

£1.25

Vol 128 No 1
January 2008

The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

Mohammed the Bear: the Aftermath

Worldwide scorn poured
on Islam as a result of
Gillian Gibbons's arrest in
the Sudan for 'blasphemy'

THE saga of the woman at the centre of the Moteddy row ended well when the Liverpool teacher, who went to the Sudan in search of adventure, was released from prison after serving several days for the "blasphemous" act of allowing a teddy bear to be named Mohammed.

But the fall-out from this ludicrous incident shows no sign of abating. What happened to Gillian Gibbons not only sparked a debate throughout the Western world about the nature of Islam, but opened the floodgates of scorn and ridicule.

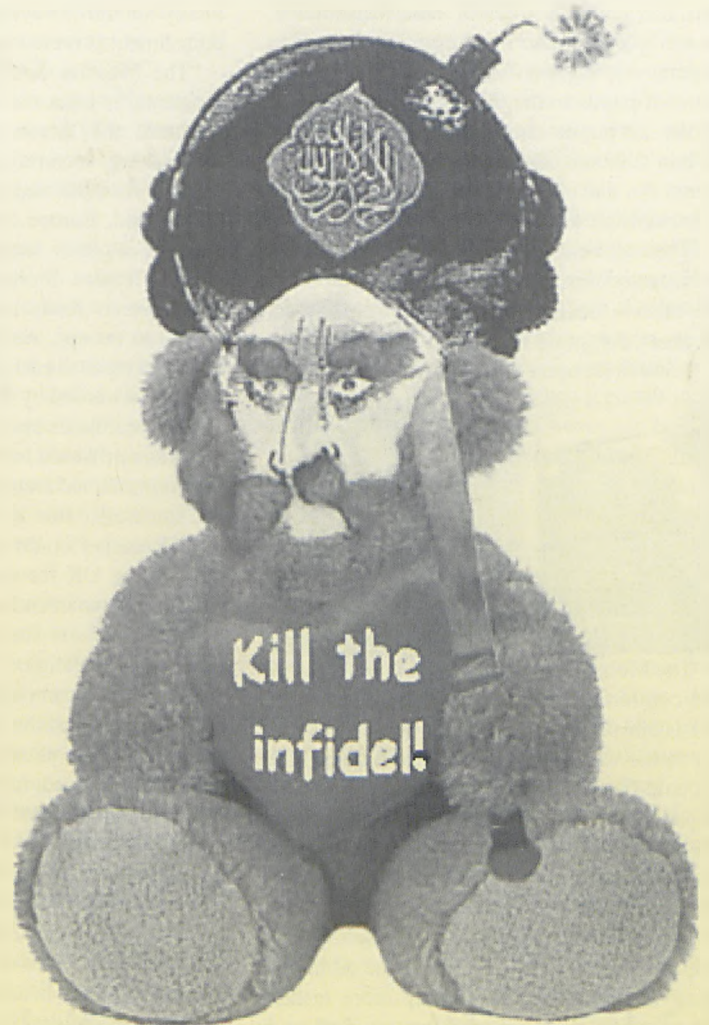
Immediately after the Gibbons' release, an atheist contributor to YouTube – one Gisburne 2000 – created a Blasphemy Bear Video Challenge (aka "Get Stuffed Mohammed"), in which he asked others to post videos giving their take on the incident.

In issuing his challenge, he said: "Islamic laws were responsible for putting a woman in prison for the ridiculous crime of giving a bear the same name as their so-called prophet.

"My challenge to you is to give a bear a name, a particular name. Call your bear Mohammed and show how ridiculous these religious beliefs and laws really are."

The response was immediate, and dozens of YouTube enthusiasts pressed a battalion of teddies into service to star in a variety of amusing videos.

Elsewhere on the internet, thousands of bloggers began post-



ing images of Mohammed bears. The *Freethinker* joined in the with its version (pictured above) which was posted on the FT website.

And award-winning British blogger Archbishop Cranmer added this sober comment to what had developed into raging debate:

"Give a Jew a bacon sandwich, and he'll roar with laughter, and what's more there will be no lawsuit for infringement of their human rights or a call to jihad. But Islam is no laughing matter, Mohammed no joke, and Allah apparently incapable of humour.

"Cranmer thought he'd heard everything absurd that could possibly emanate from the 7th-century backward mindset of Islamism, but the revelation that a British teacher faced 40 lash-

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Continued fall-out from the Sudanese Mobear incident

es (which amounts to death) for agreeing that her 7-year-old pupils could name a teddy bear 'Mohammed' beggars belief.

"The name was among the eight suggestions that the children offered, and Mohammed, which is one of the most common names in Sudan, was chosen because it was also the name of pupils in the class. In a final vote, 20 of the 23 pupils chose Mohammed, so Mrs Gillian Gibbons did what any good teacher would do, and she encouraged her charges by empowering them to name the bear.

"Then all hell breaks loose. She is arrested, interrogated for hours, imprisoned, and told she faces a death sentence for insulting 'the Prophet', defaming Islam, and sedition.

"Look here, upon this picture, and on this:



"The Mohammed on the left is cuddly, warm and comforting – the very incarnation of all that Islam professes to be and aspires to convey to the world; the Mohammed on the right is a cold-hearted, murderous terrorist who participated in the hijacking of American Airlines Flight 11, the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center during the September 11, 2001 attacks: all that Islam professes not to be.

"If the naming of the bear is an insult to 'the Prophet' and atoned for only by the administering of 40 lashes, how many more lashes may atone for the naming of the terrorist?

"The school in question, Unity High School, has stated that Mrs Gibbons teacher was guilty of nothing but an innocent mistake. The school's director said: 'We have lost one of our best teachers. She was maybe a little naive but she really had no idea what she was doing'. Nevertheless, in a statement sent to *More4 News*, the school announced that Mrs Gibbons' employment with them was being terminated with immediate effect. It said: 'The administration of Unity High School would like to proffer an official apology to all students and their families and to all Muslims for what was an individual action, which does not represent the sentiments of the administration or the school!'

"This is appalling *dhimmitude*. For a school supposedly founded on Christian principles, it has no sense of proportion, fair play, or justice. They ought to be pleading her case, leading an appeal, reasoning with the unreasonable using

their own scriptures.

"For does not surah after surah of the Qur'an begin 'In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful'? Did not Mohammed teach that mercy should always be manifest before any punishment is meted out?

"The West is being conditioned by such incidents; it joins the response to the Danish cartoons, the threats to the Pope after his Regensburg lecture, and the fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the protests against his knighthood. Europe and the UK in particular adopt a *de facto* standard of self-censorship which elevates Mohammed and Allah to a plane which Jesus and Jehovah long since ceased to occupy. And the more violently the Islamists react to each offence, the more richly they are rewarded by the appeasing politicians, bishops, cardinals and popes.

"Cranmer would have no problem if a teddy bear were named Jesus: in fact, Spain probably has hundreds. But it is inconceivable that a school teacher could be arrested and imprisoned in the UK for so naming a bear, unless Gordon Brown intends to include the provision when he revisits the legislation to ban the incitement to 'religious hatred'.

"So let the campaign begin here that not only bears, but sloths, gannets, sheep, camels, lemmings, rats, skunks and pigs can all be called Mohammed, for the name is not sacred, and has been debased a million times by thousands of Islamists like Mohammed Atta who manifest abundantly the worst characteristics and attributes of many such creatures."

Shortly after the Cranmer posted his comment, two examples of the self-censorship he alluded to hit the headlines.

A British children's author who called one of his characters Mohammed the Mole to promote multiculturalism decided to rename him Morgan, and the city museum in The Hague decided not to include in an exhibition a work of art that may offend Muslims.

Author Kes Gray said the case of British

'O Come All Ye faithless'

THE bookshop chain Borders has apologised to Christians for giving away a greeting card with the slogan "O come all ye faithless" to people who bought Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* in the run-up to last Christmas.

Responding to criticism from British evangelists, the company issued a statement which said it "did not intend it as anti-Christian or a swipe at the Christian faith", and said that it "apologises to any of our customers who feel it was that".



teacher Gillian Gibbons had prompted him to postpone a reprint of his book, *Who's Poorly Too*, and change the name.

"I had no idea at all of the sensitivities of the name Mohammed until seeing this case in Sudan," Gray told the *Sunday Times*.

"As soon as I saw the news I thought, 'Oh gosh, I've got a mole called Mohammed – this is not good!'"

Gray's book, which has sold 40,000 copies in Britain and overseas, also featured the characters Dipak Dalmatian and Pedro Penguin in an effort to be "inclusive".

The picture excluded from the city museum of The Hague is by Iranian artist Sooreh Hera. It is entitled *Adam and Ewald* and shows two gay men wearing masks of the Muslim prophet Mohammed and his son-in-law Ali.

It was part of a photoseries the Gemeentemuseum had planned to show in an exhibition that opened last month. The Gemeentemuseum's director Wim van Krimpen told reporters the museum was interested in purchasing Hera's complete series, which he called "high quality works of art". But he added he would not exhibit *Adam and Ewald* in the next few years because "certain people in our society might perceive it as offensive".

Hera responded she was "disappointed", saying "apparently a Muslim minority decides what will be on display in the museum".

The latest twist in the Mobear saga occurred when an Islamic leader in Oxford wrote to the local paper saying that Gillian Gibbons may still be in danger from fanatics because she was pardoned rather than found innocent.

Dr Hojatt Ramzy, proprietor of the Iqra Islamic School in Oxford agreed that Mrs Gibbons should never have been arrested in the first place, but, given that the Sudanese judicial authorities failed to find her "not guilty" of the charges, some fanatics may feel that she is still culpable.

Dr Ramzy says that Mrs Gibbons should seek a new judgment in a "European Islamic court" that will clear her of the charges of blasphemy and defamation of religion. In a letter to the *Oxford Mail*, Dr Ramzy said:

"A pardon is for those who have committed a considerable crime, which Mrs Gibbons did not do. She should be given an apology from the government of Sudan which wrongly imprisoned her."

It was not made clear which European Sharia court he was referring to.

The Catholic Church is forcing its reactionary agenda into Parliament

THE National Secular Society has condemned as “sinister” reports that the Government had apparently yielded to pressure from the Catholic Church, and had lifted its whip on voting for its Human Fertility and Embryology Bill.

The decision last month follows a meeting that Catholic MPs from all parties had with Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, who told them that they should defy the whip and vote according to Catholic doctrine.

The unofficial leader of the grouping of Catholic MPs is Jim Dobbin, who says that the MPs had “agreed to work more closely with church leaders on political issues”.

The fertility bill, that will be voted on in the new year, is expected to have several key amendments that would give the Catholic Church some of what it wants. One amendment would, for instance, lower the time limit for abortions from 24 to 20 weeks. Other parts of the Bill would be amended to require fertility clinics to “consider the need for a father” before providing treatment. This was thought to be an attempt to block gay women availing themselves of the service.

By being given a free vote, Catholic Cabinet Ministers could vote against the Bill, but are more likely to abstain. In total there are 64 MPs who are Catholic. Transport secretary Ruth Kelly, well known as a member of the extremist Catholic organisation Opus Dei, has opposed stem-cell research proposals and argued against the plans to force Catholic adoption agencies to consider gay couples as parents.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “We would find it sinister if these MPs were having their votes dictated by the Catholic Church rather than the people who elected them. This meeting with Cardinal Murphy O’Connor, followed swiftly by the lifting of the whip, suggest that the Vatican’s agenda is now being inveigled into parliament and into law making. Yet the Vatican’s policies on so many issues are completely out of step with the opinions and desires of the British public.”

Mr Porteous Wood said: “Naturally MPs should not vote against their conscience but, at the same time, if they are being elected as Catholic MPs with a Catholic agenda they should ensure that the people who elected them were completely aware of that. To be elected on a Labour ticket and then to discard that commitment in favour of religious demands is dishonest. Recent research from British Catholics for Choice don’t support the Catholic view of abortion.

A new weighted, representative poll of UK

faith groups, including Catholics and Protestants, shows definitive support for a woman’s right to have an abortion in cases of unwanted pregnancy, according to a poll released by Catholics for Choice (CFC).

The YouGov poll, conducted in November, shows a majority of the sample to be more liberal than the 1967 UK law on abortion allows – even where participants identified as belonging to a faith group.

Results showed a broad support for legal abortion across all groups. In response to the statement, “It should be legal for a woman to have an abortion when she has an unwanted pregnancy”, 63 percent of all respondents to the poll strongly agreed or agreed (14 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed); 58 percent of self-identified Protestants strongly agreed or agreed (19 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed); 43 percent of self-identified Catholics strongly agreed or agreed (27 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Of special note in the current environment – wherein Catholic bishops have become more aggressively vocal in their efforts to restrict access to abortion – in response to the statement “Catholic bishops concentrate too much of their attention on abortion when there are other issues that also require their attention”, 64 percent of all respondents to the poll strongly agreed or agreed (8 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed); 68 percent of self-identified Protestants strongly agreed or agreed (7 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed); 42 percent of self-identified Catholics strongly

agreed or agreed (27 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed).

The key figures above are that only 27 percent of Catholics support the bishops/Vatican line on abortion law and that nearly two thirds of the population think the bishops are too involved with abortion issues. This makes sober reading given the Catholic MPs’ moves reported above.

President of Catholics for Choice, Jon O’Brien, said, “The poll results demonstrate to us an important point that is often ignored or glossed over in discussions about the law on abortion: namely, that British people, of all faiths and none, trust women and families to make their own decisions when it comes to the choice to terminate a pregnancy or bring a child into the world. Despite what the Catholic hierarchy would like the public to believe, a plurality of British Catholics has chosen to ignore this divisive rhetoric, and instead follow their consciences when it comes to supporting access to abortion.”

The NSS has protested frequently at the tactics of the Catholic Church in pressuring politicians with veiled threats. “It is anti-democratic and undesirable in an open society,” said Mr Porteous Wood. “Politicians in the US have been threatened publicly with the withdrawal of communion and even excommunication unless they changed their stance on abortion to the Vatican hard line. We do not want to see control of democratically elected representatives being exercised by the Church, rather than those who elected them.”

Spoof nativity ads enrage the faithful

TWO companies – one in Australia, the other in Italy – have outraged the faithful with spoof nativity TV commercials.

The Australian ad, created for electronic goods retailers Betta Electrical depicted the baby Jesus tossing gifts back at the three wise men. The words “Give a Better Gift” then flashes across the screen.

Christian leaders immediately branded the ad as “tacky and offensive”. Huffed senior Sydney Anglican bishop Glenn Davies:

“The gifts that the wise men were giving were appropriate for a king, so the notion that Jesus would reject them is absurd.”

Julianne Worchurst, marketing manager at BSR Group, said the ad was “intended to be a tongue-in-cheek and humorous approach to the gift giving season. We accept that this could have been seen as offensive, but that was not the

intention at all. The ad was never intended to upset or disrupt people’s Christmas,” she said.

Earlier, the makers of energy drink Red Bull annoyed Catholics with a Christmas campaign ad in Italy, in which the product is presented to the baby Jesus by a *fourth* Wise Man.

The ad was pulled after an angry Italian priest demanded that it be scrapped because it was “blasphemous”.

Father Marco Damanti, from Sicily, wrote to the makers of Red Bull denouncing their commercial as “a blasphemous act” – and the spineless company immediately agreed to remove it from Italian television.

“The image of the sacred family has been represented in a sacrilegious way,” whined Father Damanti. “Whatever the ironic intentions of Red Bull, the advert pokes fun at the nativity, and at Christian sensitivity.”



And on the seventh day God created pillocks

AND you thought it could happen only in America! Think again. Britain looks like getting its own Dinosaur-Adventure-Land creationism adventure park, where kids can be indoctrinated into the idea that Earth is about six thousand years old and man and the dinosaurs co-existed.

According to a report last month in the *Observer*, "The 5,000-capacity park will be the first of its kind in Britain, but not in the world."

No, there are some in the USA, including the Holy Land Experience in Florida, and Dinosaur Adventure Land, also in Florida, where God is "given the glory for His creation".

We can perhaps take as read what *that* is supposed to mean.

This "giant Christian theme park", says the *Observer*, "will champion the book of Genesis and make a multi-media case that God created the world in seven days".

Gosh! And this is Lancashire, where we thought folk had more sense.

The project "will boast two interactive cinemas, a cafeteria, six shops and a television recording studio, allowing it to produce its own Christian-themed films and documentaries". The story continues:

"The AH Trust, a charity set up last year by a group of businessmen alarmed by the direction in which they see society heading, has identified a number of potential sites in the north west of England to build the £3.5m

Christian theme park ...

"By producing its own films, the trust believes it will be able to provide an antidote to modern culture. It says on its website: "On television today there is so much sex and violence, it is no wonder our youth are binge drinking ... This is a revolutionary scheme requiring innovative people with the vision to bring about change and a new direction."

Oh, but of course: telling kids the world was created in six days and the Creator rested on the seventh (all-powerful but needed a lie-down and a nice cuppa) will stop binge drinking and antisocial behaviour?

Guest commentator ANDY ARMITAGE brings tidings of woe: Britain is to get its very own Creationism Theme Park

And get those buzz words and phrases: revolutionary, innovative people, vision, change, a new direction. Dizzying, isn't it?

The trust is not saying who the backers are, but the name of Peter Vardy is in the frame – he of religious "academies" that similiarly seek to lie to children. It says it is "talking to a number of businessmen who have invested in city academies, leading to speculation that it may have approached Sir Peter Vardy, who has given millions of pounds to advance the claims of creationism – the belief that God created the world and that Darwin's theory of evolution is wrong".

Best theory we have to date, guys, but, hey, don't let us spoil your fun. However, the idea does start to get worrying, as the *Observer* story says:

The trust also says it plans to apply for government grants and European funding to help it realise its dream of turning the television studio into "an international leader in promoting family-oriented Christian programmes".

So religion – "family-oriented" religion, to boot – in the form of big business hiding behind a trust, with all the tax breaks and charity privileges that status can bestow on it, will be going cap in hand to the taxpayer. Perhaps it should take a leaf out of Dinosaur Adventure Land's book, and indulge in a bit of daylight robbery. Here's a quotation from its website: "During this three-hour party [held in November to mark it's 7th anniversary] you will have the opportunity to experience a taste of the future – an exciting new maze! Sponsor a section of the maze for \$25.00 and receive a dinosaur pin. Sponsor four or more and select an additional free gift. Not able to come, but still want to donate to the maze? Just call (850) 478-3466. Pizza and drinks will be available to purchase at mealtime."

Not happy with wanting to twist kids' minds, they want to rob them of their pocket money. A pin badge for twenty-five bucks!

Wow! And you can have pizza – at a price. And they've already paid a few dollars to get in, one assumes, and the park is run by people far richer than the kids are.

Here's some more eye-popping stuff:

"Be prepared to be challenged to think and to follow the Lord in the way God the Creator has planned for you. If you do not know your Creator, we will be overjoyed to introduce you to Him.

"Our funny and experienced guides will lead your family or group on the tour, declaring the works of the Lord and the words of the Lord.

"DAL is not an amusement park, for 'amuse' means 'to not think', and we want people to think. Rather, it is an amazement park. Come and stand amazed at the truths of the Creator and Savior of the world, Jesus Christ."

Jesus Christ! So this is a taste of what is in store for England's green and pleasant land.

Perhaps God wasn't putting his feet up after all on the seventh day. Perhaps that's when he created pillocks.

It's worth pointing out, incidentally, that the pillock behind Dinosaur Adventure Land is an out-and-out fraud. No, let's make that FRAUD.

This "Dr Dino", aka Kent E Hovind, is doing a ten-year stretch in South Carolina for 58 tax offences, obstructing federal agents and related charges, having been convicted in January 2007. His wife Jo is doing a year for related fraud offences.

Hovind is an American Young Earth creationist – the weird, kinda worrying six-day variety – who at the age of 15 became a born-again Christian (one of those people you wish had never been born in the first place).

He's most famous – or infamous – for "science" seminars that aim to persuade listeners to believe in creation Genesis style. He began his Dinosaur Adventure Land behind his home in Pensacola, Florida, in 2001. As well as the human-dinosaur coexistence nonsense, the Loch Ness Monster gets a look in.

America's Committee for Skeptical Enquiry visited the park in 2004 and branded it deceptive and misleading.

If you'd like a laugh at Hovind's expense, just tap <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjKMhtyI3L8> into your browser and watch a YouTube interview in which Sacha Baron Cohen, alias Ali G, tells him that, because he ate bananas, he was clearly descended from monkeys. Well, QED.

If you really can't keep your curiosity about this curiosity in check, then have a look at the Wikipedia article on him at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kent_Hovind.

Could God really create such pillocks in one day? Perhaps he did a bit of overtime on the quiet.

Muslim woman bins the Koran

TOLD that her luggage was too heavy by a staff member at Manchester Airport, a Muslim woman, wearing a full veil, avoided being surcharged by dumping a copy of the Koran, a prayer book and a prayer mat in the nearest bin.

The airport employee, who does not want to be named, told *The Asian Image* newspaper that when she told the passenger that her luggage was overweight, the woman simply dumped a bag in a bin.

"I thought the bag contained jeans and other clothes, but when I checked I was shocked to discover it contained the Koran."

The employee said she was "shocked and angry". She confronted the passenger and a row developed, culminating in the Muslim woman filing a complaint with the airport management.

"I asked the woman why she was wearing the veil if she wanted to do things like this. But she didn't seem to want to listen or be bothered over what she had done."

After putting her side of the story to management, the employee was allowed to take the Koran home.

New LibDem leader should not be pilloried for his non-belief in God

REACTING to the news that the new leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, has said that he doesn't believe in God, the National Secular Society said that he should be commended for his honesty.

Terry Sanderson, NSS President, said: "Mr Clegg has been honest about his beliefs and that should be commended. We hope that his opponents will not try to use this honesty against him. A non-believing MP can be a good, all-round representative of the people – it doesn't make him *anti-religious*.

"We worry that the religious interests that are resurgent at the moment will try to exploit this news in destructive ways. In the USA a

recent poll indicated that it would be almost impossible for an atheist to become president. We would certainly not want that situation in this country. If that had been the case, we would not have had Winston Churchill in Downing Street.

"To charges that he wasn't not open about his beliefs – or lack of them – before his election, we would point to Ruth Kelly, who kept her association with the Catholic group Opus Dei quiet. Her constituents knew nothing about it until newspapers exposed it."

Mr Sanderson added: "We certainly hope that religion is not going to be an issue for politicians in Britain as it is in the USA, where presidential

candidates are hysterically trying to outdo each other in the piety stakes. We must not allow religion to become a test for public office in this country. We have, until now, regarded such opinions as personal and private."



Nick Clegg

Mr Sanderson pointed out that the NSS's founder, Charles Bradlaugh, was a radical MP in the 19th century who was denied his seat in parliament because he was an atheist and was thought to be unable to take the religious parliamentary oath (the only option then). He was re-elected five times before parliament allowed him to take his seat. He then brought forward legislation that would allow MPs to affirm as well as swear on the Bible.

God responsible for shooting of Colorado gunman Matthew Murray

A PARISHIONER who thought she killed a gunman after he murdered four people at two US churches claimed that God was guiding her.

Jeanne Assam told reporters last month that when gunman Matthew Murray, 24, entered the New Life Church in Colorado Springs firing his rifle, parishioners fled.

"There was chaos. I will never forget the gunshots. They were so loud," Ms Assam said.

The volunteer security guard at the church said at first she hid from Murray but then changed her mind.

"I came out of cover and identified myself and engaged him and then took him down," Ms Assam said. "God was with me. I didn't think for a minute to run away. God guided me and protected me. It seemed like it was me, the gunman, and God."

Asked if she felt like a hero, Ms Assam said: "I wasn't just going to wait for him to do further damage."

She said God gave her the strength to confront Murray, keeping her calm and focused.

But, although Murray was shot several times by Assam, he in fact died by his own hand. An autopsy report revealed the bullet that killed him was fired from his own gun.

Ms Assam was a police officer in downtown Minneapolis in the 1990s, and is licensed to carry a weapon. She worships at one of the church's morning services and volunteers as a guard for another.

The church's senior pastor, Brady Boyd, praised her. "There could have been a great loss of life. She probably saved over 100 people," he said.

Before Ms Assam "took him down", Murray had killed sisters Stephanie and Rachael Works, aged 18 and 16 – both members of the 10,000-member Youth With a Mission – in the

church. He had also badly injured their father.

Police said that 12 hours earlier and 120km away Murray had killed Tiffany Johnson, 26, and Philip Crouse, 24 – two staff members of a Youth With a Mission centre in the Denver suburb of Arvada.

He gunned them down after being refused a bed for the night. Murray also seriously injured five people in his shooting sprees.

Police said Murray had been thrown out of a Youth With a Mission school a few years ago and had been sending it hate mail.

Murray had an assault rifle, two handguns and a rucksack stuffed with about 1000 rounds of ammunition as well as smoke grenades.

He was home-schooled in what a friend said was a deeply Christian household, but a police officer, who wanted to be anonymous, said Murray "hated Christians".

His father is a neurologist and a leading multiple sclerosis researcher.

Youth With a Mission is a missionary group geared toward young people. It was founded in 1960 by Loren Cunningham, who created the organisation after having "a vision" while touring the Bahamas on a gospel tour.

Today, around 20,000 members serve on short-term missionary trips in 149 countries.

Several former missionaries have accused YWAM (generally pronounced "Why-Wam") of being a cult that uses brainwashing methods. But Rick Ross, founder of the Ross Institute of New Jersey, which tracks cults, does not agree.

"Youth With a Mission is not a cult," he said. "However, I have received very serious complaints about Youth With a Mission from former staffers, family members and also others concerned, such as Christian clergy."

Rev Jonathan Bonk, the director of the



Jeanne Assam: 'Guided by God'

Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, said that missions like those YWAM offers appeal to those looking for something other than the consumerist lifestyle. "They want to be attached to a cosmic project that gives their little lives some kind of sense of purpose or meaning," Bonk said.

The structure of the group is decentralised, with founder Cunningham based in Hawaii at the group's University of the Nations in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Members must complete courses at Discipleship Training Schools (DTS) before attending the school.

The umbrella structure of the organisation has given the individual training schools and their leaders great autonomy, experts said.

"Some former staffers and families of current members have likened it to brainwashing," Ross said, adding, "When I say brainwashing, I mean breaking people down and moulding them into a YWAM mindset that is basically submissive and obedient and pliable to the leader's agenda."

Ross said he receives complaints on a monthly basis, many from parents who worry that their 18- to 26-year-old child – who has committed extensive time and money to an overseas mission – has fallen into a cult.

Apart from concerns about lack of health care and poor diet, the complaints include the financial straits of its members, who must pay for their missions and their DTS training by soliciting funds from friends and family.

The deadly face of

THE tragic death of an Ontario teenage girl – allegedly killed last month by her own traditionally-minded Muslim father – has sent shock waves across the world.

“Canadians”, according to a commentary entitled *The Deadly Face of Muslim Extremism* in Canada’s *National Post*, “are justified in raising concerns as to whether this is a sign of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in their own backyard.”

Aqsa Parvez, an attractive 16-year-old – popular with her friends and peers at Applewood Heights Secondary School – “was only trying to be herself, was only wishing for a normal adolescence amid Canada’s rich cultural mosaic,” according to writers Tarek Fatah and Farzana Hassan*.

Friends at the victim’s school said she feared her father, and had argued over her desire to shun the hijab, a traditional shoulder-length head scarf worn by females in devout Muslim families.

“Her father has now been charged with murder, and his son with obstruction, while a young life has been snuffed out – most likely in the name of honour and Islam.”

The report continued: “Radical Muslim men consider themselves ultimately responsible for the conduct of the womenfolk. This outlook is rooted in a medieval ethos that treats women as non-persons, unable to decide for themselves what they should wear, where they must go and what they must accomplish in life. If their conduct is seen as contravening this austere religious outlook, they are invariably subjected to abuse.

“The hijab in particular has become a thorny issue among Muslim families. It has been elevated as a sort of ‘sixth pillar of Islam’ among militant sects. Young teenage girls are often lectured over the virtues of the hijab by their family members. Once they hit puberty, compliance is deemed a non-negotiable religious requirement.

“Yet none of this is actually mandated by the Koran. The Koran, while speaking generally of modesty in dress and demeanour, falls short of specifying the details of that modesty. Scripture also makes allowances for non-compliance of religious edicts if the environment is not conducive to their observance.

“The Koran exhorts compassion upon parents, caretakers and guardians of young girls. Yet some families instead exhibit a strict conformity to doctrine and dogma, which in turn leads to violence, bigotry and intolerance of alternative understandings of faith.

“There is much discussion in Canadian society about the religious freedoms of those who choose to wear the hijab. We hear relatively little about the oppression of young girls who make the opposite choice. Seldom is their oppression from within their own community, or even their own family, cast as a human rights issue.

“If convicted, Aqsa’s father and brother must be handed the strictest penalty available

under the law. As for the imams and clergy of Canada’s mosques, who constantly berate young women for not wearing the hijab or snub them for “violating Islam,” they need to reflect on the consequences of their sermons.

“Consider, as an example, the Montreal mosque that recently posted on its website a warning to the effect that if young girls took off their hijab, they could end up getting raped and having ‘illegitimate children’. Other professed risks included ‘Stresses, insecurity and suspicion in the minds of husbands’ and ‘instigating young people to deviate towards the path of lust’.

“As if the threat of rape and the fear of illegitimate children were not enough, these pre-teen girls were told that if they took off their hijab, they would cease to be Muslims: ‘By removing your hijab, you have destroyed your faith. Islam means submission to Allah in all our actions’. Little wonder, then, that Canadian girls walk away from sports tournaments rather than remove their hijabs.

“Muslims need to stand up to this sort of emotional and religious blackmail by imams who spread the competing agendas of Saudi Arabia and Iran into Canada. Young Aqsa Parvez’s death cannot be reversed. But in her memory, we can at least challenge those whose message leads to rage and madness.”

Earlier in December the *Telegraph* reported on the plight of British Muslim, Sofia Allam, (real name withheld) who left Islam for Christianity. According to reporter Alasdair Palmer, “the response from her family was one of persecution and threats.”

Sofia, 31, revealed that her once kind, loving father threatened to kill her. He said she had brought shame and humiliation on him, that she was now “worse than the muck on their shoes”, and that she deserved to die.

“He said he couldn’t have me in the house now that I was a Kaffir [an insulting term for a non-Muslim]. He added that I was damned for ever. He insulted me horribly. I couldn’t recognise that man as the father who had been so kind to me as I was growing up.

“My mother’s transformation was even worse. She constantly beat me about the head. She screamed at me all the time. I remember saying to them, as they were shouting death threats, ‘Mum, Dad – you’re saying you should kill me, but I’m your daughter! Don’t you realise that?’”

After three weeks of bullying, and just before her parents physically threw her out, Sofia left. “They put their loyalty to Islam above any love for me,” she says, her voice faltering slightly.

“It was such a shock. I remember thinking when they brought all my uncles round to try to intimidate me – all these men were lined up

telling me how terrible a person I was, how the devil had taken me – I remember thinking, how can this be happening? Because this isn’t Lahore in Pakistan. This is Dagenham in London! This is Britain!”

“Religious persecution of the kind Sofia suffers is increasingly common in Britain today,” Palmer revealed in his report. “It is hard to get an accurate notion of the scale of the problem, not least because very few of the people who leave Islam are willing to complain to the police about the way they are treated.”

Maryam Namazie, a spokesperson for the Council of Ex-Muslims, added: “Intimidation [in Britain] is very widespread and pretty effective.” She believes that many of the deaths classified as “honour killings” are actually murders of people who have renounced Islam.

Earlier in the month it was reported that the daughter of a British imam was living under police protection, after receiving death threats from her family for having left Islam.

Most leading Muslims in Britain are unequivocal in their denunciation of British Muslim parents who threaten to kill their children for leaving Islam.

Ibrahim Mogra, of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), says that it is “absolutely disgraceful behaviour... In Britain, no Muslim has the right to harm one hair of someone who decides to leave Islam.”

Inayat Bunglawala, also a spokesman for the MCB, insists that such behaviour in Britain is “awful and quite wrong. The police should crack down on it.”

“And yet a significant portion of British Muslims think that such behaviour is not merely right, but a religious obligation: a survey by the think-tank Policy Exchange, for instance, revealed that 36 percent of young Muslims believe that those who leave Islam should be



The vivacious Aqsa Parvez

Muslim Extremism

killed," Palmer revealed.

"There is considerable support, from the Koran and other sacred Islamic texts, for that position – which may explain why, out of the 57 Islamic states in the world today, seven have a legal code that punishes Muslims who leave the religion with death.

That number may soon increase: Pakistan is currently considering a Bill that would make apostasy a capital crime for men and one carrying a sentence of imprisonment for women.

As it is, ordinary Pakistanis take the law into their own hands and kill Muslim apostates. The same thing happens in Turkey where, earlier this year, two people were killed for "having turned away from Islam".

Patrick Sookhdeo was born a Muslim, but later converted to Christianity. He is now inter-

national director of the Barnabas Fund, an organisation that aims to research and to ameliorate the conditions of Christians living in countries hostile to their religion.

He notes that "all four schools of Sunni law, as well as the Shia variety, call for the death penalty for apostates. Most Muslim scholars say that Muslim religious law – sharia – requires the death penalty for apostasy."

"In 2004, Prince Charles called a meeting of leading Muslims to discuss the issue," adds Dr Sookhdeo. "I was there. All the Muslim leaders at that meeting agreed that the penalty in sharia is death. The hope was that they would issue a public declaration repudiating that doctrine, but not one of them did."

The reluctance to condemn sharia law is widespread.

"I asked Mr Bunglawala, for instance, to condemn the Islamic states that imposed the death penalty for apostasy," said Palmer. "He did not do so, merely commenting that 'it was a matter for those states'."

Given the acceptance by some that Muslim religious law does indeed require that apostates be killed, it is hardly surprising that many ordinary Muslims think that it is their religious duty to carry out that punishment – or at least to threaten it.

"There can't be freedom of religion in Britain while so many British Muslims take that attitude," Sofia says. "It frightens me, because attitudes have hardened over the past decade."

* **Tarek Fatah is author of *Chasing a Mirage: The Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State*, to be published by Wiley & Sons in March, 2008. Farzana Hassan is author of *Islam, Women, and the Challenges of Today*. Both are members of the Muslim Canadian Congress.**

THE current Pope decided that maybe the Church had got it wrong for 800 years and there was no such place as Limbo after all. This move, sceptics suggest, will boost Catholic recruitment and retention in places like Nigeria where dead Muslim babies have had the advantage of going straight to Heaven. But did the Vatican stop to think that its announcement might actually have the opposite affect on membership?

I abandoned my own faith after a similar volte-face forty years ago, when another Pope decided that people who ate meat on Fridays would no longer go to Hell. Good news for butchers, I thought, but a bit rough on all those poor souls who were already in deep heat. How could something be a mortal sin one week but a mere indiscretion the next? Surely the whole point about God's rules was that they were timeless and immutable? And the Pope (conveniently enough) was supposed to be the infallible conduit through which God communicated his rules.

That was the pinprick that finally burst my religious balloon. To me, the Church was blatantly exposed as a merely human institution, making up arbitrary rules as it went along. And, as Carl Jung noted, 'the absolutism of the Catholic church demands an equally absolute rejection'.

It wasn't as if I hadn't tried. For 18 years I had brought myself up staunchly Catholic in a Blackburn still influenced by a history of Irish immigration via Liverpool. My parents had quietly shed their own faith during my infancy but the primary school choice was either Catholic or Protestant so they opted for the devil they knew.

Once into the faith school system, I was carried along by heady tribalism and the warmth of belonging. We revelled in sectarian snowball fights with the C of E school and rejoiced at the election of the first Catholic president of

Losing my Religion

By Brian Quinn

the USA. Always slightly embarrassed by my parents' lack of guilt, it was me who nagged them to find me a Catholic church on Sundays during our camping holidays in the wilds of Scotland. It was me who got myself up for 8 o'clock mass every Sunday and skipped the Christmas Eve telly for midnight mass.

Whilst I ticked all the boxes, I had to admit that there were some aspects of detail on which I was hazy. Like just what was supposed to be happening when I kept my head bowed solemnly waiting for the communion wafer to dissolve in my mouth – was everyone else having a transcendental experience? At confession, was it OK to make up sins so as to have something to confess, or was that another sin? Was it wrong, whilst saying a "Hail Mary" before bed, to get a pre-pubescent frisson from "thy womb"? And, on the bigger stage, when Christ died so that we might be saved, what exactly was the mechanism by which that worked? Still, there was no question of not following the tribe to the Catholic grammar school where, free of the distraction of girls, we were so malleable to charismatic clergy that each of us, at one time or another, seriously considered becoming a priest.

The Marists Fathers were engaging, trendy and intellectual – though still with a curious taste for beating us with a leather-clad steel strap. In response to challenging discussion in the sixth form, they happily admitted that the

God of Genesis as pedalled from the pulpits by parish priests was just a simple allegory for consumption by the masses. Their God was altogether a more philosophically sophisticated concept. But rather than reassuring, I found this twin-track

approach less than honest for a Church founded on absolute truth. I was starting to have my suspicions as my best friend went off to an Irish seminary and I headed to university.

Even so, during Freshers Week at Oxford, I sought the comfort of registering at the university's Catholic Chaplaincy to shield me from the attentions of the Anglican college chaplain. It was a short-lived liaison. By the end of one term free from institutional blinkers, the scales of religion were lifted from my eyes in an almost Damascene manner. With a final nudge by the Friday meat nonsense, I could clearly see that the Pope's new clothes were transparent.

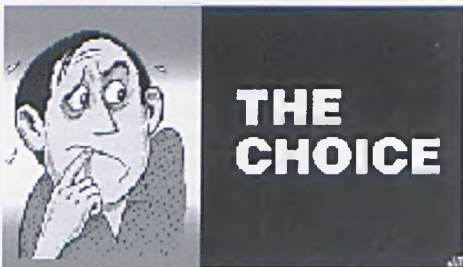
Of course, the recognition of an all too human Church exercising power and privilege by claiming a hot line to God need not necessarily lead one to atheism. It's 200 years since Thomas Paine wrote the ultimate demolition job on all organised religions. *Age of Reason* used the devastating logic of Paine's scientific rationalism and yet he did not throw God out with the religious bathwater. Indeed, his deism was founded on the reasoning that as there was no evidence that any creature could make itself, then there must be a first cause. Paine died 50 years before Darwin was to provide the evidence that surely would have let him take the final logical step. No wonder *Age of Reason* did not sit in our school library.



Brian Quinn, the latest contributor to our *Losing My Religion* spot

A gentleman passing in the street offered me a booklet. Ever eager for knowledge, I took it. It is entitled *The Choice*. In twenty-four small (5" x 3") pages, it tells in strip cartoon form of George, a young man, who is informed by an older one (who reminded me of Uncle Fester of the Addams Family), that due to the sin of Adam and Eve, all human beings, without exception, are condemned to eternal hell-fire unless ... Oh, you've heard it before. Yes, unless they sincerely accept Jesus as their only Saviour.

We know this is true because it is in the Bible, which is the Word of God. Overwhelmed by this inexorable logic, George seeks salvation, and the booklet ends with admonitions for others to do likewise.



After first reaching for the Keepidown Quell-a-Puke tablets (thanks to *Private Eye* which invented them), I wondered about the nature of a deity who created some billions of intelligent beings, only to condemn most of them to everlasting torment.

I wondered then about those who propagate this nasty rubbish. The booklet comes from Chick Publications in California. I thought the initial C might stand for Christian, but a website, www.chick.com, names Jack T Chick, a born-again Christian cartoonist who died in 1998.

Bizarre beliefs are by no means uncommon, and there is a good deal of research on how they arise and persist, although more is needed on the peculiarly dogmatic ones often found in a religious form. Owners of the latter generally seem to function well enough in everyday life, and can hardly be classified as insane (itself a controversial concept, but let that pass). But there is clearly something wrong with them. The odd analogy occurred to me of gout. Gout is a disorder which is often considered funny. In fact it can be extremely painful, and if not treated may cause permanent damage. It consists essentially in failure to excrete uric acid from the body. This acid is a natural product, which is normally got rid of without harm. But in humans the mechanism for doing so is rather fragile, and easily breaks down (yet another example of how we are obviously not intelligently designed).

The acid can accumulate, often in joints, especially the big toes, where it forms crystals that cause the pain. Traditionally it is associated with "rich" living, particularly too much port. Alcohol can be one causal factor, though beer is probably worse than port, but there is also a genetic factor, and others such as erratic meals and various foods. There is at present no

cure, but it can usually be readily treated by drugs which do the job of excretion.

We all have a tendency to believe. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, has been around for a hundred thousand years or more, with much the same physical and mental equipment, as far as we can tell. For nearly all that time we scratched a living by hunting and gathering. In an uncertain world, it presumably made good sense, in general, to follow the leader, go along with the tribal consensus, and heed the experience of the elders, even though "elder" was about 35. There is also the fact that belief has a psychological priority. If I ask you, dear reader, "Do pink unicorns exist?" you will probably say without hesitation, "No", or at least "I don't think so". But you have to take in the idea, however briefly, in order to consider and reject it. Then there is "confirmation bias". Positive instances are generally preferred to negative ones. There is a tendency to seek, or notice, what supports beliefs, rather than what refutes them.

Many beliefs are harmless, even useful. We have to work on assumptions, such as that people will in general tell the truth, the sun will rise tomorrow, and the number 11 bus will take us to the Strand and not career off elsewhere. Without this, life could not continue. Even many quite batty ideas do no real harm, they are simply eccentricities like "the Irish built the pyramids". But we also have a safety mechanism, of doubt or scepticism.

If a salesman looks dodgy, or we suspect a politician of porkies, belief is suspended or thrown out. Like other aspects of our make-up, both credulity and scepticism are the product of inborn tendencies interacting with experience, from birth on. Thus some people are more gullible, and some more cynical. It appears that many religious conversions are of people who desperately want to believe *something*. Often conversion is from one faith to another. On the other hand, at least anecdotally, many who become atheists do so from an increasing realisation that what they have been taught dogmatically simply won't stand up to reason and evidence. It isn't another belief, but a rejection of beliefs that are incredible and unsupported.

It would seem that in the Jack Chicks of this world the safety mechanism of ejecting nonsensical and harmful beliefs has failed. But, as with gout, fortunately we know something about effective treatment, though not nearly as simple as a daily pill.

An excellent prophylactic is education. In the booklet, education is singled out as a weapon of Satan. (It is represented by a man pointing at a picture of an ape labelled Daddy. See panel on the right.) There is a consistent negative correlation between education and religious belief, even in the USA with its generally high levels of belief. This is perhaps helped by the fact that education has become increasingly scientific over the last century, a very recent development in human history.

Chacun á S

Education should not just be intellectual, but about attitudes, emotions and so on, in a cliché "the whole person". The admonitions on the last page of the booklet are an effective recipe for maintaining belief. They are all familiar. Reversing them suggests how to reduce it. First, "Read your Bible every day". It does not go so far as to say read nothing else, though some religions do. But any repeated message will tend to be effective, as advertisers know.

JOHN RADFORD on the 'nasty rubbish' produced by Chick Publications – (no, they don't feature pin-up girls)

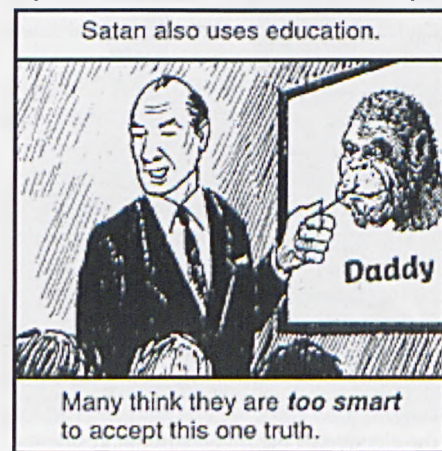
In contrast, wide eclectic reading shows up the flaws in the dogmatic teaching. Second, "Talk to God every day". The same thing applies. In the 19th century Francis Galton reported trying to understand the veneration of idols by setting himself to revere a picture of Mr Punch. He found it rapidly acquired an importance which it took him some time to shake off.

Third, join with others who accept the final authority of the Bible, to work, pray and socialise. Of course this (sometimes called "milieu control") reinforces the beliefs and excludes other ideas. The converse is obvious. Get out more.

Lastly, "Tell others about Jesus". This might seem risky as those others might be sceptical. But in fact it reinforces the beliefs, as one rehearses and defends them.

One reaction to bizarre beliefs is to laugh at them (like gout), which may make us feel better even if it has little effect on the believer. But beliefs that flatly contradict reality can, like gout, be harmful.

Fanatics are not just gullible, they are dogmatic, maintaining their beliefs against all evidence and argument, and often seeking to impose them on others. Gout hurts only the



Son Gout?

sufferer, but some religious beliefs, such as the nonsense of "original sin", hatred between different creeds, or forbidding contraception, are a general menace.

Handing out leaflets matters little, but active persecution, indoctrination of children, violence and war, certainly do. What has not yet been fully explained, as far as I know, is the peculiarly strong emotional commitment to particular beliefs, however bizarre. It seems to

THE hilarious spoof Christian website, Landover Baptists ("Where the Worthwhile Worship and the Unserved are Unwelcome") has a wonderful take on the controversy over Phillip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*.

In its December newsletter the church says:

"Most Christians familiar with *The Golden Compass* (based on the pornographic scribbles of unrepentant God-hater and – quite possibly – heroin-addicted child-diddler, Phillip Pullman), know it is an atheist recruitment film marketed towards our precious children ...

"Not only is the film full of cute, enticing, furry animals with mouths like horny sailors on leave in a Shanghai red-light district, it exposes youngsters to alarming viewpoints that are anti-Religious Right, anti-morality, and anti-(just believing what you are damn well told!).

"We now live in a world where we have to constantly worry about our children being presented with abhorrent, new ideas that are slightly different from the stuff our parents forced us to believe.

"Since we can't ban *The Golden Compass* from being shown in every cinema in America outside of Freehold, Iowa, we thought it would be a good idea to present the general, saved public with a handy comparison chart and tip sheet of how to combat the crazy inappropriate ideas presented in this movie with the wonderful and timeless truths we should be eagerly teaching our children from the biggest selling family book with sex and killing ever written: *The Holy Bible*.

"*The Golden Compass* exposes children to alcohol consumption by presenting them with a whisky-guzzling bear.

"The Bible exposes children to actual human beings who drink their own urine and eat their own poop. Parents will also enjoy reading a wonderful yarn about a poor fellow who walked into his drunk father's tent to find him buck naked! '... hath he not sent me to the men that sit upon the wall, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss with you?' Isaiah 36:12 'And he (Noah) drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father ...' Genesis 9:21-22.

"*The Golden Compass* promotes the false

be considerably more complex than just "each to his own taste".

One factor seems to be maintaining personal and group identity. "Fundamentalism" is often involved with a reaction to a perceived attack on beliefs which are experienced as essential to the individual. Physical disorders are usually easily recognised as such. Extreme religious beliefs are also pathological to varying degrees, but this is often glossed over. Too often they are excused or justified, as though the status of "religion" in itself exempts them from criticism.

If an idea is bad, it is bad, religion or no. As

The Golden Compass v the Holy Bible

notion that children who are born out of wedlock are 'a-OK' and can actually end up being someone who matters.

"In the Holy Bible, children learn that little boys and girls who are born out of wedlock (the Bible calls them BASTARDS) are to be shunned and we are to have nothing to do with them or their descendents. 'A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD.' Deuteronomy 23:2.

"*The Golden Compass* teaches innocent children that it is possible for witches, spectres and ritual magicians to be quite helpful at times.

"Little children who read the Holy Bible learn that they are commanded to kill witches and have nothing to do with the occult. 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' Exodus 22:18 'There shall not be found among you any one... that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter or a witch. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.' Deuteronomy 18:11.

"*The Golden Compass* teaches children that bears can talk.

"The Bible makes it factually clear to children that only snakes and donkeys can talk.

IT'S a pity the religious groups that oppose Pullman's books and the film are so frightened of the prospect of encouraging kids to immerse themselves in compelling, thoughtful literature. Surely their beliefs are strong enough to stand up to a children's story. And surely Hollywood can put more faith in the power of great fiction. Fiddling with art to appease narrow-minded interest groups is its own heresy, one with which Hollywood unfortunately is all too familiar."

– Editorial, *Los Angeles Times*

I write this there is news of the three men condemned to death for the Bali bombing in 2002 which killed 202 people. These victims included some Muslims. Nevertheless, the three are overjoyed, because they will be going to Paradise. Their deaths will in no way deter others, in fact the opposite. But they can hardly be released.

Perhaps the best thing would be to hand them over to a team of scientists, in the hope of understanding just a little more about their disordered minds.

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

'Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?' Genesis 3:1 'And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee?' Numbers 22:30.

"*The Golden Compass* teaches children that organised religion (or the 'Magisterium' in the movie) and its devout followers are evil and kidnap little children.

"The Bible teaches children that the Jewish church in the time of Christ produced devout followers called Pharisees and Sadducees, who hated Jesus and had him killed. 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.' John 8:44.

"It is also important to note that the Catholic Church produces devout followers called 'priests', who sodomise little children at their leisure.

"Children are presented with the notion that a golden compass can answer any question.

"Children who read the Bible are warned that a person will be punished with unspeakable, blood-curdling terrors and infinite torture if they so much as question or add anything to God's Word, the Holy Bible! 'For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.' Revelation 22:18.

"*The Golden Compass* calls True Christians™ to put on the full, platinum, ornately decorated armour of God and suffer not to spend nine dollars to sit in the badly cushioned seats of America's picture houses that choose to corrupt our sweet children with filth!

"Remember: The meddlesome local court won't let US stop the theatres from SHOWING it, but that doesn't mean all who read this article can't hop on down to their local multiplex and stop gullible trash from WATCHING it. Nobody wants to sit through a long movie being pelted by Bible tracts and pork chops!"

Ratzinger and Bush: The Fourth Reich in the

It should surprise no one that apologists for religion – to counter the observable reality that there has never been an atheism-motivated annihilation of believers (Stalin's massacres were designed to exterminate all opposition to his dictatorship, not to impose atheism on believers) – have propagated the Big Lie that Adolf Hitler's Final Solution was an atrocity by atheists every bit as fanatic as any Crusade or Jihad by god addicts.

It was nothing of the sort. Adolf Hitler lived and died a card-carrying Catholic, and defended his obsession with exterminating an opposition religion as "doing the Lord's work."¹ Nazism, far from being atheistic, took Catholicism's hatred of all competing creeds to its logical conclusion, just as al Qaeda took Islam's hatred of all competing creeds to its logical conclusion. Few people today refuse to recognize Hitler as an anti-human madman. Yet they simultaneously refuse to recognize the religion that inspired him as the cause and motivation of his madness.

Joseph Ratzinger, now known as Pope Benedict XVI, is Hitler's natural successor. Like Hitler, he has a pathological hatred of all belief systems other than his own. He has dis-

By William Harwood

missed all forms of Protestantism as "not proper churches" and categorized Eastern Rite Catholicism, which refuses to acknowledge the pope as its superior but is otherwise identical with the Roman religion, as "the diseased arm of the universal church."

Both before and after becoming Pope, Ratzinger ordered his quisling bishops and cardinals in America to utter death threats, specifically damnation to hell, to all politicians who refused to overthrow the American Constitution and replace it with the decrees of a foreign state, specifically the Vatican.

Just as Hitler tried to turn Planet Earth into his personal empire, so Ratzinger is to this day openly campaigning to make the independent nations of Europe and the Americas obedient satellites of the Vatican. He has denounced Canada, Spain and other countries that have either legalized divorce or granted equal rights, including the right to marry the partner of one's choice, to a minority that practises victimless behavior that contravenes taboos the Vatican capriciously maintains, even though it rejects ninety percent of the other taboos found in Leviticus.

Purely out of self-interest, Ratzinger is continuing his predecessor's policy of facilitating

mass murder by maintaining the ban on sane population control, and sane disease control so far causing forty-million deaths from AIDS and starvation. As the future John Paul II warned Pope Paul VI when he was about to implement a majority recommendation that the ban on artificial birth control be abolished, such a reversal would embarrass the Catholic Church by conceding that the Protestants had been right all along.² That was the reason Paul VI did not legitimize the Pill, and that is the reason the current Vatican Führer refuses to legitimize condom use. Compared to embarrassing the Catholic Church, what are a mere forty million murders?

And because, like Hitler, Ratzinger believes he is above criticism, he has denounced the news media for giving coverage to priestly sexual abuse, abuse that Ratzinger in many cases personally covered up, instead of mindlessly suppressing all information that could lessen the dignity of the Catholic Führer.

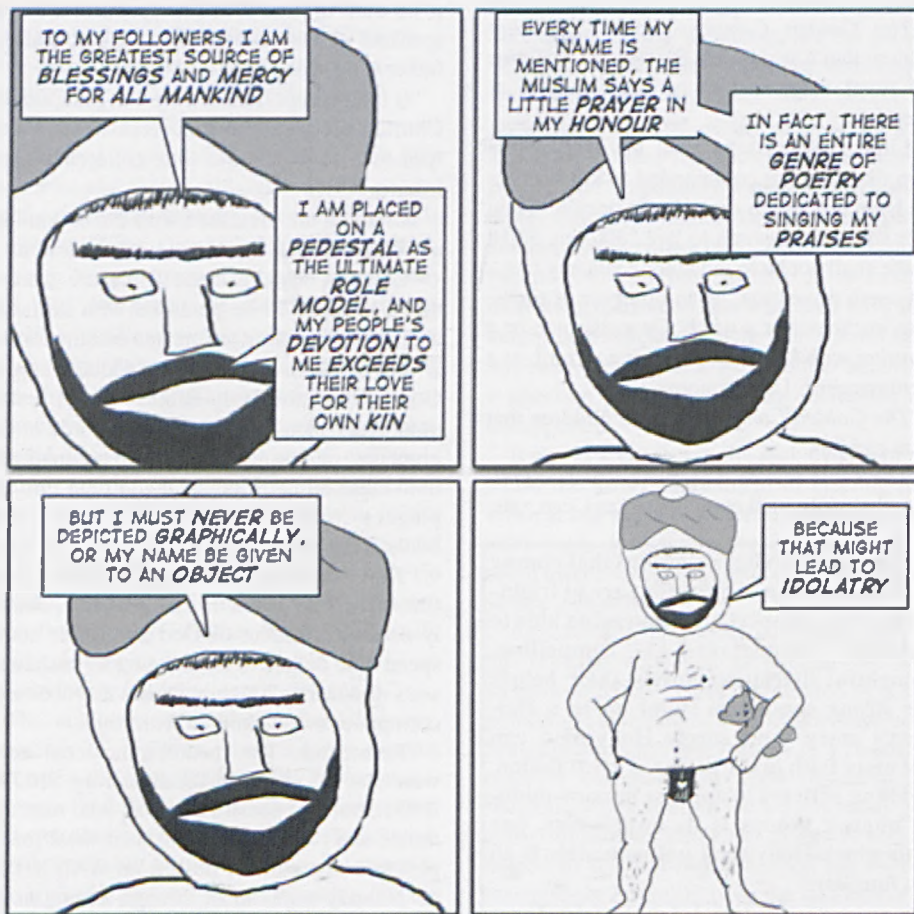
George W Bush is on record as telling Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, "God told me to strike at al Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East."³

While Bush has never confirmed making such a statement, it is significant that he has never denied it. As Thomas Szasz commented at the time, "If you talk to God, you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia." An item in *The Onion* reported that God always spoke to Bush over the White House intercom, in Dick Cheney's voice, and only when Cheney was present in the building. But as plausible as such an explanation of Bush's schizophrenia is, *The Onion* has never claimed that its articles are anything but satire.

On July 1, 2003, Bush cut off all military aid to 35 countries that supported the International Criminal Court set up in 2002 to try war crimes, because those countries refused to sign an exemption guaranteeing that no American would be tried for war crimes. Obviously, if the perpetrators of crimes such as those later committed at Abu Ghraib were convicted of war crimes, it followed that the person who gave them their orders was guilty of war crimes. By legalizing war crimes committed by Americans, Bush was simply covering his own butt. Bush has been indicted for war crimes in more than a dozen countries.⁴

A German cabinet minister compared him to Hitler. A Canadian political aide, forgetting that Bush is an overgrown school bully willing and able to punish whole countries for failing to eat his excrement, called him a moron. When Canada's prime minister refused to discipline the aide for expressing a personal opinion, Bush cancelled his proposed state visit to

Jesus and Mo

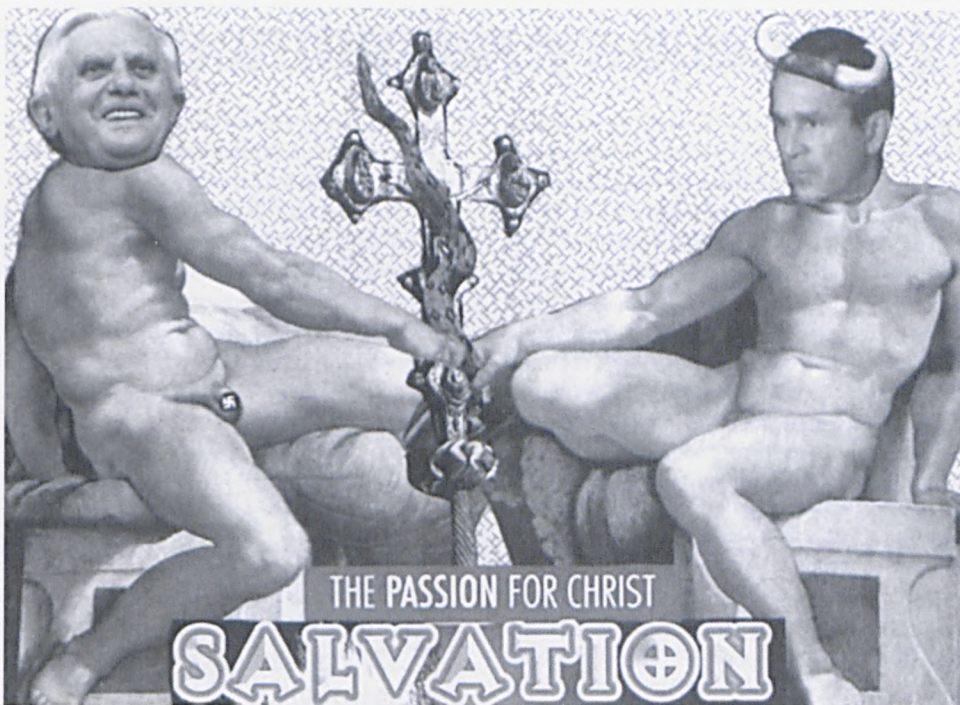


he 21st Century

Canada and did not visit that next-door neighbor until Canada had replaced its Liberal prime minister with a fellow theofascist.

Bush and his Republicanazi Gestapo do not even dispute that their treasonous violation of the First Amendment, providing tax money for religious indoctrination centers posing as schools, denying foreign aid to organizations that promote safe sex, prohibiting stem-cell research, and stacking the Supreme Court with theofascist Catholics willing to subject American law to Vatican law (even though Bush is not a Catholic), are religion-motivated and have no secular justification whatsoever. As Robert Kennedy wrote, "To justify its agenda, the Bush White House is suppressing studies, purging scientists, and doctoring data to bamboozle the public and press. It is a campaign to suppress science arguably unmatched in the Western world since the Inquisition."⁵

Bush has accepted an unprecedented amount of bribes, in the form of campaign contributions, for overturning legislation ordering the polluters who are turning America into a coast-to-coast smog zone to clean up their act.⁶ During his tenure as governor of Texas, he became the most prolific serial killer in American history, authorizing more than 150 state-sanctioned ritualistic revenge murders. And like Ratzinger, Bush and his Gestapo are peddling the Big Lie that condoms are unreliable and actually increase the probability of contracting AIDS. As insane as they are, neither the Ratzinger nor the Bush priesthood are



Photomontage: Michael Dickenson

so insane as to believe that. They are quite simply unmitigated liars.

Being dead, Hitler is now a *good* dictator. The sooner his clones, Joseph Ratzinger and George W Bush, achieve the same status, the sooner the world's 600 million Catholics, 75 million of them in America, as well as America's 125 million other theists who do not want their country to become a slave state of the Vatican, not to mention the 100 million American nontheists, can regain a degree of freedom.

1 See *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris (pp. 100-106).

2 See *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, by Gary Wills (p. 94).

3 Reported in *Ha-Arets (The World)*, quoted in *North Star Compass*, vol.11, no. 12.

4 MSNBC.5 See *Crimes Against Nature: How George W. Bush and His Corporate Pals Are Plundering the Country and Hijacking Our Democracy*, by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr (pp. 76-77).

6 *Op cit*.

William Harwood is the editor/translator of *The Fully Translated Bible*. His most recent book is *For This We Thank Our Führer: Why Religion is a Crime Against Humanity*.

Gay Italian film-maker hopes to improve Pope's image

THE cinematic image of the Catholic Church is "in ruins", and the Pope lacks a "happy" image. That's the view of Franco Zeffirelli, 84, the openly gay film, TV and opera legend who is also a devout Christian.

Zeffirelli revealed last month that he had been asked by the Pope to be his image consultant, and also to be a consultant responsible for "defending the faith in cinema, the image of the sacred", the director said.

In an interview published in *La Stampa*, Zeffirelli, said that the Pope did not have a "happy" image.

"Coming after a Pope as telegenic as John Paul II is a difficult task," he said.

Benedict, elected in 2005, came across coldly, which was "not suited to his surroundings", Zeffirelli said, adding that the Pope's wardrobe should also be reviewed.

His robes were too sumptuous and flashy, the director of *Jesus of Nazareth* and *Romeo and Juliet* told *La Stampa*. They should instead reflect "the simplicity and sobriety" seen in the other echelons of the church.

The 80-year-old German Pope did not smile

much, but was an intellectual, Zeffirelli said.

The Pope also wants Zeffirelli to improve the manner in which the Church was depicted in films.

"The holy father is very aware that the church's cinematographic communication is in ruins today," he said.

"As a Christian I cannot stand by while this disaster unfolds. I should have the full authority – and the Holy Father would not deny me – to denounce the continual blasphemies committed against the church."

But Zeffirelli himself has been criticised by religious groups for what they call the "blasphemous" representation of biblical figures in his films.

He has also earned the wrath of the gay community for publicly backing the Roman Catholic Church's homophobia.

Zeffirelli has brainstormed ideas with the Pope and senior Vatican officials, but will get to work in earnest on the make-over programme after his staging of Puccini's *Tosca* this month.

According to *Wikipedia*, the online ency-

clopaedia, film director Bruce Robinson claimed to have been the unwanted target of sexual advances by Zeffirelli during the filming of *Romeo and Juliet* in which Robinson had a minor acting role.

Robinson says that he based the lecherous character of Uncle Monty in the film *Withnail and I* on Zeffirelli,

Despite now having a gay image consultant, the Pope has again chosen to condemn homosexuality in a World Peace Day address on January 1. He has described gay marriage as "an obstacle on the road to peace."

The 80-year-old Geran-born pontiff claimed that peace and the family were inherently linked and any threat to the "traditional family" would be opposed by Catholics.



'Godfather', Pope Benedict: 'Too cold, and too flashy'

21st century religious extremism examined

NEIL J Kressel's book is a welcome examination of the unexpected 21st century phenomenon of religious extremism, yet there are omissions and some allowances have to be made for its American provenance: Kressel is writing primarily for an audience of American liberals, most of whom will either adhere to some form of religious sentiment, or at least retain those sentiments in the form of a cultural palimpsest. Ironically, in a book which is detailed, thorough and alive to nuance in practically every other regard, secular humanism is given remarkably short shrift. He attempts to summarise the secular humanist position in just 126 words (page 198), before going on to describe those who advocate the abandonment of religion as "impractical" on the basis that "religion speaks poignantly to the needs and desires of billions of people". This is no doubt true, but he misses the point about secularism. Secularists do not, generally, have a problem with religious observance, but rather, the position and role of religion within society. We just want to ensure that secular spaces are per-

mitted within a tolerant religious framework, or more ambitiously, that religious spaces are permitted within a tolerant secular framework.

In the chapter "Killers In Every Faith", Kressel turns his attention to Christian extremists, though one soon gets the impression that he is scratching around trying to find any. Christian terrorists are few and far between in Western Europe, and even in America they are limited to fringe groups obsessed with abortion clinics.

DIESEL BALAAM reviews *Bad Faith – The Danger of Religious Extremism* by Neil J Kressel, published by Prometheus Books. \$26.00, 327 pp, hardcover. ISBN: 1-59102-503-6

However, the abortion issue is very much a localised and internal matter for the United States, regarded with blinking incomprehension by other Western societies, the pragmatic majority of which accept abortion, within limits, as an occasional medical or personal necessity. The views of these Christian extremists are far from coherent, veering from jingoistic patriotism on the one hand to flag-burning hatred and the Oklahoma truck-bombing on the other. Christian terrorists in the US, though dangerous, are far less numerous than their Muslim counterparts elsewhere, nor do they enjoy anywhere near the same level of passive support among their co-religionists. The sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland might have provided Kressel with rather more fertile material for this chapter, one feels, but unbelievably, it is completely ignored.

In the section entitled "Dangerous Books?" Kressel deals with those scriptural passages that allow extremists to justify their socially destructive actions. Illiberal interpretations of these passages, with their apparent glorification of ethnic cleansing, casual rape and butchering, may be regarded as simplistically literal, or literally simple, straightforward and honest. Personally, I'm with the extremists on this one. Notwithstanding the vagaries of translation, these texts say what they say and no amount of interpretive chicanery can escape their savagery. But whereas freethinkers contextualise this outrageous behaviour and move on, religious extremists often see in it a blueprint for contemporary life and the basis, or justification, for a violent political manifesto. Liberal religionists, meanwhile, are more inclined to ignore the most troubling passages, or explain them away as being specific to ancient tribal societies.

By this sleight of hand, ancient scriptural passages come to mean whatever contempo-

rary religionists want them to mean. Rather lamely, Kressel proffers the explanation that the occasional merciful act amidst the slaughter did, in fact, mark a step forward for these ancient tribal societies, but as modern men and women, we have about as much use for the primitive religious morals of antiquity as we do for the pairs of shoes we were wearing as four-year-olds.

To his credit, Kressel is even-handed when discussing religious extremists from the three Abrahamic faiths. Notwithstanding his own Jewish heritage, he is careful not to allow inevitable loyalties to cloud his academic objectivity. The honest examination of his own heritage is important as it lends authority to Kressel's final few chapters in which he identifies Islamists as the real menace to peace and progress, even though, for several centuries, it has been mainly Christian aggression and violence that has blighted humanity's path to freedom and progress (no doubt because most scientific, philosophical and constitutional developments occurred in the West during this period). Among the causes of today's Muslim extremism, he cites the humiliation of the Six-Day War against Israel, the successful Afghan War against the Soviets, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which proved that strict *Sharia*-obsessed Muslim regimes could successfully supplant modern (though corrupt) pro-Western and communist regimes. It is these developments that Kressel identifies as the aetiological genesis of Islamic militancy and violence, though illiberal Koranic scripture and the Hadiths have certainly been pressed into service by extremists who sense that the tide of history has at last turned in their favour.

The final 67 pages examine the allure of religious extremism from a psychoanalytic perspective. This is clearly Kressel's chief interest, yet the light that psychoanalysis sheds on this subject is inconclusive. On the one hand, religion provides for people's non-intellectual needs, providing coherent structure and coping mechanisms, particularly during times of adversity. As Freud noted, in times of helplessness, we often regress into a childlike state whereby we seek out the protection and approval of the "father" in exchange for our obedience. On the other hand, Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy, maintains that emotionally healthy people should be self-directed, tolerant, flexible, scientific and self-accepting, and that far from advancing these traits, religion "doesn't help at all" and even sabotages mental health. "Happiness ... is not even the main goal of most religions" Kressel concedes, concluding that while we must tolerate and protect religions, when they become evil we must not flinch from recognising and treating them as such. Quite so.

Vatican offended by 'blasphemous' mobile phone images

AN Italian company has roused the wrath of Catholic Church leaders by offering a mobile phone download services of images of saints.

McKay and Sisters, a Milan-based communications company, came up with the idea after noticing that many Italians carried religious images around with them in their wallets.

The service offers subscribers to receive up to three images of saints and great figures of the Church, including Pope John Paul II, Padre Pio and the Virgin Mary, for three euros (£2.10) a week.

But some Catholic Church leaders have labelled it as blasphemous and commercial.

The Italian bishops' conference accused the company of offending Catholics by "exploiting" their faith.

"This is a poor show and has nothing to do with faith," the *Telegraph* quoted Bishop Lucio Soravito De Franceschi, a spokesman on doctrinal matters, as saying.

"It is exploiting the faith, lowering it to banality with no sense. It is a blasphemous idea that will horrify the true faithful.

"For the Church a saint is someone of great heroic virtue, not someone to be commercially exploited," he added.

However, Barbara Labate, a director of the company, slammed the Church's response, insisting that her company's service was in tandem with the changing times. "I don't think it is scandalous or blasphemous at all."

The many meanings of the term secularism

DURING my tenure as President of the National Secular Society the word secular appeared with increasing frequency in the media. It was not always being used in the sense that freethinkers may mean – if there is agreement amongst them!

Secularism was used as opposing the revival of fundamentalism in Christianity and the emergence in the West of political Islam.

When I was asked to debate with Muslims it was clear they regard all Western values as secular, and arising from the Enlightenment; any position not Islamic is of the infidel and hence secular.

Secular and secularism have many definitions: the Oxford Concise Dictionary – “concerned with the affairs of this world (not spiritual or sacred); not concerned with religion or religious belief; not ecclesiastical...”

Nicolas Walter in his *Humanism – What's in The Word*¹ (1997) wrote of secularism: It is “the assumption that this life and this world are all we know and all we should care about, and that we should make the best of them while we have the chance.”

In *Freethinker Classic No 1 – Secularism*² (1998) reprinted from 1879, the founder of this paper GW Foote quoted GJ Holyoake who adopted secularism for this movement in 1851: “Secularism means the moral duty of man deduced from considerations which pertain to this life alone”.

Now we have a new booklet published by the British Humanist Association, *The case for Secularism*, which uses the word “secularism” to refer to the view which has traditionally been described as the separation of church and state”.

The authors – the Humanist Philosophers Group – state their awareness of other meanings, and the preface adds the booklet does not represent BHA policy while it seeks to “dispel the damaging myths that secularists’ secularism springs mainly from anti-religious feeling...”

It proposes “a neutral state in an open society”.

The authors say their primary purpose is not with history. But they admit “there has long been a freethinking tradition in this country which has questioned religious belief...”

They also refer to works by Hobbes and Locke written in the 17th century. Some recognition is made of the “social contract” while not endorsing it wholeheartedly; Rousseau saw this contract as a condition, the same for all, but not allowing any one individual to burden another. This was in the 18th century. Thus they dig back into the past, but apart from a reference to Mill’s *On Liberty* – not a work on secularism – they give no credence to 19th-century writers, those who roused the nation to secularism – Holyoake, Bradlaugh

and Foote.

The booklet opens with a critical look at what Michael Nazir Ali, Bishop of Rochester, said in 2006: that Christian values enshrined “equality, liberty and freedom of expression”. They rightly question this, as I agree they should; coming from a bishop who refused to support abolition of blasphemy law here, while condemning it in his country of birth, Pakistan.

Much of “the case for secularism” I can accept: “all that a secular society requires is that they [religious believers] be willing to work alongside those who do not share their faith”.

DENIS COBELL, President of the National Secular Society (1997-2006) reviews *The Case for Secularism*, published by the British Humanist Association, £5.00 post-free.

But some issues – such as sanctity of life, sexual mores and faith schools, to name a few often in the news – are areas where there can be no meeting of minds. Those who deem their faith is not just a part of their private life and seek to impose these beliefs through the state are unlikely to co-operate.

Further adjuncts to secularism are quoted in this work from Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. He distinguishes between “pro-

grammatic” and “procedural” secularism: you’ll need to read this booklet to get the full blast of an archiepiscopal mind!

The ambiguities of Williams’ phraseology will not surprise freethinkers; he is hardly likely to accept the NSS’s challenge to religious privilege.

The NSS is trying to clarify its own position on secularism. At its AGM in November, President Terry Sanderson was re-elected almost unanimously on a platform with which most freethinkers would surely agree. He said: “Secularism has many definitions and there is a debate among members about whether the aims and objectives should be changed so that we cannot be portrayed, as we are by our religious opponents, as ‘an atheist front’. Does it matter that we are an organisation of atheists fighting for secularism? My own feeling is that it does not, and that we shouldn’t apologise for that.”

I doubt the booklet’s philosopher authors would go along with this. So the discussion amongst humanists and secularists is set to go on.

¹ *Humanism – What's in the Word* (1997) published by the Rationalist Press Association, BHA, & GW Foote

² *Secularism: The True Philosophy of life* (1998) from the National Secular Society, National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. £2.75 + 50p postage.

Gay icon Vladimir Putin is now revered as ‘The Chosen One’

RUSSIA’S outgoing President, having achieved the status of a gay icon this summer when he was photographed all butch and bare-chested, has now been further elevated by a religious group who are claiming that he is the incarnation of King Solomon and the Apostle Paul.

According to Russian press reports Vladimir Putin is being prayed to by the Rus’ Resurrecting sect in Bolshaya Elnya, a village in the Nizhny Novgorod Region. Rus’ is the term used for the medieval East Slavic nation that gave its name to modern Russia.

The sect’s “Mother Superior”, a Ms Fontinya, declared: “We didn’t choose Putin. It was when Yeltsin was naming him as his successor that my soul exploded with joy!

When she watched the handover in 1999 on TV, she cried out: “An *ubermensch!* God himself has chosen him!”, adding: “Yeltsin was the destroyer, and God replaced him with his creation”.

The sect possesses a President Putin icon that Fontinya claims “miraculously” appeared one day.

“He has given us everything,” she said, pointing to the sky.

A special newspaper published by the sect – *The Temple of Light* – features interviews with long-dead religious figures, including the Apostle Paul. The sect members are also convinced that President Putin knows about and supports the actions of their “Mother Superior”.

Russian Christian sects have long been known for their unusual choices of icons, some of them praying to portraits of such well-known “holy men” as Stalin and Ivan the Terrible.

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, another Russian sect is currently holed up in an underground shelter in the country’s central Penza Region and has threatened to commit mass suicide if any attempt is made to bring them to the surface.

Putin, in his mid-50s, gained the status of a gay icon when he was pictured in the Tuva region of Siberia. After it appeared, Russian gay chat rooms and blogs were alive with comments about the picture, with many comparing tough guy Putin to a character in the gay cowboy spectacular *Brokeback Mountain*. He has just been chosen *Time* magazine’s Man of the Year

Swiping at the Left

SADLY Diesel Balaam mars an otherwise interesting and thought-provoking article by yet another swipe at the Left.

One of the deficiencies of democracy is that selfish and short-sighted people have the vote. I can remember when my parents were the only card-carrying members of the South African Liberal party in the *contituency* (not just branch or ward) we lived in.

The decadent majority of white South Africans were more interested in the price of petrol than in whether their black servants had enough to eat.

Similarly, Leftists in the UK are in the wilderness, as the decadent majority of voters here are more interested in the cost of their next EasyJet trip to Majorca than they are in the danger that Bangladesh might disappear into the Bay of Bengal.

Enjoy Capitalism if you must, but don't try

Christina Odone claims she was 'censored'

HERE'S a story to brighten everyone's day. Everyone, that is, who enjoys surreal absurdity.

Christina Odone, the former editor of the *Catholic Herald* and former deputy editor of *New Statesman* magazine (she resigned in 2004), last month pulled out of a Royal Commonwealth Society carol service, loudly proclaiming that she had been censored. Because, you see, she's a Christian. According to Odone's distorted version of reality, British Christians (along with other religionists) are increasingly persecuted and have diminishing opportunities to proclaim their faith.

Just to remind ourselves: religionists have a monopoly on *Thought for the Day*; there are Bishops in the House of Lords; religious groups have control over state funded schools, privileged input into the RE curriculum, and permission to discriminate when appointing teachers. And so on and so forth.

Nevertheless, we're supposed to believe that

'Idiots' are stifling artistic expression

THE man behind *Jerry Springer: The Opera* is afraid "idiots" would close down a similar enterprise – so he says he won't be doing anything like that again.

Stuart Lee says he suffered financially because Christians orchestrated a campaign against the show.

Even though judges have decided that *JSTO* is not blasphemous, Lee says the controversy surrounding the show could nonetheless stop people from investing in such projects.

He told the free-speech group Index on Censorship "There would be no point writing anything with any religious content which would require big box-office receipts or public funding to float it, as a fuss like this could wipe it out instantly."

Meanwhile, the *Times* reported that, while

to claim it holds the moral high ground.

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE

London

Atheism and spirituality

I WONDER if I can offer your readers a few thoughts on the subject of atheism and spirituality – two states of mind that are often held to be diametrically opposed to one another?

The dogmatic atheist (not an altogether unknown phenomenon!) reacting perhaps to an earlier force-feeding, whether imposed by family or society or both, of religious doctrine, will presumably insist that all experiences and values have a material basis and that therefore spiritual experiences and values (meaning by spiritual that conviction or emotion which arises in the mind and cannot be explained, which cannot be examined and reasoned about) is no more than a baseless chimera – a mere fantasy of the religious mind. Of course the *godmatic*

believer on the other hand advances such experiences, such convictions, as proofs or at least manifestations of his (highly improbable and altogether unprovable) God. However, I see no reason at all why the atheist should not accept the existence of so-called "spiritual" experiences, while not in the least accepting that such experiences are a proof or manifestation of some supernatural power.

Many things about life, and indeed existence itself, we don't yet understand, and some things we may never understand (By "we" I mean of course mankind as a whole). But this is no reason for embracing the plainly *irrational*, as against accepting the fact of a-rational – or *sur-rational* convictions (That is to say, those for which no rational explanation can be offered).

In respect of these matters I find lines from the poet Robert Browning to be very pertinent when he writes, in his *Bishop Blougram's Apology* (That intriguing, if somewhat loaded,

By Dan Bye

religious voices are being silenced by militant secularists who want to exterminate all believers and turn them into bars of soap. Or something.

Odone claims that the Royal Commonwealth Society told her that her speech might "offend" any non-believers who might be in the audience, and suggested a Bertrand Russell text as an alternative.

Odone describes Russell as a "militant atheist", which is a bit strong for a man who said he was never entirely sure whether he should call himself an atheist or an agnostic.

It seems the evil atheists who apparently run the Royal Commonwealth Society deliberately invited the Catholic Odone to their viciously secularist Christmas carol service simply in order to ban her from speaking at it.

Channel 4 News kindly gave Odone a platform to deliver her suppressed speech, so that

we could all hear what we were missing (here at Freethinker Towers, the Royal Commonwealth Society carol service is one of the occasions to which we most look forward each year, naturally).

It turns out that Odone's text is a piece of trenchant political polemic, rather than a simple Christian homily. Lots of people might agree that it doesn't quite strike the right tone for a genteel "multifaith" carol service.

Let's look at her examples of "repression".

In the case of Portree Primary School what actually happened is that a parent or parents rightly objected to prayers in a non-denominational school, and for a short time lunchtime grace was replaced by a statement of general thanks, but in the end these concerns were overridden and religious domination reasserted. Odone doesn't say that the prayer was subsequently reinstated. School is not the place for prayers anyway.

Shabina Begum's school didn't ban her from wearing the "veil". The dispute concerned the jilbab, which she regarded as a religious obligation, but other muslims do not. The school uniform at the school allowed for other kinds of head covering. What Begum wanted to wear was effectively an intimidating political uniform.

Nadia Eweida wanted to wear a Christian symbol in violation of British Airways policy. In the end, BA capitulated. As a matter of principle, either BA employees can wear jewellery, or they can't. Assuming the ban is for a good reason, then on what grounds are crucifixes exempt?

Secularists have not banned the hijab, nor do they want to ban Christmas.

The Commonwealth Society's fear that any non-believers in the audience might be "offended" is a bit silly, but they were right to knock back Odone's paranoid rant.



account of a battle in a believer's mind between religious faith and doubt):

*Just when we are safest (ie from the idea of spiritual values) there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death,
A chorus ending from Euripides
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring ...*

It may be asked: What do I mean by spirituality and spiritual experiences? I mean no more and no less than that uplifting of the spirit (or awareness if you like) which raises it above that purely selfish or self-regarding state mind that normally holds sway and prevails as we seek good or benefit or advantage for ourselves and ours – though not of course necessarily entailing harm to interests of others – and which, however occasioned, unites us to a sense of joy and reverence for life in any or all of its varied shapes and forms. In my opinion it is this state of mind, evoked perhaps by nature or art or by being touched by human sympathy, which is often enough taken to be proof of the supernatural when in fact it proof only that the mind is capable of rejoicing in life and its wonders – whether natural or man-made.

ALBERT ADLER
London

Bollocks

On a point of fact I wish to point out to N Jones (*Points of View*, December) that I neither said nor implied that the word "bollocks" is bollocks, merely that its use in serious discourse is inappropriate. To state that the word has "a central importance in our critical vocabulary" is, persiflage aside, a pure solecism.

DAVID JAMES
London

D HARROP'S letter regarding the abuse of the English language pressed my pedantic button. He stated that "a little bit later on" is one of countless malapropisms that he particularly hates. Well, this phrase is NOT a malapropism, which is defined as the use of a wrong word that sounds like the one intended.

Nobody could constrict me on the accuracy of this. "A little bit later on" could just about pass as a "pleonasm", where more than one word is used to express the same meaning.

I hate hearing about "true facts". There are no untrue facts! "Big in size", "red in colour" are pleonasms but I'm not sure that "a little bit later on" qualifies. Something could be a lot later or a little bit later, couldn't it?

Whilst talking about words, can I add something to the great "bollocks" debate. I agree with N Jones. It's a fine word. It's a modern version of "poppycock" and "balderdash". These words are so out of date, they are comical and don't have the vehemence of BOLLOCKS!

Anyone who doesn't mind a bit of bad language in the service of atheism should look up

George Carlin on the internet. Type in "Religion is Bullshit" and hear him in action – just brilliant!

A MIZEN
East Sussex

Editor's note: My apologies to those readers who were confused by the penultimate paragraph of "Strength through language" (N Jones, *Freethinker*, December 2007). Somewhere along the way, I fear, we deleted the repeated word "just".

Whilst, of course, the main thrust of the letter was that religion is just bollocks, the penultimate paragraph, in contrast, lightly-touched on the whimsy that religion is "just JUST bollocks" (my capitals) and therefore worthwhile.

Settlement in Palestine

WHO says Palestine belongs to the Hebrews? The Jews do. On what grounds? On words supposedly spoken by their tribal god Jahweh (who lived in a tent; Samuel Ch7:6), and to a fabled ancestor – Abraham, aka "Mahabrahma" (Great Brahma), creator deity of the of the Hindu religion known to the Buddhists (6c BC). "The most ancient, father of all that are born and are to be born" – *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Palestine, already a "land of milk and honey", was taken over by the Hebrews in a series of mini-holocausts (given the small world population and man-to-man fighting) – see Numbers Ch31.1; II Kings Ch 15:14; Deuteronomy Chs 2, 3, 20 etc.

The Jews have no moral or historical right to Palestine – just self-justification backed by military force.

W K HARPER
Stoke-on-Trent

Arthur C Clarke

ARTHUR C Clarke was ninety years old on 16th December 2007. As readers may know, in 1945 he came up with the idea of satellite communications, and worked out the height of a satellite in geostationary orbit, a distance still known as the Arthur C Clarke distance. Later he wrote the famous film *2001, a Space Odyssey*.

He was interviewed for his 90th birthday by the BBC popular science magazine *Focus*, answering such routine 90th-birthday questions as "What have you done that you're most proud of?" and "Do you ever plan to retire?"

Most interesting was his answer to "What's the greatest threat humanity faces?"

His answer: "Organised religion polluting our minds as it pretends to deliver morality and spiritual salvation. It is spreading the most malevolent mind virus of all. I hope our race can one day outgrow this primitive notion."

Pastafarians

THE Pastafarians are on the move. A while back, when I suggested, in the *Freethinker*, that atheists should become followers of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and adopt a religious sounding name I did not expect reality to over-

take my fantasy so soon.

However, what may be farce to you is serious to the off-the-wall followers of the religious right. Pastafarians are causing consternation in the American bible belt. There is now concern amongst the fundamentalist community that religion (Pastafarianism) might be imported into classrooms in contravention of the constitution.

The consequence is that where an attempt to import creationism into the classroom is met with an insistence that Pastafarianism is equally valid, the creationists back off and defend the constitution.

They have reason to be concerned as Pastafarianism is in many respects more persuasively presented than religious creationism. Another problem for the literalist Christians is that they are often barely literate and Pastafarianism is often confused with Rastafarianism. They are ignorant about this but have some vague notion that it is a religion and they don't want it in their classrooms.

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

The Freethinker

Founded in 1881 by G W Foote
UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote & Co Ltd
P O Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD
Tel: 01273 680531

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5.00 sterling or USA \$8.00 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.00

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

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 Kord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar Street, Brighton Wed Jan 2, 8pm. Jo Lake: *Living Without Religion*. Wed, Feb 6, 8pm. Darwin Day lecture by Greg Marshall: *Creationism v Geology: Rock of Ages, or the Ages of Rocks?*

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. Wed, Feb 6, 7.45pm. Wendover Library, Wendover High St. Adrian Peeler: *William Blake and his Attitude towards Religion*.

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: N1 Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: www.hampstead.humanists.net

Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings second Wednesday of the month, usually at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. On Jan 9 we are having our New Year lunch at 12pm at Wetherspoons in the O2 Centre, Finchley Road. Members of other groups, or even non-members, welcome. Further details from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

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-](mailto:edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk)

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, Jan 8, 7.30pm. *What Muslims Want*. DVD on Channel 4 programme.

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

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, Jan 2, 7.30pm. DVD *The God Who Wasn't There*. Wed, Feb 6, 7.30pm. Joe Otten: *Debunking Christianity*. 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: brianmcclinton@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.