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The voice of atheism since 1881

Catholic Church intensifies its irresponsible war on condoms

Aids activists despair over 'outrageous lies' spread by the Vatican

WHEN the London Oratory School last month reneged on its offer to raise money for the UK-based Aids charity, the Terrence Higgins Trust, the furore that followed the Catholic school's decision drew attention once again to the Vatican's stupid and dangerous opposition to condoms.

The decision to suddenly drop THT as a beneficiary from the Song of Hope Concert on December 1 came just weeks after the head of the Catholic Church in Mozambique, Archbishop Francisco Chimoio, told the BBC that he believed some European-made condoms were deliberately infected with the HIV virus. These condoms, he said, were being manufactured in two European countries with the aim of "finishing off" Africans. He declined to name the countries concerned.

Chimoio made the remarks at an event to mark 43 years since the launch of the country's armed struggle for independence. Some 17.5 percent of Mozambicans are Catholic.

"If we want to change the situation regarding HIV/Aids, it's necessary to have a new mentality. If we don't change our mentality we'll be finished off quickly. It means marriage, people being faithful to their wives... (and) young people abstaining from sexual relations."

Commenting afterwards in an article highly critical of the Vatican and its stooges, Jaq Bayles, writing in the November issue of the Brighton-based gay magazine, *GScene*, said:

"You'd think, after all this time and with the massive body of evidence to back up this claim, the blinkered crazies who run the world's biggest organised religion would have woken up to the fact that they could save an awful lot more lives by sanctioning the use of condoms rather than by refusing to allow abortion."

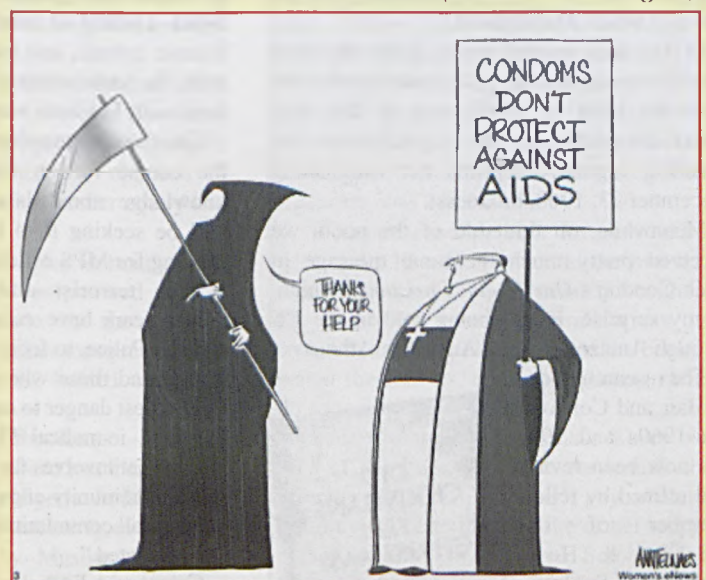
She added: "Actually, the idea in Catholic mythology that

condoms are a weapon of mass destruction is not new. Back in 2003, Steve Bradshaw, reporting in the *Guardian* on the upcoming broadcast of a BBC1 Panorama programme, *Sex and the Holy City*, said that in Lwak, Kenya, the director of an Aids testing centre said he could not distribute condoms because of Church opposition. Gordon Wambi told the programme: 'Priests have been saying that condoms are laced with HIV/Aids'."

In an article last month in the American political on-line magazine, *Counterpunch*, Michael Dickenson, writer and satirical artist, pointed out that Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family, had officially announced "The Aids virus is roughly 450 times smaller than the spermatozoon and can easily pass through the 'net' that is formed by the condom – and advised millions of people from Asia to Latin America not to use them.

"In Kenya – where an estimated 20 percent of people have HIV – the church condemns condoms for promoting promiscuity and repeats the claim about their permeability. The arch-

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AS the turkey-slaughtering season is now upon us (the bird 'flu cull aside), I am reminded of the shockwaves sent across the US 39 years ago when atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair – later dubbed America's Most Hated Woman – revealed an unpalatable truth about Christmas.

Speaking on America's first atheist radio series – broadcast weekly by the Texas-based KTVC radio station owned by then-President Lyndon Baines Johnson – O'Hair declared:

"Someone stole something from me. I don't like it. What was stolen from me – and from you – was one of the most beautiful holidays in the world.

"Robert G Ingersoll, an American atheist hero of earlier days, was also angry about this theft. He wrote a very famous 'Christmas sermon'. It was printed in the *Evening Telegram* newspaper, New York City, on December 19, 1891. The ministers of the day attacked the newspaper and demanded a boycott of it ..."

She revealed that part of what Ingersoll had to say was this: "The good part of Christmas is not always Christian, it is generally Pagan; that is to say, human and natural. Christianity did not come with tidings of great joy, but with a message of eternal grief. It came with the threat of everlasting torture on its lips. It meant war on earth and perdition thereafter.

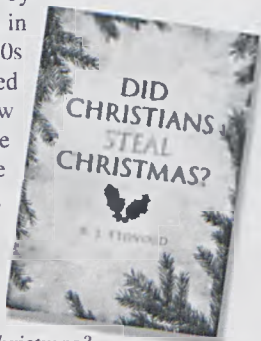
"It taught some good things, the beauty of love and kindness in man. But as a torch-bearer, as a bringer of joy, it has been a failure. It has given infinite consequences to the acts of finite beings, crushing the soul with a responsibility too great for mortals to bear. It has filled the future with fear and flame, and made God the keeper of an eternal penitentiary, destined to be the home of nearly all the sons of men. Not satisfied with that, it has deprived God of the pardoning power ..."

O'Hair pointed out: "Ingersoll said that Christians *borrowed* the Pagan holiday. I use a stronger word. They *stole* it."

O'Hair then spelled out in detail precisely why Christmas had nothing whatsoever to do with the birth of Jesus, and to this day, American Atheists, the organisation she founded, regularly reprints her astonishing December 23, 1968, broadcast.

Meanwhile, on this side of the pond, we received pretty much the same message in Dick Condon's *Our Pagan Christmas*, which, to my surprise, is still being sold in the US through Amazon, and by American Atheists.

The research done by O'Hair and Condon in the 1960s and 1970s has now been revised and refined by fellow member of the Brighton & Hove Humanist Society, Robert Stovold, who has produced an illustrated 32-page booklet *Did Christians Steal Christmas?*



published by the National Secular Society.

The booklet contains a foreword by Terry Sanderson, President of the NSS, and can be purchased securely online from the National Secular Society's website (www.secularism.org.uk).

You can also order copies by writing to: **Robert Stovold, Flat 5, 8 Bath Street, Brighton, BN1 3TB.**

The booklet costs £2.99 plus 50p postage; cheques should be made payable to the NSS.

I can assure you, *Did Christians Steal Christmas?* makes a fascinating read, and no atheist should be without a copy.

Christmas, and a course about Islam for the police, engage Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE in his last column of the year



THE British taxpayer is frequently called upon to cough up cash for some pretty ditty enterprises – and they don't come much dafter than a course designed to brainwash police officers into believing that Islam, far from being a vicious harbinger of hate, is really quite cute and cuddly. No, *really!*

According to religious think-tank, *Ekklesia*, the Metropolitan Police have signed a deal with a US company to provide them with an introductory course about Islam.

The Jones Knowledge Group announced yesterday that it was to bring its new course *Understanding Islam: An Introduction* to police officers in the Metropolitan Police (MPS) Territorial Police Command in London.

Ekklesia says: "The online course is designed for corporations, school districts, and governmental organisations. It looks at the historical context of Islam, the complexities of Islamic culture, and tries to equip the learner with 'the tools necessary to improve their relations with Muslims worldwide.'"

Chief Superintendent Dave Grant praised the course for its depth of knowledge about Islam and will be seeking it to be core training for MPS officers.

"The terrorist attacks in recent years have caused us, the Met Police, to focus activities around those who present the greatest danger to our communities, ie radical Muslims. Part of that involves far greater police community engagement between all communities likely to be affected."

Grant said he believed his knowledge of Islam was strong, until he completed the *Understanding Islam* course himself.

"I can only say that my

knowledge now is far superior to what it was. I found it to be eminently user-friendly, very informative and highly useful to operational police officers. Far, far better than anything I have seen in police circles before."

Grant has purchased a number of courses for his officers to help them deliver operational policing but with a greater understanding and empathy for Muslim communities.

The course was developed by a group of Islamic scholars, led by Ambassador Akbar Ahmed. Islamic scholars are well versed in the art of *takiyya* – that is, lying to the infidel – so we can only assume that the whole thing is an exercise in whitewashing.

Why, I wonder, is good money being spent on what is clearly a propaganda exercise, when all that needs to be known about Islam can be obtained free of charge from a number of websites which expose Islam for what it really is.

Among the best of these is *Apostates of Islam*, which clearly states:

"Humanity is facing a great danger. Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise and the hatred is brewing in the minds of millions of Muslims. This hatred must be contained or there would be disastrous consequences.

"We believe that education is the only answer. Muslim intellectuals must accept that Islam is a false doctrine and they must let the rest of Islamic world know the truth.

"Islam is a religion that thrives on the arrogant assumption that it is the most logical, the most scientific and the most perfect religion.

"The fact is that it is the stupidest of doctrines – the most backward and absurd belief. Once the truth about Islam becomes common knowledge, it will be weakened and the Islamic fanaticism will lose its fangs.

"Hundreds of billions of dollars are being expended to combat Islamic terrorism, yet no effort is made to contain the ideology behind this terrorism. It is our belief that Islamic terrorism will not be eliminated unless and until the ideology behind it is exposed and eradicated.

"This is what we intend to do."



Why waste money on courses when this is all the police need to know about Islam

Nigerian humanist leads protest against shariah court book banning

LEO Igwe, (pictured right), Director of the Centre for Inquiry in Nigeria, donned a gag last month outside a court to protest against the banning by Muslim authorities of a satirical play.

Written by Shehu Sani – a well-known human rights activist, social critic, author, and practising Muslim – the play, *Phantom Crescent*, was prosecuted by a group called the Concerned Sharia Forum. The work exposes the abuses and double standards of those implementing Sharia law in 12 states in Northern Nigeria.

Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim but has a sizeable Christian population, including those from the South who reside there. The court in Kaduna ordered Sani to cancel a planned performance of the play and to stop printing and distributing copies of it.

“I have received the court order, which we will comply with but which we will challenge legally,” Sani told AFP on the telephone from Kaduna.

‘As most Muslims cannot reason outside the Koran and Islam, they take Islamic darkness as light, and violently oppose any form of enlightenment outside Islam, opposed to Islam or critical of Islam’

“The play is a satire depicting how politicians, especially governors of the states implementing the Islamic sharia legal system, use it as a tool for looting the public treasury with impunity and for stifling opposition. I have contacted my lawyers who are prepared to fight this infringement of my fundamental right to freedom of expression.”

But when his appeal came before a shariah court in Kaduna, the court ruled that it had no jurisdiction over the case, and, at the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, the ban remained in place.

This case, says Igwe, has significant implications for human rights, democracy and civilisation in Nigeria.

“It is the first time such a case has been brought against a Muslim who is critical of this anachronistic legal system since sharia was imposed on Islamic majority states some years ago. The case comes at a time Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise in Nigeria – and around the world, with sharia as one of its most deadly and oppressive weapons.

Igwe added: “Shehu Sani said he wants to use the play to enlighten the local population

as to how sharia is being used to oppress them. And practically speaking, this is a tall order, which is likely get him into trouble with the Islamic theocrats and jihadists who do not tolerate any form of ‘enlightenment’ that is critical of Islam.”

Educationally, the Islamic majority states are the most backward in Nigeria. This is because the only form of education most people are exposed to is koranic recitation and indoctrination, which numbs and dumbs their minds, making them impervious to critical thinking, especially in matters concerning Islamic creeds and traditions.”

Koranic indoctrination, says Igwe, “has imprisoned and corrupted the minds and conscience of the local Islamic population, making them easy tools for manipulation and exploitation by Islamic jihadists and theocrats.

“Unfortunately, most Muslims in Northern Nigeria are in the dark as to how Islam has been used to oppress, exploit and tyrannise their lives. And the few who have realised the unjust nature of the system are too afraid to speak out against it.

“As most Muslims cannot reason outside the Koran and Islam, they take Islamic darkness as light, and violently oppose any form of enlightenment outside Islam, opposed to Islam or critical of Islam.

“One of the ways Islamic fundamentalists have demonstrated their moral backwardness and ignorance is through gross human rights violations. Islam is inherently opposed to human dignity and equality, gender equity and justice.”

According to Sani, the play dramatises the human rights violations perpetrated against women and poor people by the Hisbah. Hisbah is a bunch of jihadists masquerading as Sharia police or enforcers, funded with state money.

Since independence, thousands – tens of thousands – of Nigerians have lost their lives to religious bloodletting in Nigeria. In March this year, a Christian school teacher from Southern Nigeria was lynched by Muslim pupils for allegedly desecrating the Koran. And last month, Islamic jihadists attacked and killed at least nine Christians and burnt several churches in Kano – a sharia implementing state and an Islamic stronghold. In 2000, sharia riots across Nigeria claimed thousands of lives.



Evangelicals call for ban on Harry Potter books

AMERICA'S largest conservative organisation has called for the banning of the Harry Potter books and films after author J K Rowling revealed that main character Albus Dumbledore was a gay wizard. Chairman of The Christian Coalition of America, Roberta Combs, said she was disappointed that Rowling chose to “out” one of the most popular characters in children’s literature.

Ms Rowling, whose series about the boy wizard has made her an estimated £545m, sent shockwaves round the world last month when she told an audience of fans in New York that the headmaster of wizarding school Hogwarts was one of *those*.

“It’s not a good example for our children, who really like the books and the movies. I think it encourages homosexuality,” blathered Ms Combs. “I would never allow my own children or grandchildren to read the books or watch the movies, and other parents should do so too.”

Other Christians groups have never been fans of the books, because they think they promote witchcraft. Rowling’s gay revelation has only added to their dislike of her work.

Gay equality organisation Stonewall, on the other hand, praised Rowling for outing Dumbledore. “It shows that there’s no limit to what gay and lesbian people can do, even being a wizard headmaster,” said a spokesman.



Catholics on a collision course with

THOSE who are indifferent to, or sceptical about, the degree to which the churches still work to exercise political influence need only look at the unobvious battle that the Catholic church is at this moment waging against the Spanish government.

Spain's Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero has instituted a bold reforming agenda in his country, diluting church-state ties, ending direct government subsidy to the church, introducing same-sex marriage, easing divorce laws, and encouraging greater participation and opportunities for women in Spain's society and economy. He has also openly condemned the fascist Franco regime and honoured those who resisted it, something that beforehand was regarded in his country as too contentious and divisive to attempt.

None of this pleases the Catholic church, either in Spain itself or in the Vatican, showing by this (if iterated showing were needed) the reactionary, right-wing, backward colouration of church politics. In a deliberate and crude gesture of opposition to Zapatero, the Vatican has conducted its largest ever mass beatification, honouring 498 pro-Franco "victims of religious

persecution" during the Spanish Civil War. Those victims were fascists and their church supporters, and included 7,000 members of the Catholic clergy killed between 1931 and 1939 in an uprising against the staggering oppression by church and state that had kept the population

A C Grayling pulls no punches in this robust analysis of Vatican tactics, first published in the *Guardian* last month.

poor, benighted, ignorant, trapped, exploited and suffering. Look at most Catholic countries until the 1960s and beyond, in South America or Ireland or Spain: the picture of the social, political and economic effects of Catholicism is in its essentials the same.

Women enslaved to child-bearing, over-large families perpetuating ignorance and poverty, backward social policies and the iron grip of a clergy acting like the Stasi in controlling the minutiae of private lives through the confessional and the influence of fear – fear of hell, among other things. The small and, in the end, ineffectual "liberation theolo-

gy" rebellion among some South American clergy was quashed by the church hierarchy, not interested in salvation for anyone in this life except for the church itself as an institution, whose principal aim, like the politburo of the Chinese Communist party, is to stay in control at any cost.

The savagery of 1930s anticlericalism in Spain, with its deplorable murders and violence, is a mark of how bitterly the oppression was felt. Anticlericalism had been running strongly in Catholic Europe ever since the Inquisition and Counter-Reformation, when priests did the murdering; and Spain was not the only example of an anger-prompted murderous response to priestly oppression. Some might think that murder by priests is worse than murder of priests because priests, are most partic-



bishop of Nairobi, Raphael Ndingi Nzeki, said: 'Aids has grown so fast because of the availability of condoms.'

Dickenson also pointed out that the reason for the London Oratory School's decision to drop THT, whose fund-raising team had spent several months working on the concert, was "because the Trust advocates condom-use to prevent the spread of HIV, and it is also the lead organisation in the England & Wales gay men's health promotion partnership, both anathema to the Catholic church, which opposes any kind of contraception and considers homosexuality a sin. And although supposedly autonomous, the London Oratory is a Catholic school, and directly answerable to the Vatican."

On the inauguration of the current Pope, Benedict XVI, AIDS activists called on him to ease the papal ban on the use of condoms to prevent HIV.

"He has a great opportunity to help tackle the global HIV pandemic, said Nick Partridge, chief executive of the Terrence Higgins Trust at the time. "We hope that he will take it."

"He didn't. And he hasn't," wrote Dickenson. "And as usual, practicing Catholics follow the dictates of the Vatican, which condemn all sexual relationships outside marriage, and rejects the use of all forms of artificial birth control.

"The World Health Organization has condemned the Vatican's views, saying: 'These incorrect statements about condoms and HIV are dangerous when we are facing a global

The Vatican's War on Condoms

(Continued from p1)

pandemic which has already killed more than 20 million people, and currently affects at least 42 million.' The organisation says 'consistent and correct' condom use reduces the risk of HIV infection by 90 percent."

Cardinal Trujillo disputes that, saying "They are wrong about that. This is an easily recognisable fact."

Dickenson said: "The Catholic church's irresponsible and outrageous claims about condoms make the spread of HIV far harder to control, and indeed greatly help in sending the ignorant faithful to their early graves. The preservation of life must be of higher importance than the preservation of church regulations. Abstinence is not a practical option for many people.

"By axing the Terrence Higgins Trust as beneficiary of their World Aids Day gala, the London Oratory School has exposed itself as a deluded and hypocritical institution, an obedient tool of a right-wing control-freak pope. Any guests with half a heart choosing to sit through the school concert will surely have, along with the lovely music in their ears, a very nasty taste in their mouths."

The Pope's most recent attack on contraceptives took place at the end of October when



Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Trujillo, – partners in a world-wide conspiracy to spread Aids.



Benedict XVI addressed the 25th International Congress of Catholic Pharmacists at Vatican City.

He sparked sharp controversy when he urged them to avoid dispensing contraceptives and pregnancy-terminating drugs.

He insisted that conscientious objection must be recognised as a right by the pharmaceutical profession.

with reformist Spanish government



Holding photographs of priests killed in the Spanish civil war, Catholics attend the beatification ceremony – the Vatican's largest such ceremony ever. The 498 people beatified on Sunday were killed in 1934, 1936 and 1937. They are comprised of two bishops, 24 priests and 462 members of religious orders, as well as a deacon, a subdeacon, a seminary student and seven lay Catholics.

Photo: Andrew Medichini/Associated Press

ularly not supposed to murder, and if murdered (in the right circumstances, that is; not in bed with their mistresses or – more usually of late – choirboys) can claim martyrdom. But obviously murder by anyone of anyone is flatly wrong, and the Spanish revolution of the 1930s would have been better effected, *per*

impossibile, without the mayhem. Anger towards the church explains but does not excuse the violence unleashed on it; from this perspective of history, the reason why the church provoked such violence is the significant point.

Typically, learning nothing from this history, the Catholic church is trying its same tricks again, though beatifying Franco fascists as a way of rousing opposition to Zapatero's liberal policies is an uncharacteristically crude way of doing it.

The immediate reason for the Church's action is that in Spain's schools this autumn new civics courses are beginning, explaining and discussing the Spanish constitution and the rights of the citizen.

Because of what the constitution accords to gay people and women, the church is bitterly opposed to it, and to children knowing about it. The Catholic nun who is the church's liaison to the education ministry in Madrid told the press that the new civics course is "a frontal assault on the Catholic religion" and "part of a clear persecution...of the Catholic faith". One's response to her first complaint is "good", and to the second, "so: a bit of your own medicine; and salutary medicine at that – for everyone else".

The Catholic right in Spain, with Vatican assistance, is determined to recapture influence for the church and thereby to reverse the social gains that Spain has made under Zapatero's premiership. Their hopes are high; by law Catholicism is still taught in Spain's schools (though this has to be a target for Zapatero reforms too) and the church remains a large presence in the country and its life. So

the battle lines are drawn, and one of the last major conflicts of the Counter-Reformation appears ready to be played out there, as if in a *corrida* between the future and the past, freedom and oppression, sanity and superstition – or, to put the matter more graphically perhaps, between matador Zapatero and a load of [papal?] bull.

Editor's note: A movement has been afoot for decades in Spain to achieve the beatification of about 1,000 priests and nuns killed in the Civil War. But Pope Paul VI suspended the process in 1964, to avoid reopening wounds.

Pope John Paul II ordered the process resumed in 1983, when Spain was well into democratisation.

In March 1984, he beatified five people, three of them Carmelite nuns who were executed in one of the most vicious phases of the Spanish Civil War. The service was awkward for the then Spanish Socialist Government of Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, who had sought to heal the wounds left by the Civil War.

Governments of predominantly Catholic countries usually send high-ranking officials to such services, but Spain was represented by Leopoldo Torres Bourseault, the deputy president of the Chamber of Deputies.

The Pope, in a homily in Spanish, appeared to address Spanish sensitivities, saying Christian martyrdom represented "the seed of mutual understanding and never, as it would seem, of hatred and rancour."

But in documents distributed by the Vatican, the execution of the nuns was attributed to "hatred of the faith".

The church estimates that nearly 7,000 clergy were killed in Spain from 1931 to 1939.

It's a miracle! God kills the faithful in Peru but spares religious icons

IN THE August earthquake in Peru, the San Clemente church that towered over the plaza of Pisco, a coastal city, caved in during a funeral mass, killing 140. Rescue workers wept and declared a miracle when they pulled intact statues of Jesus and saints from the ruins.

According to a Reuters' report last month, "Peru's religious and seismic histories have intertwined for centuries. During major quakes, churches built centuries ago by Spanish colonialists tend to collapse, killing the faithful as they pray."

An icon that has survived earthquakes the longest is the *Senor de los Milagros*, a mural painted in a shrine by a slave.

It has attracted Roman Catholic worshippers seeking miracles since it emerged unscathed from the rubble of a quake that flattened Lima

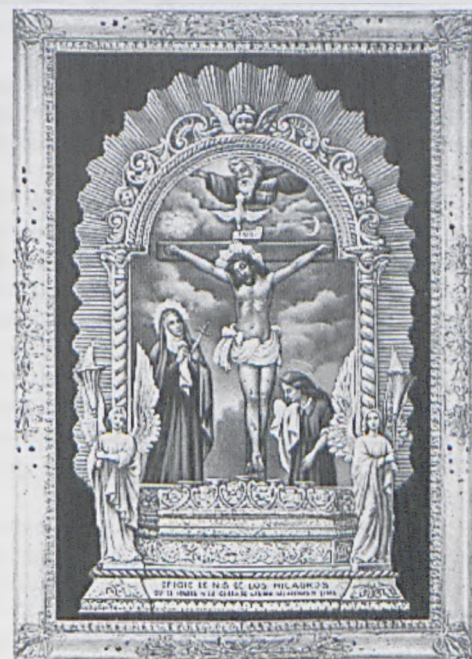
in 1655.

Since then, what is affectionately called the "Brown Christ" has survived hundreds of others, including an 8.0 magnitude earthquake in August that rattled Lima and killed more than 500 people south of the city.

The *Senor de los Milagros* has millions of devotees in Peru, and functions as the country's patron saint.

Followers around the world, from Japan to New York, claim the painting is not only quake proof, but has the power to cure the sick.

Peruvians flock to downtown Lima every year to take part in processions of the "Brown Christ." Many feast on the popular dish of anticucho – or grilled cow hearts – before heading to bullfights held in the saint's honour.



The Senor de los Milagros

Sweden clamps down on religious teaching

THE Swedish government is to crack down on the role religion plays in independent faith schools. The new rules will include a ban on biology teachers teaching creationism or "intelligent design" alongside evolution.

"Pupils must be protected from all forms of fundamentalism," Education Minister Jan Björklund told the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* last month.

Some Christian schools teach biology students that the world and all life upon it was created by a supreme being. This is often presented as another valid scientific theory alongside evolution – something most scientists reject.

Religious education will remain on the curriculum and it will still be allowed to start the school day with prayers. But in classes teachers will be expected to stick to the curriculum.

"End-of-term services in school are great," Björklund said, and added that religious education would remain a school subject. But all

elements of religious worship would have to be completely separate from class teaching.

Most independent schools in Sweden are privately owned but funded by government grants.

Björklund also said the Swedish National Agency for Education would double the number of inspections of both council-run and independent schools. He also announced a ban on anonymous financial donations to schools, and said he would make it easier to close schools that were breaking the rules.

The stricter rules will be introduced in next year's education act.

Commenting in the *Guardian* on the Swedish development, Andrew Bown said: "Britain should follow suit.

"Creationism and ID are to be explicitly banned [in Sweden], but so is proselytising, even in religious education classes. The Koran may not be taught as if it is true, even in Muslim independent schools, nor may the

Bible in Christian schools."

He pointed out that Nyamko Sabuni, the minister for integration – herself born in Burundi – would have liked even more drastic measures: "She wanted to ban *all* religious schools altogether."

Brown said there was little doubt that combating Islamic fundamentalism was the underlying aim, especially in conjunction with another new requirement that independent schools declare all their funding sources.

"In the background to these announcements comes the release of a frightening documentary film on Swedish jihadis, which follows young men over a period of two years on their slow conversion to homicidal lunacy.

"The question is whether we in Britain will come to see this as a necessary move in the struggle to contain Islamist ideologies... Superficially, the British position could not be more different. The British government's strategy with Islam or protestant extremism in Ulster

Another top religious correspondent quits in disgust

HOT on the heels of the departure from the *LA Times* of William Lobdell, a top American religious affairs correspondent – (see *Freethinker*, October) – comes the news that Stephen Bates, the *Guardian's* award-winning religious correspondent, has left his post, saying "what faith I had, I've lost, I am afraid – I've seen too much, too close."

Bates has just published an account of his seven years on the beat in an article entitled *Demob Happy* for the *New Humanist*

magazine last month.

Bates followed the crisis in the Anglican Communion for several years and even wrote a book on it, *A Church At War: Anglicans and Homosexuality*. "Now I am moving on," his article concludes. "It was time to go. A young Methodist press officer once asked me earnestly whether I saw it as my job to spread the Good News of Jesus. No, I said, that's the last thing I am here to do."

Earlier this year, in an article written in *New*

Orleans, where he was covering the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops meeting with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Bates said:

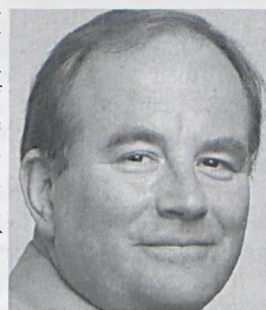
"Writing this story has been too corrosive of what faith I had left: indeed watching the way the gay row has played out in the Anglican Communion has cost me my belief in the essential benignity of too many Christians.

"For the good of my soul, I need to do something else."

Bates, who says he still regards himself as a Catholic, said he was turned off by the intolerance he saw towards gays and the self-righteousness of Christians who "pick and choose the sins that are acceptable and condemn those – always committed by other, lesser people – that are not."

Bates was UK Religious Writer of the Year in the Churches' Media Council awards in 2005 and 2006.

Shortly before Bates called it quits, William Lobdell, who gave the *Los Angeles Times* first-class coverage of the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandal in California, threw in the towel with a wrenching story of his own struggle with organised religion. The Catholic clerical sex abuse scandal put him off religion so badly that he lost his faith altogether.



Stephen Bates

Kenyan evangelicals furious over evolution exhibition

"I AGREE that to say that conservative Christians are descended from apes is an insult. To the apes!"

That comment, by Christopher Hobe Morrison, of Pine Bush, USA, was one of many reactions to a report in *The Times* last month that evangelical Christians in Kenya have their cast-socks in a twist over an exhibition in the Nairobi National Museum centred on the evolution of humankind.

Bishop Boniface Adoyo, the head of the 35 Kenyan evangelical denominations, is leading opposition to the exhibition. "I do not dispute that as humans we have a history, but my family most certainly did not descend from the apes," he huffed.

The bishop was invited to view the new Human Origins gallery before it opened this month, and said that he would call on his flock to demonstrate outside the museum if evolution was described as anything other than merely a theory.

"Bits of it are being disproved by scientists every day. Yet it's being taught in our schools to children – a theory being taught as fact," he complained.

The star of the show is Turkana Boy, a 5ft 3in (1.62m) skeleton of a human who died 1.5 million years ago, aged about 12. It is the best-preserved example of *homo erectus*, the species that set out from Africa to conquer the world.

The evangelicals, in turn, are being vociferously opposed by scientists eager to study the specimens and to explore the role of Kenya as the cradle of humankind.

Richard Leakey, who led the team that unearthed the skeleton in the far north in 1984, dismissed the creationist argument.

"Science is at the very foundation of our ability to deal with the new century, so if we bring it down to the idea that science may be un-Christian ... well, how stupid can you get?"

ning in schools

has been – so far as we have had one – flattery and corruption, or what Microsoft, in another context, calls ‘embracing and extending’.

“Find the leaders, flatter them, and draw them into the ruling class in the hope that they will then cooperate and see that their followers do too. The gamble that the government is taking on faith schools is that if religious groups are given their own schools to run, they will do so in ways that will turn out for the benefit of society as a whole, as well as of their pupils.

“Certainly this works quite well with the Church of England. Anglican schools are happy, by and large, to teach religion as if it were not true; to put it in a more flattering light, they concentrate more on the fruits of the spirit than on dogma. However, no one supposes that society is threatened by a terrorist movement nurtured in C of E primary schools.

“Demanding that Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic schools stop teaching their own religions as if they were true, which is essentially



Swedish Education Minister Jan Björklund

the Swedish position, looks an impossible task for a British government. But I think it might also be a necessary one. It is certainly the only way to discover whether the parents of such schools really want the ‘ethos’ or the pseudo-factual beliefs, and what exactly it is that the people who fund them think they are buying with their money.”

Italian saint Padre Pio ‘faked stigmata with carbolic acid’

PADRE Pio, Italy’s most-loved saint, faked his stigmata by pouring carbolic acid on his hands, according to a new book.

The Other Christ: Padre Pio and 19th Century Italy, by the historian Sergio Luzzatto, draws on a document found in the Vatican’s archive, according to a *Telegraph* report

The document reveals the testimony of a pharmacist who said that the young Padre Pio bought four grams of carbolic acid in 1919.

“I was an admirer of Padre Pio and I met him for the first time on July 31, 1919,” wrote Maria De Vito.

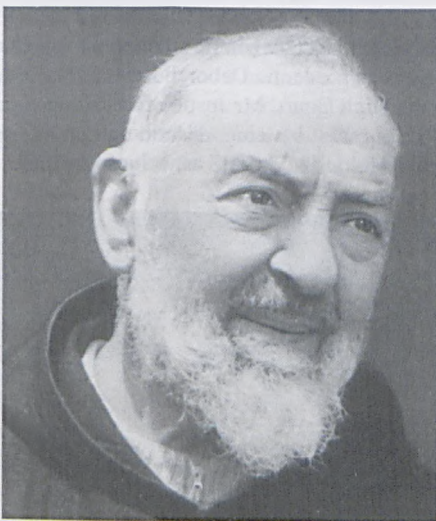
She claimed to have spent a month with the priest in the southern town of San Giovanni Rotondo, seeing him often.

“Padre Pio called me to him in complete secrecy and, telling me not to tell his fellow brothers, he gave me personally an empty bottle, and asked if I would act as a chauffeur to transport it back from Foggia to San Giovanni Rotondo with four grams of pure carbolic acid.

“He explained that the acid was for disinfecting syringes for injections. He also asked for other things, such as Valda pastilles.”

The testimony was originally presented to the Vatican by the Archbishop of Manfredonia, Pasquale Gagliardi, as proof that Padre Pio caused his own stigmata with acid. It was examined by the Holy See during the beatification process of Padre Pio and clearly dismissed.

Padre Pio, whose real name was Francesco Forgione, died in 1968. He was made a saint in 2002. A recent survey in Italy showed that



Padre Pio: a fraud?

more people prayed to him than to Jesus or the Virgin Mary. He exhibited stigmata throughout his life, starting in 1911.

The new allegations were instantly dismissed by his supporters.

The Catholic Anti-Defamation League said Mr Luzzatto was a liar and was “spreading anti-Catholic libels”.

Pietro Siffi, the president of the League, said: “We would like to remind Mr Luzzatto that, according to Catholic doctrine, canonisation carries with it papal infallibility.

“We would like to suggest to Mr Luzzatto that he dedicates his energies to studying religion properly.”

Alabama approves Bible textbook for public schools

ALABAMA has become the first state in the US to approve a textbook for a course about the Bible in its public schools.

The textbook is a product of the Bible Literacy Project, founded and run by Chuck Stetson, a conservative Christian New York-based equity fund executive.

Assessing scripture and its influence on literature, art, philosophy and political culture, it was specifically designed to avoid the Constitution’s church-state barriers.

Although the text, which has been on the market for two years, is now taught in 163 schools in 35 states, no state had previously officially endorsed it.

The Bible and Its Influence has a wide range of supporters and critics. Some of its more liberal champions, such as the American Jewish Congress’s counsel Marc Stern, feel that the US will not only survive but will actually benefit from public school courses on a document as culturally important as the Bible – as long as the classes avoid being devotional.

Evangelical heavyweight Chuck Colson hopes that “God will speak to students even through a class that is secular in intent”.

Those opposed to the book include secularists, who argue that it already violates the First Amendment, and fundamentalists, who see its approach as secular and therefore diluting the value of what they see as God’s inspired word.

Website editor cleared of hatred charge

SWEDEN’S Supreme Court has cleared website editor Leif Liljeström of charges of acting as an accessory to incitement to hatred of homosexuals.

Liljeström, who runs the Christian website *Bibeltemplet*, had been sentenced to one month in prison for allowing the publication of hateful comments about homosexuality.

The Supreme Court ruled that Liljeström may not have been fully aware that the comments posted by visitors to the website constituted incitement to hatred.

One of the more extreme comments posted said: “Men who cannot summon up the energy to abstain from intercourse with other men should be sentenced to death and hanged from posts in the town square.”

Two of the appeal judges said the statements went far beyond the bounds of reasoned debate and could be considered deeply insulting to homosexuals as a group. They wanted the conviction upheld. But they were in the minority, and Liljeström was freed.

Why freethinkers must proceed

Britain, it seems, is in the grip of an anti-racist hysteria that threatens to undermine the very freedom of speech we have long held so dear. For the anti-racist lobby, even *discussing* matters of race, immigration and non-Christian religions is now considered taboo.

In October 2007, the hapless Dr James Watson, a man who evidently knows a thing or two about the human genome, fell foul of anti-racist bullies, for stating in an interview with the *Sunday Times* that "... there is no firm reason to anticipate that the intellectual capacities of peoples geographically separated in their evolution should prove to have evolved identically. Our wanting to reserve equal powers of reason as some universal heritage of humanity will not be enough to make it so."

This is an undeniably controversial statement, but one certainly worthy of further investigation and debate.

What led such an eminent scientist to this startling conclusion? What is the evidence to the contrary? What would it mean if this assertion turned out to be true? What would it mean if blacks turned out to be more intelligent than whites, or if Asians turned out to be more intelligent than both? Are we really to believe that just a 0.01 percent difference in our racial DNA profiles accounts for appreciable variations in intelligence? All of these questions, and more, are perfectly legitimate.

There is evidence in Britain, that in some socio-economic groups, black people are now outperforming whites, academically and economically, with black women in particular forging ahead of their peers. Nigerians are one of the most successful and highly qualified immigrant groups in Britain, whilst white Portugese immigrants are among the least successful, which – apart from demonstrating that colour is no bar to success in modern Britain – would seem to contradict Dr Watson's core premise.

By comparison, his other widely reported statement about equal intelligence: "... people who have to deal with black employees find this is not true", is a throw-away, banal conversational prejudice, of the kind many people utter from time to time, reprehensibly, but forgivably. It is clear from Dr Watson's lack of recollection and subsequent apology that he was foolishly loose-tongued, but did this slightly dotty and elderly genius really deserve to be hauled over the coals, have his UK lecture tour cancelled and his career at the Cold Harbor Laboratory prematurely curtailed?

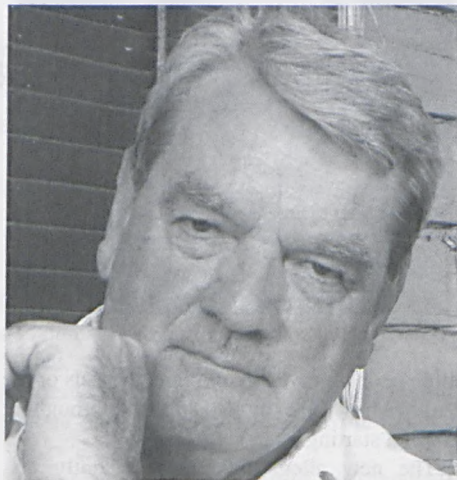
More difficult, for freethinkers, was the decision of David Irving to go on a lecture tour in the UK, in an attempt to rehabilitate his now firmly discredited claim to be a serious historian. Often described as a "Holocaust denier",

this life-long apologist for Hitler may more accurately be described as a "Holocaust diminisher", as he believes that only (*only!*) 2.4 million Jews were murdered by the Nazi regime and certainly fewer than four million.

Caught between the disgraceful racism of the Right, and the strident, often irrational anti-racism of the Left, what are freethinkers to do? DIESEL BALAAM examines the issue

He does describe each individual death as a "tragedy", but his single-minded desire to deny Hitler's culpability for the Holocaust (a term he rejects), together with his claim that Auschwitz was not a mass extermination camp, does not stand up to the critical scrutiny of Holocaust survivors themselves or *bona fide* historians who let facts inform their outlook, rather than the other way round.

Recently released from a jail term in Austria, where Holocaust denial is a criminal offence, Irving is now threatening the *Jewish Chronicle* with prosecution if they continue to describe him as such. This would be ill-advised: in 2000, when he attempted to sue the American academic Deborah Lipstadt for libel at the High Court, Mr Justice Gray's appraisal of Irving was damning, describing him as "an active Holocaust denier" as well as "antisemitic and racist".



Holocaust 'diminisher' David Irving

Nevertheless, libertarian freethinkers' commitment to free speech cannot be selective, even if one knows that what is being said is politically motivated falsehood. Providing he doesn't actually incite racial hatred, Irving should be free to address anyone silly enough to waste an evening in his company. It is a mark of Britain's political maturity that we not only allow neo-Nazi cranks the right to free

speech, but in doing so, we give them enough rope to hang themselves in the glare of public opinion and media scrutiny.

Quite rightly, holding racist views is not, in itself, illegal, but active discrimination or stirring up racial hatred is. As it stands, the law is actually quite sensible in this regard. When both the prosecutions against BNP leader Nick Griffin and his gurning sidekick collapsed in 2006, it was a triumph for common sense, if not exactly a cause for celebration.

Describing asylum seekers as "cockroaches" is dehumanising and hateful, but unless a particular racial group is identified, it cannot be racist. Likewise, describing Islam as a "wicked, vicious faith" has nothing at all to do with race. Any one of us can become a Muslim and any Muslim can become one of us. Belief is not inscribed into one's DNA, so charges of "Islamophobic racism" are a *non sequitur*.

'Most citizens now accept that without migrant labour and invigoration, our economy would decline along with our ageing population, our transport and health systems would collapse, our national diet would be a disgrace, our sports trophy cabinets would be practically empty and we'd all be sitting around listening to Gracie Fields on our iPods'

The editor of the *Freethinker*, certainly no racist, has described Islam as "stupid and barbarous" (*Freethinker*, Nov 2004), whilst *Sunday Times* columnist, Rod Liddle, was told by the Home Office that he could "probably get away with" calling Islam a "wicked, vicious faith" (*Sunday Times*, February 2006). In the mouths of BNP members these statements may indeed be *informed* by racism, but once the law begins to second guess the motivation behind such statements we really are on a slippery slope.

From a humanist perspective, true racism is not only vicious and unkind, but really very silly. Just how silly was exemplified by the über-patriotic BNP's decision, during the 2002 World Cup, not to support England, but Denmark (the only all-white European team). In fact, racial prejudice – to treat someone differently purely on the basis of where they were born, their skin colour, nationality or ethnicity – is so obviously farcical and beyond reason, it need not detain us here. Like the "metric martyrs", who ignore the fact that, since 1970,

d from race fact, not race fiction

every child in Britain has been educated in decimalised units of measurement, racists ignore the fact that most of us under 60, in urban environments, have grown up sharing our communities, schools, workplaces, homes and beds with people of all colours and ethnic backgrounds.

Most citizens now accept that without migrant labour and invigoration, our economy would decline along with our ageing population, our transport and health systems would collapse, our national diet would be a disgrace, our sports trophy cabinets would be practically empty and we'd all be sitting around listening to Gracie Fields on our iPods. Derogatory and condescending racist language has, thankfully, all but disappeared. We are, in the final analysis, a "live-and-let-live" society, so while we may not always like minorities, our distaste for the unfair treatment of minorities is even greater.

Nonetheless, freethinkers must be wary of the anti-racist lobby which is cynically manipulated by the far-Left. The reasons for this manipulation are obvious. The British Left has not only failed, but failed spectacularly, over the last quarter of a century. Economically, socialists have lost the argument, so instead they adopt fashionable no-hope causes like unilateral nuclear disarmament and attempt to knit together a "rainbow alliance" of mutually antagonistic underdogs – militant Muslims, feminists, gays, blacks, peaceniks, IRA sympathisers etc. Add to this unlikely mix the unrivalled capacity of the Left for internecine squabbling, and it's plain to see exactly why they're such prolific losers.

The one triumph the Left has had, however, is in the arena of anti-racism. Those who marched against the National Front in the 1970s were inspired to do so by left-wingers, who, back then, were the only people prepared to organise against them. This played an important part in discrediting the National Front, which under pressure, split in 1980. Likewise, when Margaret Thatcher was schmoozing P W Botha, it was mainly left-wingers who galvanised opposition to the Apartheid regime, which eventually gave way, thanks to the sanctions brought about by a skilful campaign of international dimensions. The Left is justifiably proud of these achievements, but as its star has waned, it has become ever more desperate to prolong these past glories.

This desperation has resulted in a constant redefinition of what it means to be "racist", accompanied by a deliberate collapse of perspective. So, when a gobby dimwit calls a Bollywood actress "Mrs Puppodum" on the *Celebrity Big Brother* TV show, instead of receiving a simple reprimand, she is treated

like a Nazi war criminal and pushed to the brink of suicidal despair.

At a slightly more elevated level, the Marxist literary critic, Terry Eagleton, has bitterly attacked the author Martin Amis. His crime? Being "Islamophobic" and bravely admitting that when you inherit a cultural legacy of racism, you don't just shrug it all off overnight. Left-wingers, under the "socialism-lite" of multiculturalism, are engaged in the anti-racist equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition, whilst taking every opportunity they can to instill a false sense of grievance among the client ethnic minorities they seek to patronise.

Taking one example, to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in 2007, an alliance of sappy Christians, black power activists and socialists, came up with the fatuous gimmick of asking white Britons to apologise for the slave trade – the only problem being that it was at least 125 years too late for it to have any meaning. As the staunchly Catholic, but strangely likeable, Anne Widdecombe sensibly remarked, we can no more apologise for this wrongdoing than we can take the credit for its abolition.

Of course, a cynic might add that, in the light of Operation Trident, it would be more relevant and fitting if the black community apologised to the rest of us for so many of its young men running around with knives and guns – but freethinkers should avoid cynicism.

The "apologise for slavery" idea is seriously flawed in its historical revisionism: it ignores the complicity of many black Africans themselves, the Arab slave trade (which continued long after 1807), and the fact that roving North African slavers took their own white slaves from as far afield as Iceland and southern Ireland.

Undeniably, the scale and systematic brutality of the British slave trade marks it as a particularly gruesome episode in the evolutionary journey of our society, but calls for a vicarious apology mask the fact that those profiting from the slave trade were, at the same time, brutally oppressing the English poor, causing havoc in Ireland and discriminating against Jews.

Such empty political gestures appeal to the likes of London's mayor, Ken Livingstone, because, far from healing the systematic inhumanity of ghastly episodes like the slave trade, they keep alive the contemporary "victim politics" of grudge and grievance, providing grist to the socialist mill.

Pressuring Western governments into honouring their promises to drop the crippling Third World debt our generation has imposed on African countries would be a far better use of everybody's time. Thus left-wingers are

guilty, not just of gimmicks and distortion, but like David Irving and the BNP – their ideological mirror equivalents – they ignore inconvenient facts in the service of a bonkers belief system based on the religious paradigm of "absolute truths" and wishful thinking.

One such inconvenient fact is the sheer scale and chaotic nature of immigration into Britain. During the last ten years, towns like Slough, Peterborough and Walsall have evidently come to be seen as the Promised Land for every Mustafa, Gregor, Ling-Ling and Olakunde going (or rather, coming). Officially, two million more people now inhabit the British Isles than in 1997, mostly due to immigration. According to the Commons Library, a third of the increase in public spending for the next four years will have to be spent coping with this influx.

As this inevitably descends upon the poorest neighbourhoods, working-class people naturally feel resentful as the resources they rely upon are stretched to breaking point. Of course, do-good council officials are quick to pounce on such complaints as evidence of "racism" – but not as quick as they are jumping into their 4x4s after work each day, so they can drive home to leafier suburbs where the in-built apartheid of the housing market acts as a sterile barrier to such problems.

The rigorous academic research of Migrationwatch has identified, not only a massive net in-flow of migrants, but the way "white flight" exacerbates this unprecedented demographic change. No one knows the true scale of illegal immigration, but given that most people's second language is English and our reputation as a "soft touch", it is hardly surprising that global patterns of migration have impacted disproportionately on the UK.

Unfortunately, Migrationwatch was ignored for years, because too many people fell for left-wing smear stories about the organisation. It is true that the BNP uses much of the data found on the Migrationwatch website, but then the BNP also refers to the weather forecast when planning its protest rallies. Are we therefore to infer that Met Office weather-girl, Sian Lloyd, is some kind of nascent neo-Nazi? Of course not. Belatedly, senior politicians now admit that Migrationwatch "tells it like it is", confessing that official statistics have long been skewed by bad methodology, politically correct meddling and incompetent ministers like Peter Hain.

For the record, Migrationwatch is an independent body, founded by the Conservative, Sir Andrew Green, and funded by donations. During his time as Middle East adviser at the Foreign Office, Green campaigned, unsuccessfully, to have asylum-seeking Muslim

(Continued on p10)

extremists deported, but he is also involved in assisting Muslim refugees through the charity Medical Aid for Palestinians. Moreover, Professor David Coleman, Migrationwatch's senior academic, who coordinates Oxbridge students in the detailed collation and analysis of migration data, has presented papers on global population movements to the United Nations. These are not the profiles of knuckle-dragging racist morons!

Another potent Left-inspired myth that needs to be debunked is the notion that it is somehow politically incorrect to hold ethnic individuals to account when they are guilty of wrongdoing. Ironically, this condescension is, in itself, racist, because it suggests that ethnic minority citizens are not fully responsible for their own actions, unlike white people.

At the time of writing, the BBC *Crimewatch* programme's "Most Wanted" website has 125 mugshots and CCTV stills, comprising 78 whites (11 with foreign names), and 47 people of colour, including 19 with Muslim names. If this sample is representative, it means that less than 10 percent of the population provides over 37 percent of the "most wanted" felons in the UK.

One in seven of the prison population is now a foreign national. Scotland Yard says that in London, 170 foreign gangs, from 22 different

Race fact, not race fiction

(Continued from p9)

ethnic and national groups, are involved in major fraud, trafficking, prostitution, drugs and gun crime. The police DNA database, compiled from arrested citizens (a third of them unconvicted), contains records from 9 percent of all white men, but 13 percent of Asians and 37 percent of black men (*Guardian*, Jan 2006). Can this all be down to "institutionalised racism", or are there complex cultural factors at work, most of them under the control of ethnic minorities themselves?

I mention these statistics, not to give racists ammunition, but because freethinkers have to proceed from facts, not fiction, however difficult and uncomfortable those facts may be. When a crime is committed against a white person by a person of colour, the media tend to screen out any suggestion that the crime may have had a racial motive. Yet when a person of colour is the victim of a white person, it's headline news and the breast-beating circus surrounding the victim and their stoically forgiving family plays out to an all too familiar formula. In July 2005, Anthony Walker, a

black teenager, was brutally killed in Huyton, Liverpool, a truly sickening crime which, quite properly, induced an outpouring of media revulsion, as well as compassionate admiration for his Christian mother who managed to find it in her heart to forgive his twisted killers. Yet in the period 2001-2004, Home Office figures show that out of 22 racially motivated murders, 12 of them, just over half, had white victims. Can you name a single one of them? No, neither can I.

The Stephen Lawrence affair set the template for news stories about racially motivated crime, but in that case, the real scandal was not just the incompetence of the police investigation into his death, but the way that five white working-class youths (admittedly rather unprepossessing in character), faced trial by *Daily Mail* and were pilloried by the hyenas of the anti-racist lobby before they had even been found guilty by a court of law. Black youths, similarly treated, would have had human rights lawyers queuing up to represent them and every university refectory in Britain would have been renamed in their honour.

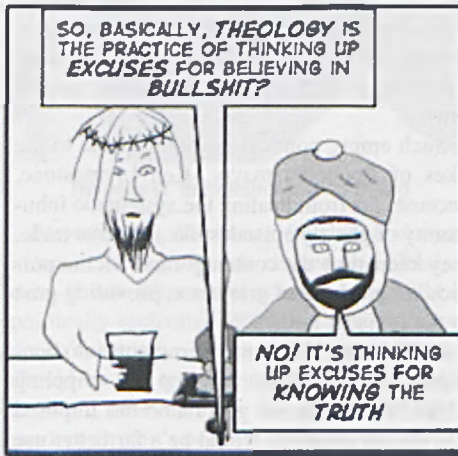
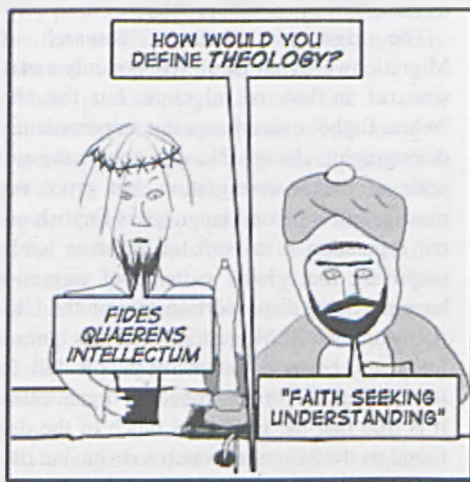
To conclude, it is easy to see how freethinkers have become sandwiched between goggle-eyed racists on the one hand and hardbitten anti-racists on the other. Pointing out the links between immigration and the upsurge in religious extremism causes the bearded white Catweazles of the atheist Left to go into a tail-spin of hysterical denial, but the failed gas-canister bomb attacks of July 2007, in which immigrant Muslim doctors came within a hair's breadth of bringing fundamentalist carnage to London's Tiger-Tiger nightclub and Glasgow Airport, finally exposed these denials as the dangerous delusions they always have been. Encouragingly, there are signs that freethinkers are now feeling brave enough to take on, not just the racists, but the anti-racists as well.

We will not accept the endless extension of the definition of "racism" to proscribe criticism of Islam or excuse clerical fascism. We will insist on freedom of enquiry and a sense of proportion when public figures make silly mistakes discussing these matters. We will defend freedom of speech, even when we despise what is being said, and we will judge jokes by a more lenient set of criteria than we do the policy objectives of racist organisations. In short, we will cut each other some slack and make allowances for human fallibility, eschewing ideological fictions so we can be guided by facts alone. For genuine freethinkers, the future of this sensitive and complex debate is neither "racist", nor "anti-racist", but, simply, non-racist.

Little Britain's David Walliams

IN A report in the October issue about the violation of intellectual property rights of several top British comics by an evangelical publishing company, we misspelled the name of one of the complainant, David Walliams, of *Little Britain* fame. We called him Williams. Sorry.

Jesus and Mo



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"GIVE me a child for seven years and I will make him a soldier of Christ for life!"

Thus boasted the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). And certainly, even today, recruiting sergeants for the regiments of Muslims and Mormons in our midst are equally impelled to secure soldiers to march under the banner of Mohammed of Joseph Smith. "God is drawing his sword; we are marching with the Lord", is the rallying cry of many a battle hymn. Most of us have in youth been subjected to this seductive yet threatening baptism of indoctrination, intimidation and brainwashing. But why this eagerness to recruit and what effect does this scourging of young minds have on the adult-to-be?

I offer below my own experience of family and society's subtle and not-so subtle attempts to gather me into the fold of the faithful. Naturally my conversion from Christianity has been a slow (though not especially painful) progression and might well be considered atypical, what philosophers might term "a one-case induction". It was not painful because I was born in the 20th century – not in an Age of Reason, for I don't believe there is such an era – but in a fairly liberal environment in a Western democracy. Millions of others are not so lucky.

In 1942 I was evacuated from the London bombing, spending the next two years with relatives in Devon. Although I had sporadically attended Sunday school before, I was now to discover a whole new world of prayer and worship. Every night I was to kneel by my bed and ask God for help and forgiveness, remembering in my prayers, mother, father, brother, sister, the cat and the canary and any other creature dear to me, asking that they be kept safe all through the night.

Sunday began with putting on best clothes (God's armour perhaps?) for morning service at the village church two miles distant – one walked in those days, adjusting one's pace to the slowest, in my case an 80-year-old aunt with gout.

The afternoon was taken up with Sunday school in the Methodist chapel, while the evening was devoted to Evensong that began in the aforesaid church at 6.30 and ended, after an hour's trudge home, at bedtime. The only reading permitted on the Sabbath was *The Sunday Companion* and *Red Star Weekly*, a sort of comic with fateful or morally uplifting tales. My luckier neighbour, a fellow evacuee whose godless foster parents were town-bred, would sometimes smuggle me out his *News of the World*. Was this my first step on the road to damnation?

Like most of us of a certain age, I found God's cloudy presence in school classrooms, on the radio and in school assemblies. I took him for granted, much like taking salt with one's meal. He was always on the menu, hovering at one's elbow like the salt pot. Was St Ignatius right then after all? Not really in my case. I sang with the other pupils but never

Losing my Religion

gave him much heed at all. He just belonged to our society, like the government, healthy milk and good sanitation. When I came to teach, I was asked to teach RE – it was, with PE, the only compulsory subject on the curriculum. I made no fuss, not wishing to stand out in the crowd. In consequence I still know most of the Bible stories, as well as the fine old hymns

DAVID JAMES of London is the second contributor in our re-launched *Losing my Religion* series. If you would like to describe your journey from faith to scepticism, please send your contribution (maximum 1,000 words) along with a photograph (optional) to: *Losing My Religion*, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD, or email it to fteditor@aol.com.

from hundreds of school assemblies.

When I was hospitalised in 1964, I was asked my religion. I had never given the matter much thought until then. In my National Service days I gave my religion as C of E, going with the majority, although my mother seeing my paybook was horrified: "But David you know we're Methodist!" I didn't, my mother being, as I now suspect, in her heart, next door to an atheist.

Anyway, the Sister was rather put out when I confessed to having no religion. She had to put down something; I mean, suppose some-

thing terrible were to happen, the worst, like, say, death. It would put the undertaker in such a sad quandary. She didn't exactly put it like that, but I saw her predicament and wanted to help. "All right, then, put down C of E," I said, for a moment forgetting mother's injunction. Relief and smiles all round. A happy ending, then; or nearly so.

I was lying on my hospital bed reading *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon, it being one of my set texts for BA finals. A young man in a sports jacket came smilingly towards me. Yes, I expect you've guessed: it was the vicar arriving for a chat with one of his flock, a poor wandering one who had surely strayed, but could still possibly be saved. We talked at some length, but of *Beowulf* rather than God. Eventually I pleaded fatigue and he left.

The following week I glimpsed him again, making his happy way from bed to bed. I closed my eyes and feigned sleep. "Tell David I was sorry to have missed him this week. I really enjoyed our little chat," he told Sister. When she told me this, I felt I had been a miserable little rat. I might have been the bright spot in his dull day.

Although today I am an avid reader of Dawkins, Hitchens and the *Freethinker*, I cannot bring myself to decline invitations to friends' weddings or relatives' funerals, where God is supposedly ever-present in the congregation. It would be unfeeling, bad-mannered and churlish to make a point by non-attendance.

Moreover, I have recently acquired a young loving couple as niece and nephew-in-law, a pair of devout Born-againers who insist on saying grace before meals. So far, I have gone along with the crowd, but St Ignatius's words live long in the memory.

The absurdity of religion begins in the cradle and, unless we atheists are prepared to stand up and be counted, we can easily find ourselves conniving with it.

Huge boost for the *Freethinker* Fund

During the period June 5-November 15, subscribers donated £3,836 to the *Freethinker* Fund – a hugely generous contribution to our operating costs. We thank the following for their support: C F Ablethorpe, F Acker, D Ainger, G L Angel, A Akkermans, P Albrecht, C I Allan, J Allison, P Arnold, P V Atkins, R M Atkinson, J L Baird, R Bairstow, Ken Baldry, A E Ball, J F Bartley, B Barrett, P H Bayliss, C Baxter, T Beaton, K Bell, D M Bennett, A J Bloomfield, M Booker, J Bosley, A W Briglin, D Broughton, P Brown, K Byrom, E Carim, G Chapman, R Chadwick, G G Chambers, M Chauhan, D Clamp, A Clay, A Clunas, A Comerford, G Connor, R Corfield, S F Cotsgrove, G Coupland, O Crocombe, D Cunningham-Green, B Dawson, R Deacon, M De Feo, R G Dennick, K Dessau, Derbyshire Secularists, J Dillon, N H Divall, K Dixon, O Dumbleton, S Eadie, R S Eagle, A S Ellis, F Evans, M Evans, J Evers, K F Ferguson, F N Fish, A Flinn, M Fox, G Francis, S R Fletcher, R J Giles, J S Goldsack, C P Goodwin, D K Gorringer, E Govier, R Grandidge, N Green, K Hall, J Haggerty, D R D Harding, W K Harper, W E Harman, R C Harrison, R Hart, A Henness, M F Hoare, P Howell, R M Howells, J G Hunt, D R Hutchins, J R Hutton, M Irwin, L Jackson, J Jeffrey, J Jeynes, B Johnson, D O Jones, J Kay, C Kensit, I Kirkland, P L Lancaster, J Lance, D Langdown, J Lavety, T Lee, D Lewis, J E Lewis, R Lewis, T Lock, E Loughran, H McDougall, J A McKenna, P McKenna, J R Mackay, D T McIntyre, P McKay, A J McQuillan, J W McKinnon, D Mactavish, D E Mansfield, L L Martin, L Massey, G Masters, C Matthew, P Matthew, G Meaden, B J Mercer, T P Milton, K Moore, J Murray, C Nettleton, J C Newell, R Newman, A Newton, G Noble, T Norris, R Oakley, M O'Brien, A M Orford, N Otten, K Papas, F T Pamphilion, D Perrin, J Pocock, N J Potter, T Price, P Proctor, J K Radford, A Rankin, J Rathbone, R Richardson, T J Roberts, B Ross, J M Ross, P Ryvar, D L Seymour, W Shevlin, W M Simcock, D Shoesmith, L Smith, M W Smith, R Smith, K G Spencer, D Still, G Strang, A G Sumner, W Suschitzky, R Tariq, A Taylor, G Taylor, J H Taylor, C R Thomas, A Tiffany, M D N Towers, Trahearne, G E Tuck, R W Vickers, D Vincent, A Wallis, M Watkins, D Watkins, A Watmore, K M Wayland, G A Weerasinghe, D Whelan, B Whiting, D N Whyte, E Whyte, S F Wilson-Chalon, P Wood, F Wright, W Wynne-Willson, S W Yorke, and A Zakrzewski.

When 'divine' revelations collide, s

It sometimes seems to be assumed that science and religion are two comparable entities, each with its proper sphere of influence, or perhaps competing for the same one. I argue that religion and science are quite different kinds of thing. Religion is best considered as a *polythetic* concept, a selection from a score or more of frequently found features, such as prayer, doctrine, ritual etc. The simple dictionary definition of science is "organised knowledge" (OED).

This embraces all knowledge, not merely the conventional "sciences". However, those do exemplify the means of gaining such organised knowledge. A scientific approach seeks as far as possible to be objective, systematic, rational and empirical. "Empirical" means, based on verifiable observation, most effectively done, wherever possible, by experiment. This approach distinguished the history of Thucydides, and the science of Aristotle, from mythology and folklore. It doesn't imply that knowledge is final, merely that it can advance. The approach is justified by the colossal practical progress it has produced, from astronomy to zoology.

Some religious believers have rejected this outright, holding that all knowledge is to be found in particular holy scriptures, and in extreme cases have set about destroying everything else. In modern society, most religious people accept most scientific knowledge, though some reject some of it. The best known current example is the "creationist" view that the account of origins in the Book of Genesis is literally true. Others, while accepting the reality of scientific knowledge, reject its application in particular cases, like Jehovah's Witnesses refusing blood transfusions.

It appears that most religions, whatever their attitude to science, claim another, quite different, source of knowledge, namely revelation. I use this broadly to mean all claims of direct apprehension of reality without, as it were, going through the usual channels. St Paul said *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. In other words, a different way of knowing. There are two implications of this idea. One is that there exists a reality beyond or underlying what we normally apprehend. Different religions see this as God, or as some transcendent nonpersonal "beingness". The other implication is that we have, or can develop, a faculty of reaching this reality. Some, such as Buddhists, see this as their ultimate objective. Many Muslims and Christians accept science as one source of knowledge, but claim that revelation is simply given, and must be accepted. Their revelations are, respectively, the message from God transmitted to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel (the Koran); and the person of Jesus Christ, and his

preaching (though some hold the whole Bible to be revealed). These are held to be direct statements of truth, and thus take precedence over the findings of science, which are necessarily provisional.

Revelation covers a wide range of phenomena. A very rough division might be made, it seems to me, between experience and instruction, although these overlap. What the individual "gets" may be an unusual state of mind, and/or more or less specific teachings. Pentecostals and others seek a state of ecstasy – "baptism in the spirit with signs following", the signs being such phenomena as "speaking in tongues" (ie gibberish) and physical collapse. Christian mystics such as St Teresa of Avila seek union with God (sometimes expressed as "marriage with Christ"; there are obvious similarities with falling in love). Buddhists and others work for "enlightenment" variously defined. The desired state is an end in itself.

JOHN RADFORD presents an in-depth analysis of 'divine' revelation – and pin-points its dangers

In other cases there is a specific message. The Prophet Mohammed reportedly experienced a highly aroused state, in which he was commanded to preach, and received the material he was to convey. Aleister Crowley gave a similar account of receiving *The Book of the Law*. It is uncertain how far these various psychological states are the same, or related. The various messages or instructions, on the other hand, are clearly not the same. Christians hold that Jesus was both human and divine. Hindus believe in many gods. Mohammed proclaimed belief in the divinity of anyone except Allah as the greatest of sins.

Revelations vary in several other ways. Where there is specific content, this is in terms of the prevailing faith. The message is often a reformulation or development of it. Gods, where they are the supposed source, only reveal themselves in societies where they are believed in. Classical Greeks never saw Thor, and Christians don't meet Athena or Apollo. Revelation may be spontaneous, or only obtained after lengthy training. It may be available to all, or considered the privilege of an elite. Revelations do, however, seem to have some things generally in common. They are normally unpredictable, uncontrollable, and usually short-lived. They are usually felt as positive, indeed ecstatic. They are often overwhelmingly powerful, and felt as uniquely different from any other experience.

While received messages may be comprehensible and can be transmitted to others, the experience itself is often said to be inexpressible in words. There is a conviction of contact, or union, with some transcendent reality. And there is often a sense of absolute certainty. There is no doubting the truth of whatever has been received.

Such features often lie at the root of the beginnings of new religious movements, since the recipient is strongly motivated to convey the wonderful message to others. Reports vary as to how common revelatory experiences are, partly due to the difficulties of definition and criteria (for example, how strong does an experience have to be to count, and how can one measure this? Should we include euphoric responses to nature, art or love?).

What is clear, is that broadly similar experiences are found the world over, as are various means to induce them, such as drugs, fasting, meditation, group suggestibility etc. The obvious problem with the religious claim that they offer a valid source of knowledge is that there seems no clear way to test it. It is essentially private, and not replicable to order. There is no doubting the strength of the individual's experience and conviction, but what does it mean? If revelation is a message from some divinity, it seems a most bizarre one. Why should such a being cause people to fall down in a fit, or utter gibberish? Why should what gets through be so contradictory of other messages, and often so trivial or absurd? If revelation involves contact with some "super-reality", what independent evidence is there for that? Such experiences appear to be very ancient. Why does our knowledge of the super-reality not advance, like our knowledge of the everyday world? Why don't we get better at contacting it, after thousands of years of trying? It is really much more plausible to suppose that "revelations" reduce to human brain/minds acting in unusual ways.

Admittedly we do not yet fully understand these. However a strong case has been made that "visionary" experiences originate in the built-in mechanisms of the brain and nervous system which give rise to unreal perceptions or hallucinations under various conditions. These may be spontaneous, as dreams during sleep, or in illnesses such as epilepsy and migraine. Or they may be induced by techniques such as fasting, hyperventilation (rapid shallow breathing), drugs, ecstatic dancing, and insistent repetitive sounds or music. Again, Pentecostal ecstasy seems superficially not so different from non-religious "raves" using loud repetitive music and often drugs. The latter are not (fortunately) accompanied by any particular dogma, but do provide "out-of-oneself" thrills. Emotional arousal, espe-

strife is sure to follow

cially in large groups, is effective in changing attitudes and beliefs, at least in the short term, and is exploited by both religious and non-religious fanatics.

Recent research suggests that emotionally charged rituals can alter the chemical balance of the brain, making it more susceptible to accepting beliefs. Advanced meditation techniques are similarly accompanied by changes in brain activity, which may be rewarding. Individual "revelations", closely related to conversion, are often related to periods of intolerable stress, from which a conviction of certainty provides relief. "God had taken my sins, even mine, upon himself!", exclaimed the morally blameless John Wesley.

Zen Buddhism, which often appears a sort of psychology in religious dress, systematically builds tension through intellectually insoluble problems (and other techniques), until the desired breakthrough of enlightenment, which doesn't necessarily have any supernatural connotations. These are just some lines of enquiry.

Revelation has another dimension, that of providing a foundation for religious systems. A major problem here is that, as pointed out, the "truths" of different religions are incompatible. As between Islam and Christianity, for example, the truth of one implies the falsity of the other. But if one revelation is false, why should both not be? What distinguishes them?

I have put this point to religious persons, and the answer is essentially, *We know we are right. Others may have different, equally strong, convictions, but they are wrong. We are right.*

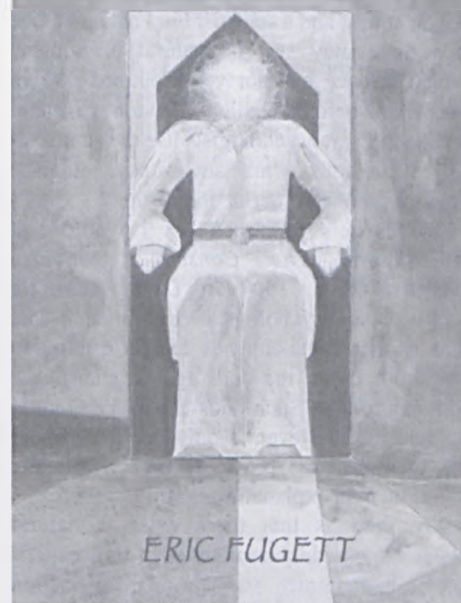
Theologians advance more sophisticated (though I think fallacious) arguments for the truth of their own faith, but do not seem to tackle the problem that other faiths offer equivalent arguments. Some claim that all are seeking "truth", but usually add that the best way is, surprise, their own.

Perhaps I have missed something. In any case, as a reason for action, a mere conviction of being right is potentially dangerous. If taken seriously, and far too many do take it seriously, it can only lead to conflict, and frequently does so.

Many people have suffered or died on the basis of beliefs that turned out to be mistaken. But of course conviction is a very weak ground for thinking one is right, though it may be a starting point.

For millennia humans saw the sun going around the earth, or at least across the sky. It is extremely difficult to see it otherwise. Yet the conviction is false. Very likely, the perception was unaffected by evolution, since it had no effect on survival. Scientists, and artists, often have sudden insights that seem as if they must be true. But they know that they must test them out.

A PERSONAL REVELATION



The religious sections of bookstores groan under the weight of 'revelatory' books, such as the one above by one Eric Fugett. This is 'an exhaustive commentary on the Book of Revelation in the Bible'

Revelation is undoubtedly a remarkable human phenomenon. But we should do well not to base our lives on it, as so many religions urge.

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

Richard Dawkins wins prestigious Deschner Prize

ONE of the most prestigious prizes given in recent months to God's nemesis, Richard Dawkins, was the Deschner Prize, awarded in Frankfurt in October by the Giordano Bruno Institute.

The institute is named after Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), an Italian philosopher, priest, cosmologist, and occultist who was burned at the stake as a heretic by the Roman Inquisition. The Deschner Prize is named in honour of Dr Karlheinz Deschner, 83 (pictured below), who has published novels, literary criticism, essays, aphorisms, and, above all, critical histories of religion and the Church. He has enthralled and provoked audiences over the years with more than 2,000 public lectures.



In 1971 he was called before a court in Nuremberg, charged with "insulting the Church". He was acquitted, but the Church put his works behind a wall of silence that wasn't broken until

the 1980s, when he was published in Spain, Switzerland, Italy and Poland.

Deschner has been working on his ambitious Christianity's Criminal History since 1970. Since disquieting spirits like Deschner are unlikely to find support from research grants, honoraria, stipends, emoluments and official positions, it is only the generous support of a few friends and readers that have enabled him to devote the time required for this enormous task of research and writing. His generous friend and patron Alfred Schwarz was able to celebrate the appearance of Volume 1 in September, 1986, but did not live to see Volume 2 reach publication. The German industrialist Herbert Steffen has continued to support Deschner's work, and Deschner is now working on volume 10 of Criminal History.

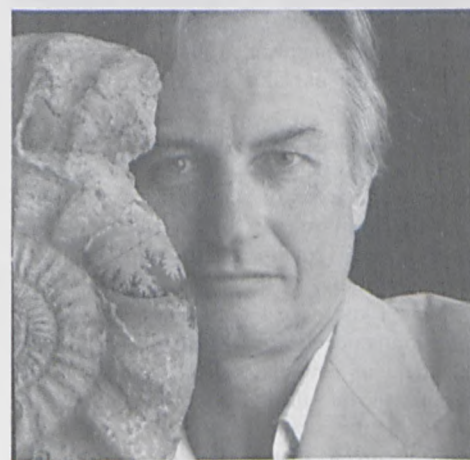
During the summer of 1987 Deschner taught a course entitled Criminal History of Christianity at the University of Münster.

In recognition of his literary work and his efforts to combat ignorance, Karlheinz Deschner has been awarded numerous prizes. In July of 1993, following Andrei Sacharov and Alexander Dubcek, he was the first German to be recognised with the International

Humanist Award. In 2001 he received the Erwin Fischer Prize, and in November of that year the Ludwig Feuerbach Prize as well.

He is a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in the Department of Historical Sciences.

Deschner, unfortunately, is virtually unknown in the UK, as none of his works have been translated into English.



Richard Dawkins
Photo: The Times

The Paranormal

I WAS encouraged to read the letter from Jack Hastie (*Points of View*, October) about the validity of some parapsychological research. I am an atheist and a scientist but I acknowledge that there may still be natural phenomena which science has not yet explained. We've been here before: Galileo, Newton, Einstein. Academic parapsychologists use the same statistical methods as mainstream psychologists, so why should we deride the former?

To Hastie's reference list I would add one more: *The Conscious Universe* (HarperCollins, 1997) by Dean Radin. He looks at parapsychological experimental data and applies meta-analysis to the results. In numerous cases, the odds against chance are millions to one. Such odds cannot be ignored as delusion and even if only one experiment out of thousands proves to be scientifically valid, then an explanation is still required.

My view is that there exists a natural phenomenon which sentient life-forms experience, albeit faintly, and whose manifestation has fed the imaginations of prophets, visionaries, soothsayers and witches for centuries.

The Christian religion hijacked paranormal experiences and barred ordinary people from expressing them at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE under the direction of the Roman Emperor Constantine. Since then the paranormal has been associated with Satan, evil spirits, fallen angels, etc. That connection is totally false. Paranormal phenomena are just that – paranormal. We just haven't invented the machines yet that can detect the causative agent, though I suspect that quantum physics may find the answer soon.

RICHARD A BATCHELOR
Fife

JACK Hastie (*Points of View*, October) rightly says the existence or otherwise of parapsychology has no bearing on the existence or otherwise of God, heaven and hell, but devotes most of his letter to giving parapsychology a plug.

Freethinkers readily accept the proposition that, while church livings, seminary posts and theological journals exist, people will be found to fill them. But some freethinkers don't believe this principle also applies to ostensibly non-religious pursuits like metaphysics and parapsychology.

When investigating the latter I found that, wherever full details of the methodology and statistical analysis of paranormal experiments and the circumstances of "veridical" experiences were given, their claims could be shown to be worthless.

Now, I know the freethought and scientific position is openness to revising hypotheses in the light of new evidence. But, really, most sceptics devote their lives to exploring every grotto in the world were some piously disturbed person alleges a visitation from the Blessed Virgin, and perusing every book, journal and SPR report that presents new "evi-

dence" for amply discredited phenomena? Are we required to send out circumnavigators every time a flat-earther pushes his/her barrow?

Let any psychokineticist not just "influence" the fall of already falling dice, but make them rise from the table by non-mechanical means. Let any intuitionist tell me what I am thinking about as s/he reads this letter. Let any clairvoyant say what money I now have in my wallet. And let any precognitionist accurately foretell the winner of the next lottery or horse race.

If any of them can, there's a lot of money to be made from financial challenges by sceptical individuals and organisations around the world.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

Don't abuse the English language

AT the risk of being thought pedantic, I must point out that the terms "faith" and "religious belief" are not synonyms; nor are the terms "gay" and "homosexual". There are other examples.

Then there are the countless malapropisms; my particular hate is "a little bit later on", not infrequently heard on various radio channels. Presumably the single word "later" would serve as well.

Let us not abuse the English language; it rather needs nurturing.

D HARROP
Sheffield.

Sacred Heart of Jesus

I WAS intrigued to see the unfortunately famous Sacred Heart of Jesus in the November *Freethinker*.

The Sacred Heart is a semi-fascist cult. It is supported by France's Le Front National, whose supporters regularly carry the image on demonstrations.

The Sacred Heart cult permits not the slightest criticism of the Pope, or any aspect of the Catholic Church. It is widely supported by those evil magicians, the Jesuits, though they secretly look on Sacred Heart devotees as simpletons.

J HAGGERTY
Scotland

Jesus' existence

MARTIN O'Brien (*Points of View* November 2007) relies too much on the opinion of Rudolf Bultmann, only one of many theologians who have considered the life of Jesus; others (e.g. Albert Schweitzer) thought that much can be known. In any case, to understand Jesus in historical context, as Schweitzer tried to do, one needs to turn to books by people who had different training: e.g. Hermann Reimarus (*Oriental Languages*), Maurice Goguel (*Exegesis and NT Criticism*), Charles Guinebert (*History of Christianity*) or James Mackinnon (*Ecclesiastical History*). And what about works by Jewish writers (Klausner, Cohn) or the more recent works by

Carmichael, Schonfield, Brandon and Sanders? Bultmann's negative view pales into insignificance with so much positive material.

On the whole, historians are more reliable than theologians regarding Jesus' life and times. They are in no doubt that Jesus existed and that much of what the gospels report is based on real events. I claim no special knowledge, but I do claim to have gone to worthwhile sources.

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

FOLLOWING on from Martin O'Brien's letter about Jesus, readers may be interested to know that Hershel Shanks, editor of the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, has stated "we have no direct evidence of Moses",

Of the Ten Commandments he stated: "We do not know when or where they were written, and we don't have any idea who wrote them".

As for the ten plagues which Moses supposedly unleashed through God, there were natural explanations and historical parallels for none of them, and no direct evidence for the tenth: the killing of every first-born Egyptian.

All of this was presented to us by Jeremy Bowen in a BBC television documentary about Moses.

STEVEN JOHNSTON
Stockport

'Mad' Rowan Williams

THE October *Freethinker* carried a report of pronouncements about "faith" schools by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. He was reported as saying, for instance: "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" – whatever that means.

As the source for the quotations was given as the Associated Press, I wondered at first if Dr Williams had been quoted completely accurately. However, the National Secular Society's "spirit guide", Terry Sanderson, directed me to the archiepiscopal website where my doubts were dispelled; and I began to understand why the executive director of the NSS, Keith Porteous Wood, was muttering darkly about "plain madness".

Another quotation was: "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."

I find it staggering that a man with considerable pretension to honesty can come out with stuff like this without a blush.

Imagine if some London lunar leftie claimed



the following: "The more that Maoist schools form an integral part of our overall educational provision, the better the chances of educating all working-class students sensitively in what it actually feels like to share political convictions and Chairman Mao's thought. We are proud of our proletarian ethos, and what we offer is not indoctrination, but rather we enable the children of workers and lower-middle-class peasants to develop a greater level of community cohesion and class solidarity through understanding the writings of Lenin, Stalin and Mao."

Would you take this seriously? Anyone who would needs a generous spell of fatty fast food, rest, meditation, psychotherapy, prayer, handgun cleaning and cactus arrangement at the George W Bush Coalition of the Willing Clinic in Rapture, Texas!

I spent ten years in private Anglican "faith" schools (1952-62) in England. The indoctrination there was constant, repetitive, heavy-handed and reinforced with the none-too-subtle threat of punishment.

On the Archbishop's website I found the following: "Thus strong and explicit Christian commitment should never be an alibi for failing to help students grasp the feelings and motivation of believers in other faiths – or of convinced unbelievers, for that matter."

I recall being made to sit through two Anglican sermons denouncing other religions, one being Mormonism. Afterwards a couple of students asked if a Mormon speaker could visit the school to put the Latter-Day-Saints' case. Certainly not.

I think I would like to meet His Grace one of these days, if only to look him straight in the eye and tell him, in unparliamentary language, what I think of his "spin" on faith schools!

NIGEL SINNOTT
Australia

Atheist athletes

JONATHAN Edwards wouldn't be the only Olympic gold medallist to openly reject religion. I no longer have *Mary P: An Autobiography* (1974) by the 1972 pentathlon gold medallist Mary Peters, but I clearly remember her account of attending a church service and realising, with no apparent angst, that she no longer believed in God.

RAY MCDOWELL
Co Antrim

Capitulating to Islam

NOT a day goes by, it seems, without us reading of some or other form of capitulation to the Muslims in our midst, or, in the case of Greggs, the bakery, the mere possibility of the presence of Muslims.

Let me elaborate. According to the *Daily Record* (September 21), Greggs have installed a Muslim toilet in its new £15-million Scottish HQ in Cambuslang near Glasgow – even though they have no Muslim workers!

Staff think the installation of separate cubicles with ceramic holes in the floor was a pointless exercise – and so, of course, do I.

But the company insists this was just a case of forward planning that would accommodate the needs of any Muslims they may employ in the future.

I wonder how many – if any – Islamic countries provide alternative Western-style toilet facilities for non-Muslims who don't like the idea of squatting over a hole like a desert Bedouin.

When will all this nonsense stop?

P FELLOWS
Newcastle

Strength through language

THE correspondence strand created by Stephen Moreton (*Freethinker*, August 2007) and David James (*Freethinker*, October 2007) still has some mileage in it.

Stephen Moreton said that homeopathy is "bollocks". David James decried this use of "strong language" reminding us that "bollocks (testicles) are invaluable possessions in the male animal...", and nothing more.

Unselfconscious swearing is full of hidden information. There is an elegance to the rules people routinely follow when they swear, that could even be used as an argument for intelligent design.

The give-away with the word "bollocks" is the often-used phrase (the root phrase?) "That's just bollocks!". So if something is "just bollocks", what is missing? Well, there is no penis! No stabbing spear, no phallus, no dagger of despotism, nothing to shag you to death for thinking, saying or doing the wrong thing.

Every milk-maid and farm-hand since the dawn of time has known that a great pair of testicles is useless without a sex pistol. In much the same way, your average mainstream religion is bollocks because there is no god.

Thus, our thought for the day, today, runs: LET'S RECLAIM THE WORD "BOLLOCKS".

"Bollocks" is the single most powerful term in the freethinker's vocabulary. The word is not rude, and as a concept, simple and often in the sub-conscious, it has a power and universality that goes way beyond just a pair of testicles. Judicious use of the word "bollocks" can and will create a freer, fairer society. Have a go!

Where might this lead us? Rigorous use of the B word would help young people understand what they can and can't, should and shouldn't do.

The behaviour of young people is one of the abiding pre-occupations of the nation, so what a fantastic opportunity. What, for instance, is the difference between a driver turning off a road, crossing the on-coming traffic without stopping or giving it priority, and someone speaking words which might cause some people offence even though that was not the intention?

This leads neatly to a consideration of blasphemy: this is only a problem if someone is

kidding a whole bunch of other people that their religion has a pillar of power at its heart (ie, it is not just bollocks). The more people fooled, the greater the power surrounding the illusory organ. Who has that power and what is it being used for?

On a lighter note, a conformist/believer might argue that even if there isn't a god, the power is being used in an equitable and even-handed way for the benefit of all. However, that would lead to a discussion about it being just bollocks!

Finally, if this piece has lifted the morale of a single adherent of our cause, the best of causes, I would like to thank David James for making the contention that use of the word "bollocks" is bollocks. No, it's not, David. "Bollocks" has a central importance and place in our critical vocabulary. Let's hear it!

N JONES
Derbyshire

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Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Wednesday, Jan 9, 6.30pm for 7pm. New Year meal. Wing Wah Restaurant, Wolverhampton Road, Oldbury. Contact Eddie Roberts, 0121 357 4294.

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, Dec 4, 7.30 pm. Robert Stovold: *Has Science Buried God?* Telephone or see website for details.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information and programme: 01494 771851. Sat, Jan 12, 8pm. Annual Dinner, The Full Moon, Hawbridge Common. £22. Advance booking required.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available. Details: 01268 785295.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ. Tel: 0844 800 3067. Email: secretary@galha.org. Website: www.galha.org.

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

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

Harrow Humanist Group. Meetings second Wednesday of the month (except July, August and January) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. On December 12th you are invited to our Grand Victorian Yuletide Party, with games, a quiz and prizes. Members of other groups welcome, but please let our Secretary, Julie Crow, know on 0208 907 6124 if you are coming.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thurs, Jan 3, 8pm. Public Meeting. **The Havering Careline.**

Humanism for Inquirers: www.humanists.freeserve.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. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk. Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Local Scottish Groups:

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

Dundee Group: 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh Group: 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Glasgow Group: 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Sq, Leeds. Tuesday, Dec 11, 7.30pm. Angie Petit: *First Offender to Old Lag – Inevitable?* Jan 8: *What Muslims Want*. DVD od Chabbel 4 programme.

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

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

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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Third Thursday, 8pm

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. Contact: Derek Marcus, 47 Birch Grove, Potters Bar, Herts, EN6 1SY. Tel: 01707 653667 email: enquiries@nondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk website: www.nondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

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 Trangle Trust: Registered Charity promoting humanism and obtaining justice. PTT 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB. 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, Dec 5, 7.30pm. Seasonal Buffet, Quiz & Social Evening. Tickets £11.

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

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

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

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

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

Think Humanism: An independent discussion forum for anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought - www.thinkhumanism.com

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

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

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