or injure other Muslims, so what is their message?

It seems to be much the same as that of the American President who said that we are either

## Swedish 'Modog' sketches send Muslims into



*"THE symbolism of the dog is a deliberate attempt to infuriate Muslims. The dog is considered an impure creature in Islam and is not even welcome in the Muslim home because angels are afraid of it and will not enter."*

This is part of a rant in an editorial in the *Khaleej Times*, written by Kuwaiti-based American writer and convert to Islam, Sumayyah Meehan.

She states: "Once again the Prophet of Islam, Mohammed (peace be upon him) has been degraded in yet another Danish (sic) cartoon. This time Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks targeted the noble Prophet in the most disgusting fashion."

She suggests that Muslims are themselves to blame for the latest "insults" because they did not keep up the boycott of Danish goods after the publication of Mootoons in Denmark.

Muslims are once again buying them [Danish goods] and supporting a country that

never even apologised for the insults. The message that Muslims as a whole sent was that our reaction is only temporary and proved that the *Ummah* (Muslim brotherhood) is a 'soft-target' ... I firmly believe that Muslims had the right to be angry in 2005 as they do now.

She adds: "If Muslims decided to unite and boycott Swedish goods it should not be a limited boycott like the Danish one was. It should be a permanent lifelong commitment to avoid all Swedish products. It should be something you teach your children to do and even your grandchildren.

"It's easy for the enemies of Islam to insult our religion and our Prophet but it's even easier for us to not support them with our dirhams and dinars. The quickest way to bring any nation to its knees is to hit them where it hurts ... their wallet."

Meanwhile, a Muslim woman could face charges after admitting that she sent death threats to the Swedish artist who made a series



# es of irrational leaders

for him or against him, and though many of us agree with the suicide bombers about the low level of entertainment provided by television, and the ease with which advertisers can persuade many people to live beyond their means, we believe that a suicide bomber goes well beyond the authority he claims to have been given by Allah when he kills others in a false hope of paradise, and he or she appears to be quite unaware that they are being used by power-seekers who are the real mass-murderers.

It is rational to believe that we human animals are liable to respond to something we cannot explain by feeling anxious or at least irritated. Also, when groups of people share a high level of anxiety they are likely to want to accept almost any solution to their problem, but to what are they responding?

It looks as if it is often just a response to emotions and not to reliable and significant evidence. Islamic responses to supposed insults to Mohammed looked like a hysterical version of this. In the cultural tradition of Western Europe the most reliable religions and ideologies are usually the ones that teach objective criticism and self-discipline, not obedience imposed by the authority of an organisation, especially since the days of rabble-raising and witch-hunts of rival religious groups or fascist and communist extremists.

The Christian Church was still murdering witches or heretics in a Central American republic right into the 18th century, just as the extremist Mohammedans have done in Afghanistan, we were told fairly recently, who murdered a schoolteacher for daring to teach

algebra to women, supposedly justified by a weird interpretation of the meaning of words in the mediaeval book said to have been dictated by Mohammed from recollections of his dreams.

Reason is seriously devalued by blind obedience to rules. In Muslim countries the law does not seem to prevent women being raped or men raping them. Is rape actually prevented by persuading women to wear all enveloping clothing, and what does this say about the morals or self-discipline of their men that women's faces and figures must be invisible? To the rest of the world it demonstrates that women are viewed by Muslim men as part of a man's possessions, as if the assault on the woman is of less importance than the damage being done to a man's property. This is just the kind of situation in which religion comes into conflict with reason and humanity.

Religious laws seem to me to have less to do with encouraging self-disciplined human behaviour and much more to do with obeying a written text and paying respect and tax to the guardians of the holy books. Parts of the Koran and the Jewish texts are expressed in graceful poetic stanzas that can be enjoyed for their beauty as well as

their lessons in morality, but other parts, in Leviticus for instance, are written as if it is a book of instructions rather than an attempt to express the purpose behind them.

Like Chairman Mao's poems, holy books can express ideas that still need rational interpretation or they can provide justification for all kinds of stupid behaviour that have no logical let alone humanitarian result. Superstition and irrational fear of the unknown provide powerful emotional stimuli that can overcome reason and keep the religious and political leaders of unreason in power.

We need to view all leaders, secular and religious, with the deepest suspicion and be ready to replace them. This is where secular Western democracies have such a big advantage over authoritarian regimes, other than religious ones, of course.



**Chips with that, sonny?: A swivel-eyed Muslim rage boy in Jakarta sinks his teeth into a pornographic video disc during a demonstration last year against plans to publish a local edition of Playboy magazine.**

Photograph by: Jewel Samad, AFP, Getty Images

## 0 a fresh frenzy

of drawings depicting the Prophet Mohammed as a dog.

The woman, who was not named, admitted under questioning that she had threatened Lars Vilks in telephone calls and e-mails, said Hakan Lund, a police spokesman in Helsingborg, southern Sweden.

"She threatened him with death. She didn't say she would do it herself, but that she is encouraging like-minded people to do so," Lund said.

Vilks' drawings, one of which appeared in the *Nerikes Allehanda* infuriated Muslims worldwide. The paper printed it as part of an editorial criticising Swedish art galleries for chickening out of displaying the sketches.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that "Zionists" were behind the cartoon. "They do not want the Swedish government to be a friend of other nations. I strongly believe the Zionists are behind the cartoon. They thrive on conflict and war," he said.

## Author accused of 'hurting Muslim feelings'

BANGLADESHI author Taslima Nasreen is to face criminal charges in India after being accused of stirring up religious enmity. The charges come after Nasreen was attacked at the launch of her latest book, *Shodh*, in Hyderabad last month.

Several lawmakers and members of a conservative Muslim political party threw flowers and other objects at her, and called for her death.

Nasreen, author of *Wild Wind* and *Shame*, is an exile from her native Bangladesh because of a fatwa against her and a threat by the government to lay charges stemming from her writing.

She lived in Sweden and France for several years, but moved to India in 2002. In articles and books, she writes about the poor treatment of Hindus in mostly Muslim Bangladesh, and rape and mistreatment of women in Muslim societies. She is also a strong opponent of sharia law.

A police official in Hyderabad said Nasreen had been charged with "hurting Muslim feelings".

Under Indian law, promoting "disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will" between religious groups is punishable by up to three years in jail.

Three legislators were charged with rioting after a police investigation into the incident at the publication launch party.

The case against her followed a complaint to the police by one of her assailants, Akbaruddin Owaisi, who alleged that she had hurt the sentiments of Muslim community with her writings and speeches against Islam, including Holy Prophet Mohammed.

Owaisi has denied threatening to behead Nasreen if she came to Hyderabad again. "What I said is that there is a 'fatwa' against her. It is the responsibility of Muslims to abide by the fatwa and being a Muslim I will also abide by the fatwa." The fatwa in question calls for Nasreen's death, and a reward of 500,000 rupees (£6,000) is offered to her killer.



# Are Muslim beliefs compatible with critical thinking?

Almost every standard world history textbook celebrates Islam's golden age of science, according to a feature written by **JAY TOLSON** last month in *US News & World Report*.

Between the 9th and 13th centuries, Muslim scholars not only translated the great works of Greek medicine, mathematics, and science but also pushed the frontiers of discovery in all of those areas. They improved and named algebra, refined techniques of surgery, advanced the study of optics, and charted the heavens. Then, toward the end of the 13th century, something mysterious happened: the scientific spirit seemed to die almost completely.

Today, most predominantly Muslim countries benefit daily from the fruits of science and technology, and most of the leaders of these nations at least pay lip-service to the importance of scientific education. Arab analysts, in recent UN-backed reports on the deplorable state of human development in 22 Arab countries, have consistently called for more robust support for "knowledge acquisition" as a crucial step toward catching up with other regions of the world.

Yet, according to the distinguished Pakistani scientist Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy, chair of the physics department at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, the news from the Islamic world is not very encouraging. And if his report in the August issue of *Physics Today* is accurate, it seems that not only science but the critical reasoning that undergirds it is in a precarious state.

Hoodbhoy marshals an array of data to demonstrate that the commitment to real scientific study and research in Muslim nations still lags far behind international averages.

For example, the 57 nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference can boast only 8.5 scientists per 1,000 population, while the world average is 40.7. Of the lowest national producers of scientific articles in 2003, half are members of the OIC. The OIC countries spend about 0.3 percent of their gross national product on research and development, in contrast to the global average of 2.4 percent.

Some Muslim nations have recently boosted such spending, but throwing money at the problem is no good unless it is used by well-educated professionals who are capable of quality work. And so far, evidence of such quality is lacking. Of the approximately 1,800 universities in OIC nations, only 312 publish journal articles, and no OIC university was included in the top 500 of the "Academic Ranking of World Universities" that was produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

Beyond the data, Hoodbhoy's more unsettling observations bear on the culture and attitudes that prevail in much of the Islamic world, even in those citadels of study that are receiv-

ing more funding.

To say that intellectual freedom is restricted is, as Hoodbhoy tells it, an understatement. His own university, ranked second among OIC academic institutions, has three mosques on its campus but not one bookstore. Like all other Pakistani universities, it barred a Nobel-winning Pakistani physicist from campus because he belonged to a Muslim sect that the government had deemed heretical.

And that's not all. Films, theatre, and music are viewed as impious pursuits by religious zealots, some of whom physically attack students who participate or show an interest in those forms of cultural expression. The atmosphere of intimidation has become so menacing, in Hoodbhoy's view, that students in general have become more timid and passive in the classroom. Throughout the Muslim world, there is a widespread suspicion that science is heresy – or at least those parts of science that cannot be used, or twisted, to support literalist interpretations of Islamic scriptures. Needless to say, this suspicion has received support from other varieties of religious fundamentalism, including the Christian and Hindu ones.

Some modern scholars make a more serious intellectual argument for the compatibility of science and traditional Islamic thought. And those thinkers believe that ignorance of an Islamically-based understanding of science is what really impedes its pursuit in the contemporary Muslim world.

One of the more articulate proponents of that position is the Iranian-born philosopher of science Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University and the author of, among other books, *Science and Civilization in Islam*. Educated at MIT and Harvard, Nasr has long argued that Islamic science must be understood "not as a chapter in the history of Western science, but as an independent way of looking at the work of nature". Nasr insists that traditional Muslim scientists never went the way of Descartes and Newton in reducing the physical world to its material and mechanistic aspects. Nor did Muslims accept that humans can know this world with certainty only through its quantifiable properties.

Instead, traditional Muslim scientists held that a full understanding of nature also required seeing its parts as signs of divine purpose. Furthermore, Nasr holds, this approach to science did not die at the end of the 13th century but inspired work in fields such as medicine through the 16th and 17th centuries.

But change did come during the colonial period. Not only did Europeans impose their approach to science on Muslim elites, but many Muslim reformers themselves advocated the adoption of modern science as the best means of catching up with the West. Yet in their zeal,

## Muslims vs

Nasr says, these reformers carelessly tossed aside the rich perspectives of traditional Islamic thought for more streamlined – and often more literalist – approaches to sacred teaching. "This effort didn't go very far," Nasr says, "because instead of being integrated into Islamic culture, the science was merely tacked on."

Nasr's call for an Islamic approach to modern science has no shortage of critics who see it as spurious (and as politically correct) as appeals for Indian science, Chinese science, or even feminist science.

But even scholars who acknowledge that culture may have some effect on how people conceive the practice of science say that, finally, certain standards of scientific practice must be upheld, whether the work is being done in Bombay or Beirut.

And the real problem in most of the Islamic world, Hoodbhoy insists, is an "unresolved tension between traditional and modern modes of thought and social behaviour." Muslims who embrace uncritical literalism cannot embrace the scientific method, which requires that facts and hypotheses be tested heedless of any established authority. Hoodbhoy sums up the problem eloquently:

"If the scientific method is trashed, no amount of resources or loud declarations of intent to develop science can compensate. In those circumstances, scientific research becomes, at best, a kind of cataloging or 'butterfly-collecting' activity. It cannot be a creative process of genuine inquiry in which bold hypotheses are made and checked."

**T**he Islamic world's most recent "gift" to the world of science is *The Atlas of Creation*, writes **BARRY DUKE**. Measuring 11 x 17 inches and weighing 12 pounds, it has a bright red cover and almost 800 glossy pages, most of them lavishly illustrated. It is probably the largest, costliest and most beautiful creationist challenge yet to Darwin's theory – and it is being sent unsolicited to seats of learning, to scientists and to politicians throughout the West.

Behind this hugely expensive exercise in monumental stupidity is the Turkish Muslim fundamentalist, Adnan Oktar, who, under the name Harun Yahya, has produced numerous books, videos and DVDs on science and faith – in which he attacks, in particular, what he calls the "deceit" inherent in the theory of evolution.

The book says that creatures today are just like creatures that lived in the fossil past, so evolution must be impossible.



# inquiry? A new study is sparking debate vs Science

According to a recent report in the *New York Times*, "in bowing to Scripture, Mr Yahya resembles some fundamentalist creationists in the United States. But he is not among those who assert that Earth is only a few thousand years old. The principal argument of *Atlas of Creation*, advanced in page after page of stunning photographs of fossil plants, insects and animals, is that creatures living today are just like creatures that lived in the fossil past. Ergo, Mr Yahya asserts, evolution must be impossible, illusory, a lie, a deception or 'a theory in crisis'."

The book caused a stir earlier this year when a French translation materialised at high schools, universities and museums in France. Until then, creationist literature was relatively rare in France, according to Armand de Ricqlès, a professor of historical biology and evolutionism at the Collège de France. Scientists spoke out against the book, he said in an e-mail message, and "thanks to the highly centralised public school system in France, it was possible to organise that the books sent

to lycées would not be made available to children."

So far, no similar response has emerged in the United States. "In our country we are used to nonsense like this," said Kevin Padian, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who, like colleagues there, found a copy in his mailbox.

He said people who had received copies were "just astounded at its size and production values and equally astonished at what a load of crap it is."

"If he sees a picture of an old fossil crab or something, he says, 'See, it looks just like a regular crab, there's no evolution'," Dr Padian said. "Extinction does not seem to bother him. He does not really have any sense of what we know about how things change through time."

Kenneth R Miller, a biologist at Brown University, said he and his colleagues in the life sciences had all received copies. When he called friends at the University of Colorado and the University of Chicago, they had the books too, he said. Scientists at Brigham Young University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Georgia and others have also received them.

"I think he must have sent it to every full professor in the medical school," said Kathryn L Calame, a microbiologist at the Columbia University medical school who received a copy. "The genetics department, the biochem department, micro - everybody I talked to had it." While they said they were unimpressed with the book's content, recipients marvelled at its apparent cost. "If you went into a bookstore and saw a book like this, it would be at least \$100," said Dr Miller, an author of conventional biology texts. "The production costs alone are astronomical. We are talking millions of dollars."

In the book and on his website ([www.harunyahya.com](http://www.harunyahya.com)), Yahya says he was born in Ankara in 1956, and grew up and was educated in Turkey. He says he seeks to unmask what the book calls "the imposture of evolutionists" and the links between their scientific views and modern evils like fascism, communism and terrorism. He says he hopes to encour-

age readers "to open their minds and hearts and guide them to become more devoted servants of God."

Taner Edis, associate professor of physics at Truman State University, Kirksville, and author of *An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam* (Prometheus Books, 2007), points out that in the 1970s, as in the rest of the Muslim world, political Islam started to gain strength in Turkey.

"Evolution became a minor item in the culture war, a way for Islamists to demonstrate opposition to secular life without naming official secularism as a target. But creationism came into its own in the mid-1980s, when religious conservatives gained control of the Turkish Ministry of Education. Conservative Muslims thought evolutionary ideas were morally corrosive, yet they found themselves in an environment where science commanded significant cognitive authority.

"So they needed a way to suggest that evolution was a scientifically dubious idea, a fraud. They found the resources they needed in Protestant 'scientific creationism', and invoked Christian creationists just as the secularists tended to rely on Western scientific authorities. While the Muslims down-played some features of Protestant creationism such as a young earth and flood geology, they adopted the bulk of the anti-evolutionary debating points developed by their Christian counterparts.

"Indeed, the Education Ministry had many instances of 'scientific creationist' literature officially translated and made available to high schools and teachers. Since this mid-80's breakthrough, Turkish textbooks have often contained anti-Darwinian or explicitly creationist material. The creationist paragraphs disappeared during the infrequent periods when secular leftists shared power, and reappeared when the Islamists returned to government.

"The last ten years have seen a deepening of the popular appeal of Turkish creationism and its international spread. The central figure in this development is Harun Yahya, a pseudonym that serves as a brand name for a ubiquitous, well-funded, and media-intensive form of creationist propaganda.

"In content, there is nothing new in the Yahya material: worthless arguments and distortions of science often copied from Christian anti-evolution literature, presented with a conservative Muslim emphasis. The range and production quality of this material, however, is impressive. Large numbers of glossy books, magazines, videos, web sites, and public events make Yahya's simple, intuitively appealing creationism available to a large public.

(Continued on p13)



**Creationist Adnan Oktar, author of *The Atlas of Creation*. After its distribution, bloggers around the world began pouring scorn on his brainchild, calling it, among other things, "a load of crap." Oktar retaliated by persuading the Turkish judiciary to block these internet blogs, hosted mainly by Wordpress.com. People trying to visit Wordpress from Turkey are seeing this message: "Access to this site has been suspended in accordance with decision no: 2007/195 of T C Fatih 2.Civil Court of First Instance." The Freethinker website is also hosted by Wordpress, which means that it cannot be accessed in Turkey.**



# Stalin, Hitler and God: Three faces of Evil

FEW people today regard Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin as a hero. Consequently, fewer citations of their behavior are necessary in order to prove that they conform to any reasonable definition of "evil" than would be needed to convince the victims of media propaganda that Mohandas Gandhi and Mother Teresa were less than admirable. A couple of incidents from the life of each should be sufficient.

Hitler signed an agreement at Munich guaranteeing that he would make no further territorial demands on European nations—and then promptly annexed Czechoslovakia and invaded Poland. He signed a non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union—and then invaded the country he had agreed could remain neutral. He encouraged his fellow Catholics in Croatia to attack Serbia and massacre over 100,000 Eastern Orthodox Christians. But his most memorable venture into unspeakable evil was his attempt, in partnership with Pope Pius XII, to exterminate a non-Catholic religion in a conspiracy that, since the publication of a novel of the same name, has come to be known as the Holocaust.

Estimates of the number of persons killed at Stalin's orders, including the Ukrainian genocide, Party purges, and executions, range from 3 million to sixty million. Russian writer Vadim Erlikman makes the following estimates: executions 1.5 million; gulags 5 million; deportations resulting in death 1.7 million (out of 7.5 million deported); and 1 million POWs and German civilians. And those figures do not include the 6 to 8 million victims of a famine that some historians believe was imposed intentionally as a campaign of repression against kulaks. Stalin was a repressive dictator who murdered all allies whom he considered potential rivals, and whole populations whose mere existence he considered an annoyance (*Wikipedia*).

Rather more examples of actions which his own addicts attribute to God are necessary in order to show that he is at least the equal of Hitler and Stalin in oppression, genocide, and capricious serial killings. And the best place to start is his own official biography.

According to the fantasy novel known as *Genesis* (as interpreted by biblical literalists), the first humans co-existed with dinosaurs less than 10,000 years ago, T-Rex and all other animals were vegetarians, death did not exist, and "sin" did not exist because nothing was illegal. So that he could have something to ban, God capriciously planted a fruit-tree in the middle of the garden and ordered Adam and Eve not to eat from it. They disobeyed, and he punished them by sentencing them to death. So far that makes him no more evil than George W Bush. But he did not stop there. He also sentenced all of their descendants to death. Didn't Hitler do something like that, sentencing descendants to death because their ances-

tors had chosen to be Jewish?

A little later, God murdered the entire population of planet earth except for one family of his pets, basically because he damned well felt like it. He murdered the entire population of Sodom and Khomorah, again with the exception of a single family of his pets, because a huge outcry against them had come to his attention (*Genesis* 18:20), and he deemed the presence of a few righteous people among them irrelevant. Abraham cajoled him into sparing the cities if as many as ten righteous persons could be found among them, but when the number turned out to be less than that he sent down his thunderbolts. Less than ten righteous persons in a whole city? Oh come now. The number of righteous persons in

**WILLIAM HARWOOD compares God to two murderous dictators – and concludes that the deity is by far the most evil**

Washington, DC, is more than that.

In more recent times God has been credited with authorizing Hurricane Katrina, the Asian tsunami, earthquakes in India, the Philippines and elsewhere, the World Trade Center atrocity, the starvation of several million in Africa, and the creation of AIDS. In each of those situations, God's own apologists have accepted responsibility on his behalf, and declared that, even though he is possessed of the omnipotence to have prevented them, he had perfectly good reasons for letting them happen. According to one theofascist apologist, God leveled New Orleans in retaliation for the alleged offenses of a former resident. If punishing the innocent for the guilt of others does not put God into the same troika of evil as Stalin and Hitler, it is because, to his sycophants, "When God does it, it's not evil." And when the president does it, it's not illegal. So said Richard Nixon.

If God was omnipotent and omnibenevolent, and actually existed, humans would not need to urinate, defecate or menstruate; AIDS, cancer, multiple sclerosis and the common cold would not exist; Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell would never have been born; Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter would be confined to insane asylums for the term of their natural lives; Tom Cruise would not be a shill for the confidence swindle that is fleecing him, because L. Ron Hubbard would have spent his life wearing a paper hat and asking, "Do you want fries with that?"; no one would ever be hungry; and there would be only one religion and no non-theists, because a non-imaginary god would have unambiguously demonstrated his existence by appearing on the *Tonight Show* and the *Late Show*, turning



*Hitler, Stalin and God*

the studio audiences (temporarily) into chimpanzees, and raising Katie Couric's ratings from the dead.

But do persons who adamantly insist that God is nicer than Hitler or Stalin acknowledge that he has a lot to answer for? They justify their not doing so with the rationalization, "He has his reasons." Do they suggest that maybe he is not omnipotent and therefore could not have prevented the aforesaid evils? Do they suggest that maybe he is not omniscient, and did not learn of the aforesaid evils in time to prevent them? Do they suggest that he is not omnipresent, and therefore could not prevent atrocity A because he was currently engaged in preventing atrocity B? They do not. Nor do they suggest that maybe he is simply a capricious, sadistic son of a bitch who gets his orgasm substitute by mass murder, torture and oppression. Yet those same apologists for God offer no similar defence for the actions of Hitler or Stalin. Go figure. And they do not suggest that, since God's own biography acknowledges that he is jealous, perhaps his jealousy of Hitler and Stalin is what makes him determined to outdo them.

Persons who praise or defend Hitler or Stalin thereby make themselves unemployable. If their endorsement of evil makes them a threat to public safety, they are incarcerated in mental hospitals. It is high time persons who defend or praise God faced the same consequences.

**William Harwood is the author of *For This We Thank Our Führer: Why the God Fantasy is a Crime Against Humanity*, and editor/translator of *The Fully Translated Bible*.**



*FREETHINKER* readers will need little introduction to Paul Kurtz, professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. It is unlikely any of his 45 books will not have been reviewed in this and/or similar periodicals over the years.

What he has served up here is much more basic than his other works. It sets out to answer the question that is its title – *What Is Secular Humanism?* – and does so with refreshing accessibility in what amounts to little more than a booklet. Yet much, for the person making her or his first explorations into humanism, is crammed into that booklet.

It's an excellent starting point, therefore, for the person who has begun to ask questions about humanism in general and secular humanism in particular, dealing with its history and roots, looking along the way at secularism itself, modern and contemporary secular humanism, a naturalistic outlook on the cosmos, methods of enquiry and non-theism.

There is little point in reiterating in detail here what will be known to most; but my rea-

## What Is Secular Humanism?

ANDY ARMITAGE reviews *What Is Secular Humanism?* by Paul Kurtz, Prometheus Books, NY, pbk, 62 pp, US\$9.95

son for recommending this little book is that it would be a delightful gift for a friend, a child – even a parent or grandparent!

Kurtz emphasises just how secular humanism uses reason to solve human problems. Humans will apply science and technology, and secular humanism is confident in this. I would add a note of caution, in that (and I'm

sure most agree) science has not answered *everything*, and – although we believe that it can do so *in principle* – there's every likelihood that the human race will be replaced with something else or die out completely before all the answers could be gathered in.

This leaves us with some interesting mysteries. Many secular humanists are apt to disregard them completely if there is not a technological or scientific explanation, rather than put them on one side labelled "mystery – interesting but as yet unexplained".

That aside, Kurtz is keen to assert that, although humanism is "the modern-day version of classical atheism in what it rejects", it also expresses "a positive normative concern for developing constructive ethical values relevant to the present conditions of humankind".

Human freedom and fulfilment are the highest human values, according to secular humanism, he says, and, he concludes, "In all of these ways it offers a new paradigm for guiding human life in what might be termed the post-postmodern era."

## Muslims v Science

(Continued from p11)

"None of this material is marked out as being religious literature of interest only to a conservative Muslim subculture; from its presentation style to its use of everyday language, Yahya material is designed to be marketed to ordinary, modern Muslims who need not be attracted to strictly observant varieties of Islam. Furthermore, Yahya material is artificially cheap, and is often distributed free of cost. Clearly the Yahya enterprise has considerable financial backing, though the source of these funds remains unknown.

"Turkish scientists have tried to counter such popular creationism, but in the public arena, the creationists have won. Building on their success in Turkey, the Yahya brand of creationists have more recently gone global. Today, Yahya material is available in languages spoken by Islamic populations all over the world. Yahya books are prominently displayed in Islamic bookstores in London, used in classrooms in Pakistan, promoted by speaking tours in Indonesia.

"We now have a global variety of Islamic creationism that goes beyond long-standing Muslim resistance to Darwinian ideas. Many modern Muslims are attracted to claims that Darwinian evolution is scientifically false, and that science, properly done, supports Koranic notions of special creation.

In the Muslim world, defenders of Darwinian evolution are associated with political secularism. And in the last few decades, secularism has been increasingly discredited as

an alien cultural imposition, a tool of despotic regimes, and the ideology of Westernised elites who have lost touch with the pious bulk of Muslim populations.

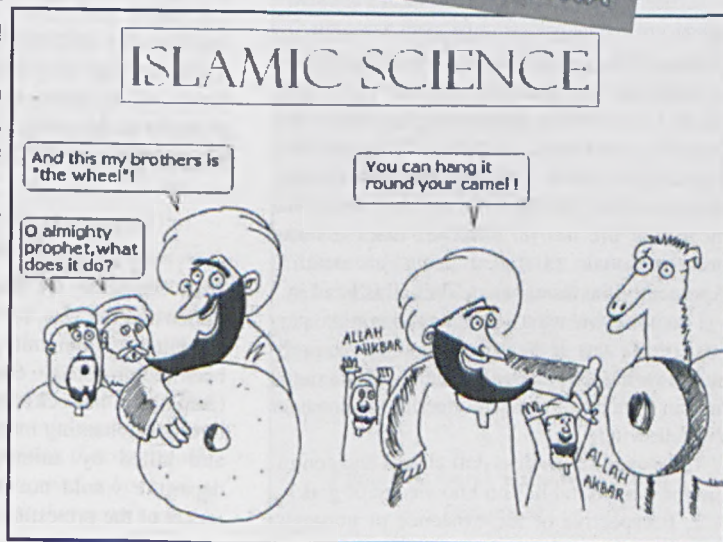
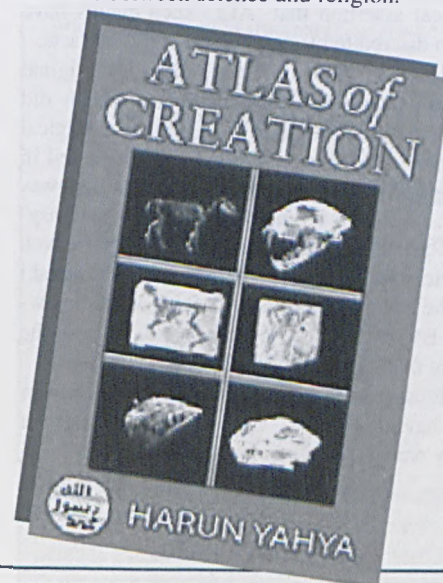
In European history, the development of popular democracy included an anticlerical element, so that science, secularism and democracy have often been allied. Among Muslims, however, anti-evolution sentiments belong to political moderates and democratic forces more than to stereotypical militants. In Muslim lands, more democracy typically means religious populism, less political secularism, and a tension between science and democracy.

"Overall, this means that creationism is likely to remain strong in Muslim populations. The prospects for a Western-style accommodation between science and religion, where each has their separate sphere, are doubtful.

"Culturally and politically, conservative interpretations of Islam are very strong, and conservative Muslims see little reason to back off from the ideal of religion regulating all aspects of life.

"Revelation, Muslim thinkers usually insist, must condition how we understand the world. All this may change, as this is a time of experimentation and rapid religious change in the Muslim world. Political Islam may yet fail, especially in its promise to make Muslims equal players in the realm of technology-driven development. Conservative

failure could create more space for more liberal versions of Islam and for the autonomy of science. But in the short term, the Islamic world will continue to harbour very serious tensions between science and religion.





## Parapsychology

I CAN assure William Harwood (*Points of View*, August) that I am aware of the excellent work done by CSICOP and the *Skeptical Inquirer* in debunking crackpottery.

However, for an account of laboratory experiments which appear to indicate the presence of PSI I would refer him to Bem and Honorton, *Does Psi Exist?* (*Philosophical Bulletin*, 1994, Vol 115, No. 1, pp 4-8) and Bem, Palmer & Broughton, *Updating the Ganzfeld Database* (*Journal of Para-psychology*, Vol 65, Sept 2001, pp 1-5)

For rigorously controlled experiments with mediums he should read three papers by Robertson & Roy (*Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol 65.2, No 863, April 2001, pp 91-106; Vol 65.3, No 864, July 2001, pp 161-174; and Vol 68.1, No 874, Jan. 2004, pp 18-34) which report a PSI effect with a very high degree of probability.

These two groups of experiments demonstrate the highly probable occurrence of anomalous transfers of information. Comparable studies report the occurrence of anomalous kinetic effects on a small scale, but with a statistically significant probability, though in this field the most striking evidence comes from some of the spontaneous cases investigated by the SPR. At present, therefore, Harwood's categorical assertion that 'ALL' such claims have been discredited is not supported by the facts.

However, all this is irrelevant to my original paper (*God's Advocate*, February) which did NOT assert the validity of parapsychological research. To labour the argument I repeated in *Points of View*, May, the point of my article was that, EVEN IF its methods are valid, parapsychology tells us nothing about God or Heaven or Hell, just as the reasoning of Behe, Demski or the Dalai Lama tells us nothing worth knowing EVEN IF their logic is valid. This is the point that has escaped Harwood.

He is quite right, of course, to berate me for not having made it "very well". In future, for slow readers, I will try to be more explicit.

JACK HASTIE  
Scotland

## Jonathan Edwards

WHILST it was encouraging to read of Jonathan Edwards' recognition that Christianity is nonsense, he needs to go that extra mile before he can be the ambassador for reason that Graham Newbury suggests (*Freethinker*, September 2007). In the final paragraph, Edwards asks, "If there is no God, does that mean that life has no purpose? Does it mean that personal existence ends at death?" Apparently the thoughts are doing his head in.

I do not know what Jonathan thought the purpose of life was, if there was a god, but he probably now accepts that god is an unsubstantiated human concept and he might like to consider the following.

1. Despite the endless daft claims and contradictions, mankind has no knowledge of god.

2. Irrespective of the existence or non-exis-

tence of god, there is no known purpose for life to exist in the first place, nor does it have any known purpose now.

3. There is no known, verifiable evidence of an existence after death. The idea is, like religion itself, a human concoction of myth, superstition, fear and wishful thinking, and is utter nonsense.

When Jonathan gets his head round these facts, he will have become reasonable and his head relieved of being done in. He can then move on to enjoy what he has – a brief existence.

JOHN HUNT  
Camberley

## Strong language

I WOULD like to point out to Dr Stephen Moreton (*Points of View*, August) that the use of strong language in print rarely helps to clarify argument; it merely reflects the passion of the writer.

To refer to another's belief as "bollocks" is not only impolite but a travesty of language. Bollocks (testicles) are invaluable possessions in the male animal and in no way to be equated with "nonsense" or other derogatory metaphorical terms such as "tripe" or "rubbish."

DAVID JAMES  
London

## Jesus and religion

IT IS devious of William Harwood to claim that Jesus ignorantly invented a religion (*My Way or the Highway: Jesus and Mohammed as prototype theofascists*, July 2007). Insofar as no Jew of his time believed that the Messiah was divine, of course Jesus was an Ebionite: However, he would not have recognised this; he was a regular Pharisee, albeit one belonging to a gnostic Messianic sect (detailed in my book *The Rise and Fall of Jesus*). Jesus thought that he was fulfilling Jewish aspirations and the Law and had no intention of creating a new religion. Nor was he a "Nazirite"; he did not abstain from alcohol nor avoid corpses and graves. Nor did he come from Nazareth (yes he does seem to have come from Capernaum); his appellation "Nazarene" came from the name of the sect to which he belonged.

I agree with Harwood that Jesus was an example of a religious leader who believed that it was his Way or nothing, but that's not saying much: all religious leaders believe that they alone have the route to salvation. Jesus' Way was merely a Jewish Way.

STEUART CAMPBELL  
Edinburgh

## Shambo

THE sensitivity of the Welsh Assembly, the Police and the vets, for the religious feelings of the Hindu Community in West Wales has not been reciprocated. Shambo, the "sacred bull" (actually a bullock) was removed, through a throng of chanting monks and their supporters, and killed by animal welfare officers. His departure would not have been eased by the racket of the protesting horde.

Now two more sacred bullocks, suspected of having bovine tuberculosis, have been killed and one headline read, *Monk decries 'Nazi' killing of sacred bull*. The government vet and ten officials were again confronted by chanting Hindus. One of the animals, 16-year-old Bhakti, was considered by the vet to be too old to be moved before being slaughtered. He said that to do this would cause the animal to suffer unnecessarily. The younger animal could be moved.

The monks insisted that the aged bullock be moved from what they have declared to be "sacred ground" before being killed. The vet refused, did his professional duty and spared the animal additional suffering.

Brother Michael said: "I understand how the Jews must have felt in Nazi Germany waiting for fascist soldiers to knock on the door." Unlike the Jews, however, Brother Michael is still there parading his religious sensitivities and criticising a vet who put the distress of an animal before the raving of a religious community.

DENIS WATKINS  
Pembrokeshire

## Naming God

BISHOP Tiny Muskings told Dutch TV a few weeks ago that "God does not mind what he is named". (God is surprisingly inarticulate for someone who is omnipotent, as bishops always seem compelled to speak on his behalf.)

This means we are free to call Him "Murderer", "Racist", or "Misogynist", or any one of a number of apt names; just remember to mention when chatting to Him, that Bishop Muskings said it was OK.

FABIAN ACKER  
London

## Jerusalem

I WISH people would lighten up about "Jerusalem". It would be a perfectly good National Anthem. The first verse is four questions, to which the answer in each case is 'no'. The "dark Satanic mills" are not cotton mills: they are churches. The second verse is entirely aspirational. It does not mention any religious symbolism or metaphor, Jerusalem being a metaphor for "a better Britain". Further, we all know both verses, which is more than can be said of the pathetic royal anthem we have to put up with at the moment.

KEN BALDRY  
London

## Regensburg row and fatwas

MAY I deal with two points. First, I am sorry that I seem to have got on the wrong side of Dr Jon Gower Davies. I have looked again at the Pope's reported address at Regensburg, and I stick to my reading of it. Benedict explicitly says that he is using, from Manuel II's dialogue, "only one point – itself rather marginal to the dialogue itself – which can serve as a starting point for my reflections on this theme" – ie faith and reason. His final mention of Manuel merely reiterates that God acts reasonably. The text I used is at <http://news.bbc>.





co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15\_09\_06\_pope.pdf.

Dr Davies's main point concerns my remark that one might advise public figures not to mention Mohammed. I agree it wasn't very funny, but it wasn't very serious either. I simply tried to point out that some matters are so sensitive with some people, that it is almost impossible to avoid offence being taken. I didn't mean to imply that they should not be raised.

Second, I thank the Editor for drawing to our attention the website **Islamonline.net**, with its crackpot "fatwa bank". This is a great help to us all. We must all have worried, for example, about the correct length of the beard of an imam leading prayers. The answer is that Allah accepts beards of any length. What a relief. But he is adamant that moustaches must be trimmed. Again, I am sure we wish to know how many times to wash our backsides after using the loo. It must be three, or an odd number larger than three. That was the practice of the Prophet (peace be upon him). But eyebrows are puzzling. Plucking them is forbidden to women (and presumably men), since that is interfering with Allah's creation. But it is permissible to remove hairs between the eyebrows. Are these not also Allah's work? And if not, how do we distinguish between a hair which is part of the eyebrow, under divine protection, and one very near to it? So it goes on. Hours of fun for young and old.

But the fatwas are more serious. Many concern crime and punishment, war and peace, and major moral issues. The Islamic authorities rule on matters sometimes of life and death, in accordance with the fantasies of an illiterate 6th-century Arab merchant, who suffered the delusion that he received messages from God. Hundreds of millions believe this nonsense, and the thought is not reassuring.

**JOHN RADFORD**  
London

THE petty absurdities of Islamic rules and regulations as described in August's *Freethinker* are risible, but those who have been brought up under religious totalitarianism only feel comfortable when they hand over every aspect of their lives to some higher authority. Any kind of questioning, creativity or independence of spirit has long since been beaten, literally or figuratively, out of them. We in Western cultures find it difficult to understand the absolute control Islam can wield over people's lives.

Even those not subjected to this type of conditioning can prefer certainty to doubt and it is said that believers and atheists are happier than agnostics. Often religions will target young adults who lack self confidence about their own identities, and feel something is missing in their lives. It is a common technique for religious organisations to approach first-year students at universities because they know that some freshers, away from home for the first time, will be lonely and consequently vulnerable to offers of friendship and sympathy from evangelicals.

Movements seeking converts also exploit the fact that many people are intellectually lazy and find it far easier to be told what to think than to

think for themselves. Add to this the appeal to the infantile need to be unconditionally loved, and promises to assuage the universal fear of death, and it is little wonder that religions still survive and flourish.

In times of crisis and instability people turn to religion for comfort, hope, or out of sheer terror. If global warming really takes hold and human life becomes more uncertain, unpleasant and unstable, many will revert to primitive tribal belief systems and superstitions in a vain attempt to placate their gods and regain some control over existence.

**DINAH FOWERAKER**  
Bristol

### Manifestations of 'holy' images

WITH reference to Lynette Van Dam's article (*Freethinker*, February 2007) on the alleged manifestation of "holy" figures (such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and no doubt Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all) on a variety of unlikely artefacts, I would raise the following queries.

1. You would think any self-respecting "Holy One" would have more taste, if not sense, than to consent to appearing in such a very suspect and inappropriate manner! Perhaps their next appearance will be in a cow-pat! Is it not odd that these marvellously persisting if elusive spirits, floating no doubt between heaven and earth, should choose to make themselves known by such a very unlikely manifestation when it was open to them to have put in an appearance in a far more public and even publically advertised manner?

2. To what extent have the artifacts in question been "assisted" into a resemblance of sorts to the "holy figures", whether in their material "embodiment" or in the photographic record alleged to have been made of them?

3. Surely it is more than a little odd that the persons – if they ever actually existed – who are, allegedly, so manifested, were never known to have been recorded by their contemporaries in either a visual or even a literary depiction. (Of course, that has not prevented artists of a much later period from depicting their features – informed, no doubt, by divine inspiration. And in the case of Mohammed even this was forbidden, which didn't stop his devotees from "recognising" him in cartoon form!) So the "discoverers" of these miraculous epiphanies can claim no more than that what they encountered – or produced – was a likeness to a completely invented appearance, sanctioned at most only by very belated artistic tradition. I think a final word on these "miracles" may be found in Richard Dawkins' *Climbing Mount Improbable*, where he writes (on page 2):

*The Natural History Museum in London has a quirky collection of stones that chance to resemble familiar objects: a boot, a hand, a baby's skull, a duck, a fish. They were sent in by people who genuinely suspected that the resemblance might mean something. But ordinary stones weather into such a welter of shapes, it is not surprising if occasionally we find one that calls to mind a boot, or a duck. Out of all the stones that people notice*

*as they walk about, the museum has preserved the ones that they pick up and keep as curiosities. Thousands of stones remain uncollected because they are just stones. The coincidences of resemblance in this museum collection are meaningless, though amusing. The same is true when we think we see faces, or animal shapes, in clouds or cliff profiles. The resemblances are accidents.*

**ALBERT ADLER**  
London

### Bill the Irish for abortions

ON a recent visit to Dublin I observed that a protest march was taking place against allowing legal abortions to be performed in the Irish Republic. The pregnant females then mainly come to the UK to have them performed on the overworked NHS. I suggest that the bill for these operations be sent to the Irish government.

**PETER SUTHERLAND**  
Scotland

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## Events & Contacts

**Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Friends Meeting House, George Road, Edgbaston. Tuesday, Oct 9, 7.45 pm. Stuart Pedley-Smith: *Belief, Belief Systems and Truth*.

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, Nov 6, 7.30pm. Barry Duke, editor of the *Freethinker: Turning the Tide Against Fundamentalism*.

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

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

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 01494 771851. Hemel Hempstead School, Tuesday, Oct 9, 8pm. Public meeting. *God and the Tsunami*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Harrow Humanist Society.** Meetings second Wednesday of every month (except July and August) 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Our next meeting on October 10 will be a showing on DVD of Al Gore's double Oscar-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth*. Non-members welcome. Admission free. Further 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, Oct 4, 8pm. Robert Mills: *Humanist Ceremonies*. Thursday, Nov 1, 8pm. Forum: *Everyday Ethics*.

**Humanism for Inquirers:** [www.humanists.freeerve.co.uk](http://www.humanists.freeerve.co.uk)

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Sq, Leeds. Tuesday, October 9, 7.30pm. Jemma Hooper: *Six Myths about Humanism*.

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

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, Oct 18, 8pm. Sue Mayer: *Mixed Games and Social Control*.

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

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** Information: Howard Kinberley 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.

**Pink Triangle Trust:** Registered Charity promoting humanism and obtaining justice. PTT 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB. [www.pinktriangle.org.uk](http://www.pinktriangle.org.uk)

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

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, Oct 3, 8pm. Public 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](mailto:library@ethicalsoc.org.uk). Monthly programmes on request.

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

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

[www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk)

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

**The Thomas Paine Society:** Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq, London WC1.

Saturday Nov 3, 2pm. Robert Morell: *Moncure Conway, Paine's Great Biographer*.

**Think Humanism:** An independent discussion forum for anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought - [www.thinkhumanism.com](http://www.thinkhumanism.com)

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

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

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

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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