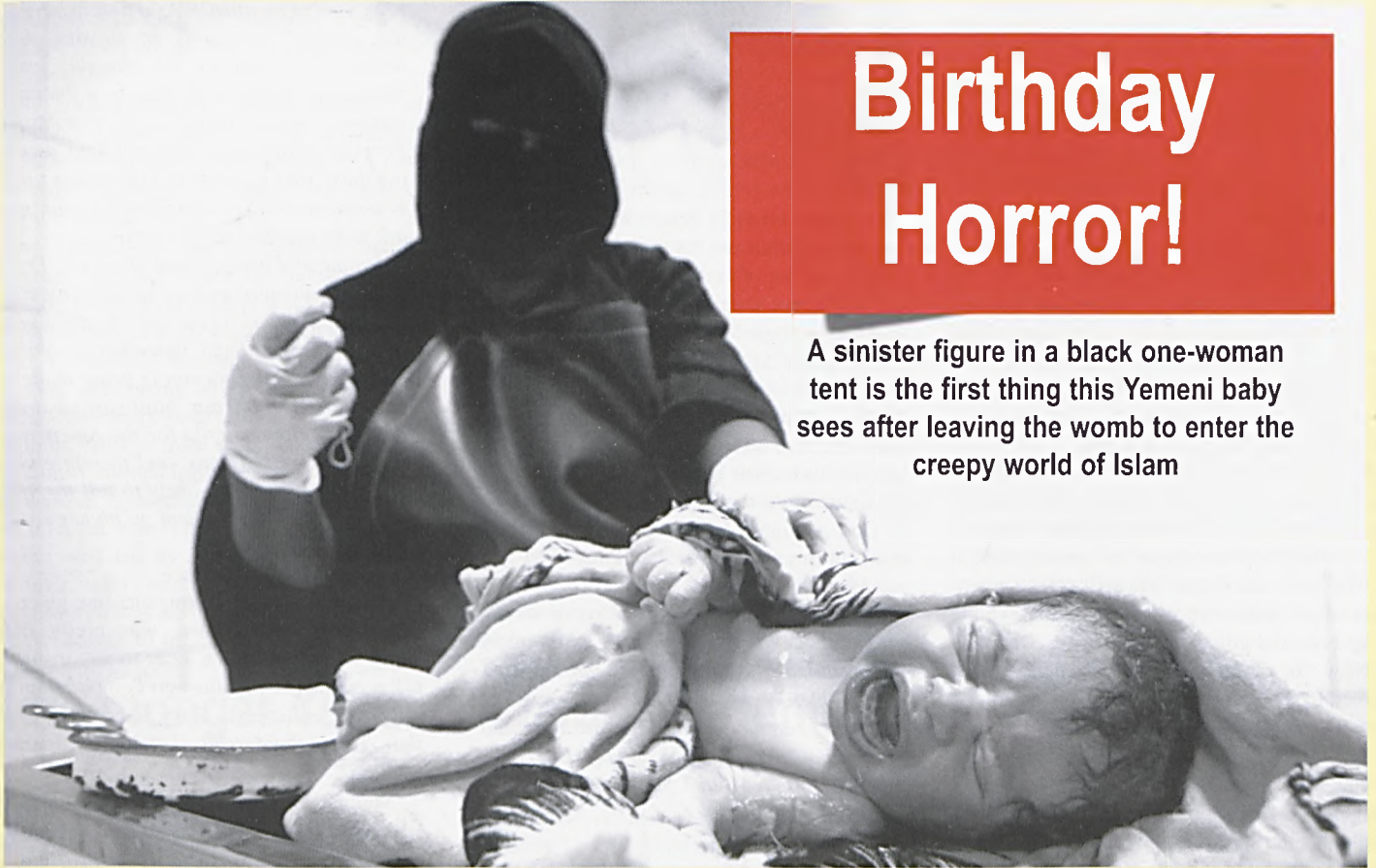


£1.25

Vol 128 No 3
March 2008

The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881



Birthday Horror!

A sinister figure in a black one-woman tent is the first thing this Yemeni baby sees after leaving the womb to enter the creepy world of Islam

IT LOOKS like a scene from a horror movie, but this is, in fact, a routine entry into the world of Islam if you happen to be born in the Yemen. We discovered the photograph taken by writer/photographer Abbie Trayler-Smith when we were looking for a picture to illustrate a report that special treatment was being demanded by female Muslim medical students who are refusing to obey hygiene rules brought in to stop the spread of deadly superbugs.

Women training in several hospitals in England, according to the *Telegraph* last month, have raised objections to removing their arm coverings in theatre and to rolling up their sleeves when washing their hands, because it is regarded as immodest in Islam. We were wondering how soon it would be before they demand burquas in which to do their work.

The *Telegraph* reported that universities and NHS trusts fear many more will refuse to co-operate with new Department of Health guidance, introduced this month, which stipulates that all doctors must be "bare below the elbow".

The measure is deemed necessary to stop the spread of infec-

tions such as MRSA and *Clostridium difficile*, which have killed hundreds. Hygiene experts said that no exceptions should be made on religious grounds.

Dr Mark Enright, professor of microbiology at Imperial College London, said: To wash your hands properly, and reduce the risks of MRSA and *C.difficile*, you have to be able to wash the whole area around the wrist. I don't think it would be right to make an exemption for people on any grounds. The policy of bare below the elbows has to be applied universally.

Dr Charles Tannock, a Conservative MEP and former hospital consultant, added: "These students are being trained using taxpayers' money and they have a duty of care to their patients not to put their health at risk. Perhaps these women should not be choosing medicine as a career if they feel unable to abide by the guidelines that everyone else has to follow."

But the Islamic Medical Association insisted that covering all the body in public, except the face and hands, was a basic

(Continued on p4)

Inside
this
issue:

St Peter's Church
vs the
PussyParlure

– p2

Hate-monger Yusuf
al-Qaradawi banned
from Britain

– p3

Who will rid us
of this idiotic
priest?

– p5



Bring on the Pussy Parlure and to hell with the church, says *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke

I LIVE just a stone's throw from that useless great neo-Gothic lump they call St Peter's in Brighton – so my delight knew no bounds when I learned that plans were afoot to site the Pussy Parlure spiegelent on council-owned land adjoining the church during this year's Fringe Festival in the city.

The Parlure is a Belgian mirrored travelling theatre in a similar style to the spiegelent which proved popular with visitors when it appeared during the Brighton Festival for three years from 2004.

The original Art Nouveau structure, in which I have seen several highly-entertaining acts during past festivals, came into the city each year flat-packed, like some giant Ikea self-assembly kit, and in no time at all rose up to form a plush and substantial theatre, complete with ornate stained glass panelling, and a startling arrangement of mirrors.

But now I learn that church officials are less than ecstatic at the idea of the Pussy Parlure on their doorstep. The parish committee, according to the *Brighton Argus* "is concerned that the venue is too risqué and will offend members of the public who mistakenly believe the lawn is sacred ground."

Now the spineless City Council, which agreed to rent out the land, says it will only do so with the church's agreement.

As soon as the threat to the spiegelent became known, hundreds of godless Brightonians rose up as one to let the *Argus* know that they were entirely in favour of erecting it next to the church – which, at the last count, was attracting maybe three people a week to its regular services. Almost a thousand people who took part in an *Argus* poll were in favour of placing it near the church, while only 50 were against.

The uselessness of St Peter's has even been recognised by the Church of England, which has earmarked it for closure, along with several other churches in the city, and I think the parish committee has a bloody nerve to try and deprive us of a venue which promises things far more uplifting, entertaining and sensible than anything the C of E could ever offer. *Especially when it's not on land they own.*

What infuriated me even more was the suggestion by Brighton Council that the agreed ground rent of £5,000 could be paid into church funds.

Excuse me? The ground belongs to the council, and, by extension, to the city's taxpayers, and any money raised should go towards improving public services, and not to prop up an ossified institution which started dying on its arse decades ago.

I am by no means the only one to think this.

One outraged reader of the *Argus* wrote: "As for handing over the £5,000 rent to the church fund, I, as a council-tax payer, am completely against giving our money to the richest institution there is – or to any other religious cause."

I was also unhappy to learn of the placatory suggestion by the spiegelent's owner, Malcolm Haynes, who wrote to the church saying that he was prepared to drop the word "Pussy" from the venue's name to spare the blushes of the pitiful handful of parishioners who dodder off to St Peter's each week.

This is Brighton, for goodness sake. The only thing that offends people here is religion, and it's about time the city leaders took that message on board and told the church council to get stuffed!

ON those rare occasions when I find myself at a loose end, I trawl through my spam emails, identify those that begin "Greetings to you in the name of Almighty Allah" or "in the name of God Almighty I seek your assistance" and send out this stock reply:

My dearest Khalid Ahmmad (or whoever), I am so sorry to have heard of the untimely death at the hands of assassins of your father, the late coffee bean/oil magnate Chief Dr Alwadi Ahmmad (or whoever) and I can understand your desire to find a safe haven for the \$25,000,000.00 (twenty five million United States dollars) your



Designed by Charles Barry, St Peter's is one of the earliest Gothic revival churches in the UK

father left in a bloody great chest, now under lock and key in a Senegal bank.

I would gladly help you in your attempts to transfer this cash to the United Kingdom (in exchange, of course, for a percentage of the money), but unfortunately, by using the phrase "Greetings to you in the name of Almighty Allah" you have identified yourself as a thief and a liar.

Let me briefly elaborate. Your email has been sent to an atheist. As a non-believer, I am deeply suspicious of anyone who invokes the name of the almighty when attempting to find a partner in a financial venture – or any enterprise, for that matter. From my experience, most religious people (or those who claim to be) are either totally untrustworthy or completely ga-ga, and are to be shunned at all costs.

Let me end with a word of advice. Don't use religious terminology in your attempts to defraud anyone in Europe. We are a godless bunch who will immediately realise that a fraudulent attempt is being made to separate us from our hard-earned dosh. Save the religious crap for the Americans, who are very religious, and therefore very stupid, and far more likely to fall for your scams. Now f%k off and go bother someone else.*

GAY Catholic Michael (no surname given) of Gwynedd, North Wales, was pretty damn angry when he wrote a letter to gay magazine *GT* a couple of months ago complaining that magazine columnist, Terry Sanderson – yes, that Terry Sanderson – "always degrades religion."

Wailed Michael in a letter published in the February issue of *GT*: "Why can't he look at the charity work it does, the great things it inspires people to do, and the happiness it brings to millions of people every day?"

His anger must have boiled over into uncontrollable rage when he turned to page 105 of the same issue, where Sanderson – in his column that month – penned a blistering attack on the Catholic Church, which concluded with the words:

"There is enough evidence now to show that the Vatican has nobody's interests at heart but its own. It is not the benign institution it likes to portray itself as; it is a vile, reactionary force that has held back science, created bigotry where none need exist, and robbed the poorest to reinforce its vast wealth.

"It must never be forgiven for banning condoms in the fight against Aids, nor its filthy treatment of gay people. Those gay people who continue to support it – and there are many – need urgently to get some self-respect and to stop making excuses for a church that hates them so deeply, and is way beyond reform."

Methinks Michael, in the interests of his health, ought to read magazines less likely to send his blood pressure soaring.

More bull from the Hindu community

HINDU protestors descended on Parliament in London last month to demonstrate against what they said was the “unacceptable lethargy” of the Government in dealing with their complaints following the killing of a cow by the RSPCA at a Hindu temple in Hertfordshire last December.

The demonstration, which started at Parliament Square, made its way to DEFRA headquarters where a mock killing of a cow was staged as scores of orange-robed monks blew on “sacred” conch shells.

The 11-year-old cow in question, named Gangotri, was put down by humane lethal injection after officers found it suffering from injuries sustained from a mating incident with a bull. The RSPCA decided to end the animal’s suffering after taking advice from three independent veterinary surgeons.

Similar outrage from sections of the Hindu community erupted last year when Shambo the bull was put to sleep after it was discovered he was infected with TB. Last month’s demonstration was led by Brent North MP Barry Gardiner who said: “The temple nursed Gangotri in a way no farmer could ever afford to”. According to the “Krishna Lovers” blog



Poor cow: Gangotri, pictured shortly before her next incarnation

page, the injured cow was being cared for with Reiki, acupuncture and massage.

In a letter to the *Borehamwood & Elstree Times*, the RSPCA pointed out that it would have been against the law for them to allow the cow to continue suffering while further consultation with the Hindu temple officials took place.

At the beginning of February, a press release from the Hindu Forum accused the Government of “failing” the British Hindu community. “This Government has no regard

for the needs of communities that do not shout,” commented Sudarshan Bhatia, President of the National Council of Hindu Temples, while Ishwer Tailor, President of the Hindu Forum of Britain, said “The impression we get is that those who shout the loudest or cause problems get immediate attention from this Government, while those who work actively to make community cohesion a reality get ignored.”

Commented the National Society’s Alastair McBay: “The view that the troublemakers get what they want, while the ‘quiet’ ones don’t, is a none-too-subtle broadside at the Muslim community and the Government’s approach to dealing with Islamic fundamentalism. We suspect the last thing Gordon Brown wants is rising tensions between Muslims and Hindus.

“We wait to see how the Government responds to the demand that animals kept at Hindu temples are treated differently to farm animals. Hindus can, of course, point to exceptions given to Muslims and Jews over animal welfare regulations. But it is the bigger picture that is of more concern. The statements from the Hindu community confirm that the Government’s policy of lumping citizens together and appealing to them by religious affiliation, the so called ‘faith communities’, is causing precisely the problem we predicted – an unedifying ‘me too’ scramble for attention and privilege. And once you agree to jump, it then becomes forever a question of how high.”

Hate-monger Yusuf Al Qaradawi denied to the entry the UK

MUSLIM fanatic Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Qatar-based cleric who defends suicide attacks, hates Jews and calls for the execution of homosexuals, has been refused a visa to enter the UK after a campaign by Conservative leader David Cameron.

The Muslim Council of Britain is not happy. The MCB said it deplores the decision, and accuses the Government of caving in to “unreasonable demands spearheaded by the Tory leader”. Muhammad Abdul Bari, the secretary-general of the MCB, said that Dr al-Qaradawi enjoyed respect as a scholar throughout the Muslim world.

“I am afraid this decision will send the wrong message to Muslims everywhere about the state of British society and culture. Britain has had a long and established tradition of free speech, debate and intellectual pursuit. These principles are worth defending, especially if we would like to see them spread throughout the world.”

And Muhammad Sawalha, the British Muslim Initiative president, said: “We would have to go as far back as the medieval age, when scholars were hounded and vilified, in order to find a similar retrograde decision.

So let’s examine some thoughts of this

“respectable scholar” – described by some, including London Mayor Ken Livingstone – as a “moderate Muslim”.

Defending terrorist bombing against off-duty Israeli soldiers, Qaradawi told BBC *Newsnight* that: “An Israeli woman is not like women in our societies, because she is a soldier. I consider this type of martyrdom operation as an evidence of God’s justice. Allah Almighty is just; through his infinite wisdom he has given the weak a weapon the strong do not have, and that is their ability to turn their bodies into bombs as Palestinians do.”

When Saudi Arabia banned the game of Pokemon as a Zionist plot, Qaradawi issued a fatwa endorsing the ban, saying that “Pokemon not only uses Jewish and Masonic



Nonsense spouter Yusuf al-Qaradawi

symbols, but teaches evolution. Not only do Pokemon evolve, they do so in battles where the survivors are those who adapt better to the environment; another of Darwin’s dogmas. In addition, both depiction of imaginary animals and card-games are contrary to the Koran.

This pathetic old half-wit also noted that “some Japanese expressions squeaked and gibbered by Pokemon may mean ‘I am a Jew’ and ‘Become a Jew’ But he did admit the matter was controversial and he really wasn’t certain.

In August 2005, he called for the stoning to death of the Crown Prince of Qatar for being gay.

It is understood that Dr al-Qaradawi, who is banned from entering the United States, applied for a medical visa almost a year ago. In August he was hospitalised for a stomach ulcer, and in November he was treated for a cracked vertebra apparently caused by a slipped disc. So, while we in the West are completely corrupt, depraved and under-dressed – thanks to the immoral influences of Zionism, homosexuality, rampant secularism and Pokemon – we’re the number 1 choice when doddering old Muslim hate-mongers like the 81-year-old Al-Qaradawi need their worthless lives prolonged.

Sweet justice: Christians shamed at employment tribunals

A WOMAN who demanded the right to ram her Christian piety down the throats of work colleagues, and a Church of England bishop who discriminated against a gay youth worker, have been thoroughly shamed at separate employment tribunals.

Far from being the poor victim whose religious sensitivities were cruelly stomped upon by British Airways when they told her to wear her cross under her uniform, Nadia Eweida was, in fact, an insensitive zealot who had no consideration for her colleagues.

That was the verdict of an employment tribunal to which Eweida appealed after refusing to comply with BA's rules on jewellery. She insisted on wearing a cross for all to see. Not only did the tribunal kick out all her claims of religious discrimination and harassment, it also criticised her for her intransigence, saying that she "generally lacked empathy for the perspective of others ... her own overwhelming commitment to her faith led her at times to be both naive and uncompromising in her dealings with those who did not share her faith."

One example of this was her insistence that she must never be required to work on Christmas Day, even though she had signed a contract that made it clear that she, like her colleagues, would be working in an operation that functions 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and therefore required shift working and bank holiday working, too.

The tribunal commented: "[Eweida's] insistence on privilege for Christmas Day is perhaps the most striking example in the case of her insensitivity towards colleagues, her lack of empathy for those without religious focus in their lives, and her incomprehension of the conflicting demands which professional management seeks to address and resolve on a

near-daily basis."

Writing in the *Guardian's* "Comment is Free", Terry Sanderson, National Secular Society President, said: "Eweida and her Christian activist backers managed to foment such a backlash that BA was forced into changing the policy. Now she can wear her cross visibly, and the airline offered her £8,500 compensation and a return to her job, with her point successfully made. But no – she decided to continue pursuing the airline at the tribunal. She was funded in her action by a right-wing religious law firm in Arizona called the Alliance Defence Fund, whose affiliated lawyer was Paul Diamond, a familiar figure in court cases demanding religious privilege."

The tribunal concluded: "The complaint of direct discrimination fails because we find that the claimant did not, on grounds of religion or belief, suffer less favourable treatment than a comparator in identical circumstances."



Bigots Nadia Eweida and Bishop of Hereford, Anthony Priddis

The tribunal also heard how Eweida's attitude and behaviour towards colleagues had prompted a number of complaints objecting to her "either giving them religious materials unsolicited, or speaking to colleagues in a judgmental or censorious manner which reflected her beliefs; one striking example was a report from a gay man that the claimant had

told him that it was not too late to be redeemed."

Indeed, pointed out Sanderson, the proselytising motivation of her desire to wear the cross over her uniform instead of underneath it was underlined when she said: "It is important to wear it to express my faith so that other people will know that Jesus loves them."

The second tribunal case involved a gay Christian, John Reaney, who was awarded more than £47,000 in compensation from the Church of England – but it appears that the church won't have to pay a penny in legal costs.

Anni Holden, spokeswoman for the diocese of Hereford, told the BBC that the legal costs of the case brought by John Reaney, 42, were being met by an anonymous donation.

Mr Reaney applied for the vacant post of youth officer within the Hereford diocese in May 2006. Members of the eight-strong interview panel had recommended him for the job and the appointment just needed the approval of the Bishop of Hereford, Anthony Priddis. During a two-hour meeting with the bishop, Mr Reaney claimed that Priddis questioned him about a gay relationship. Three days later the bishop phoned him to say he had been unsuccessful.

The tribunal ruled that Mr Reaney, who now lives in Cardiff, had been discriminated against "on the grounds of sexual orientation". The bishop has now apologised, and gay-rights group Stonewall said the "substantial compensation" sent a clear message. Its chief executive Ben Summerskill declared: "We're delighted that the tribunal has sent such a robust signal, both to the bishop and other employers. The substantial level of compensation sends out a very clear message. Not even a bishop is above this law."

Muslim medics demand special treatment

tenet of Islam, adding that "No practising Muslim woman – doctor, medical student, nurse or patient – should be forced to bare her arms below the elbow."

Dr Majid Katme, the association spokesman, said: "Exposed arms can pick up germs and there is a lot of evidence to suggest skin is safer to the patient if covered. One idea might be to produce long, sterile, disposable gloves which go up to the elbows."

When this story first broke, we posted it on the *Freethinker* website, and among the many comments we received was this one from a Muslim doctor:

"What is with these so called followers of a 'true Islam' who take everything so literally;

the underlying principle is modesty and chastity in one's conduct of affairs in life – baring the arms to scrub before surgery in no way violates that fundamental!

"What are the chances of the team of doctors having sex because they saw each other's arms while scrubbing?"

"It is because of this failure to see the essence of the doctrines in Islam that we end up blowing each other up, or slaughtering innocent people, all the while chanting God's name and dressed from head to toe in black – what purpose does that serve?"

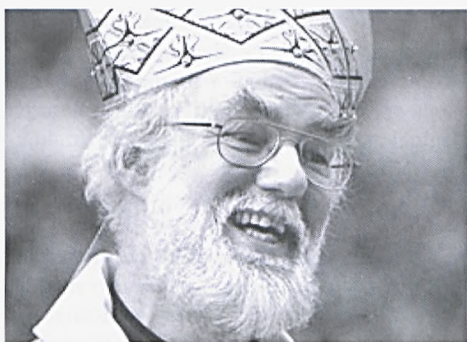
"It's incidents such as this which make being a Muslim such an embarrassment!; certainly my wife, who is a surgeon, is not going to refrain from baring her arms while scrubbing – but, this does not amount to a violation of a basic tenet, so long as she is dressed modestly, whatever some 'Islamic Body' somewhere may have to say about it!

"These so called priests of Islam have institutionalised Islam and buried it beneath a thicket of legalistic decrees; with them lies the blame for much of what is wrong with the muslim world."

And Stuart H commented: "When they reviewed MRSA procedures at my local hospital they came up with another 'faith-based' danger – the hospital chaplain!"

"Think about it – most staff are contained within a well-policed area (eg a ward) and don't cross barriers to another, so can't spread infection to another self-contained unit. But the chaplain rushes from ward to ward and bedside to bedside, shaking hands left, right and centre, and not stopping to wash them in between.

"I'm told the hospital's 'solution' was to just give him his own little bottle of soap – might as well have told patients to pray and hope for the best!"



His fuzziness Rowan 'Dumbledore' Williams

APART from sending the nation scuttling to find the word "unclarity" in their dictionaries – it is, for the record, in our office copy of *Collins Scrabble Words* – the Archbishop of Canterbury left people reeling in horror and disbelief over his now infamous pronouncements about sharia law in the UK.

Dr Rowan Williams afterwards apologised for the "unclarity" of his words, broadcast ahead of a speech he was giving called "*Civil and Religious Law in England: A Religious Perspective*."

For this apology we should give him credit, said Alistair McBay, the National Secular Society's Scottish representative. He was, said Mr McBay, apologising to us "for being just too dim to understand his musings."

He added: "Some say the simultaneously intelligent and unintelligible Williams was misinterpreted (he wasn't), and bemoan the frenzied media reaction. This ignored the vast space granted exclusively to religious leaders either to put the boot in or defend his twitterings (or both), with an article by Lord Carey dominating coverage in *The Sunday Telegraph* and *News of the World*."

"Many said refilling the ever-emptying Anglican pews was his job, not going into bat for Islam, while others saw a man supposed to be peddling the moral absolutism of the Bible instead peddling moral relativism and nodding to the equal (or maybe that should be parallel?) veracity of the Koran."

"Others recalled that previous Archbishops of Canterbury in history had been summarily executed for heresy. Should the present incumbent be grateful we don't kill heretics any more? Or should believers be able to choose sharia to deal with heretics, if unwilling to "relate" to British law on the subject? Better watch out, Rowan!

"Dr Williams' apologists say he was brave to kick off the great debate of our times, but as NSS members know, it has been raging for years. In effect he said nothing new – belief in god (any god, apparently) must be privileged. As for the debate on Islamic values in a British setting, it has raged since the Ayatollah's fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989, when we saw some British citizens parading the streets to demand the death of another British citizen for the crime of writing a book. To suggest Dr Williams is doing a Captain James T Kirk, and boldly going where no man has gone before, is daft.

Who will rid us of this idiotic priest?

"The American sci-fi writer Robert Heinlein famously said 'theologians can convince themselves of anything', and Rowan Williams is the proof. One thing is certain – he has unleashed the unholy and unedifying spectacle of Britain's faith groups arguing within and between themselves about how Britain should accord religion yet more privilege. The debate about where one man's 'religious conscience' ends and another man's unfair discrimination begins is in full cry."

In less knock-about fashion, but nonetheless equally devastating, was a piece in the *Washington Post* by retired Episcopal priest and writer James Anderson, who pointed out that Williams "is a political appointee, a prominent civic personage in English life. This anomaly of an established church means that, despite his lack of actual governmental power, the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury carries the same weight of political baggage as that of any high-level political appointee in the American system. When the Archbishop says or does something really inept or stupid and the action has possible widespread implications for the nation, media frenzy erupts."

"Williams," said Anderson, "created a major controversy when he seemed to be suggesting that the British legal system must inevitably accommodate itself to Islamic law. Amid calls for his resignation, a blizzard of blogs describing him as "a dangerous buffoon" and as "so utterly clueless as to be a liability", and after a

phone call from Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the Archbishop took responsibility for "any unclarity" or "any misleading use of words that has helped to cause distress or misunderstanding among the public at large."

He continued: "Despite the fact that 'unclarity' doesn't appear in my complete edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I think I understand that the Archbishop of Canterbury is saying his words did not communicate the message he intended and that he in no way believes he might have been mistaken in his message. Because of the protracted, ongoing disputes with the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a whole over homosexuality and the authority of Scripture, I have been a regular reader of Dr Williams' speeches and pronouncements. Accordingly, I can say without reservation that his public reflections upon sharia law and its place in English law are typical of the Archbishop's public expressions.

"As Stephen Bates of the *Guardian* says of Dr Williams, 'His subtle academic mind contains so many caveats and subordinate clauses that ordinary mortals regularly find it difficult to navigate the labyrinth of his prose'. In commenting on this form of 'intellectual arrogance' at the centre of the Church of England, Ruth Gledhill, of the *London Times*, described Rowan Williams as 'confident enough of his intellectual gifts to consider that he does not need the wisdom of others in guiding the public expression of his thoughts'.

"We do not have an established church in this country," continued Anderson, "for which we should all give thanks. Most of us are mere mortals with some recognition of the wisdom of others, believing additional guidance is often helpful and necessary. The Episcopal Church has been unable to ignore the Archbishop of Canterbury because his position provides a platform from which he broadcasts his 'unclarity' across the Atlantic. Much of the muddled thought of Dr Williams regarding English law and Islamic law seems to stem from his perspective in a declining established church within a more and more diverse society. He is clearly concerned to explore some of the issues around the 'rights of religious groups within a secular state'.

"Unfortunately, from this perspective, his thinking seems to gravitate strongly to the official co-mingling of religion with civic governance and law as the means of recognising the allegiances of differing religious communities. On this side of the Atlantic, where we are very clear that religious communities are voluntary associations which do not need and cannot have a cozy relationship with our nation's mechanisms of law and governance, Dr Williams' ideas are misleading and should be ignored."

Republished Mohammed cartoon stokes more Muslim rage

CHANTING "Death to the cartoonist", dozens of Islamist students last month burned the Danish flag in southern Pakistan after the republication of a caricature of the Prophet Mohammad by a number of Danish and other European newspapers.

The cartoon was reprinted after a Danish citizen of Moroccan descent and two Tunisians were arrested for planning to murder 73-year-old Kurt Westergaard, a cartoonist at *Jyllands-Posten*, the Danish paper that originally published a series of Mohammed drawings in September 2005.

Berlingske Tidende was one of the newspapers involved in the republication by newspapers in Denmark. It said: "We are doing this to document what is at stake in this case, and to unambiguously back and support the freedom of speech that we as a newspaper always will defend."

John Radford: The hopeless Pope

I DON'T mean to imply by the title that Benedict XVI is incompetent in his job as head of the Roman Catholic church. He appears to be hardworking and sincere, and no doubt gives general satisfaction to those whose life is incomplete without a Pope. I refer rather to what he has to say about hope, specifically in his Encyclical *Spe Salve*, dated November 30, 2007.

An encyclical is a letter, a sort of printed sermon, addressed in this case to the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women religious (ie monks and nuns) and all the lay faithful. It is readily available on the web, but I found the texts hard to read, and reluctantly contributed £2.95 to the Catholic Truth Society (there's a contradiction in terms) for a printed copy. Any major pronouncement by a Pope is big news, and this one hit the headlines. He is head of the third largest agglomeration of people in the world, after China and India. It seemed worthwhile to see what he has to say. Hope is something we can probably all do with from time to time. Benedict is a scholarly man, a



former professor of theology, and he has brought his learning to bear on this topic.

The encyclical runs to 52 pages and covers quite a lot of ground. The title comes from St Paul's letter to the Romans, *spe salve facti sumus*, "in hope we are saved". Benedict begins by arguing that for the early Christians, and by implication still today, hope was more or less equated with faith. Before Christ, people had no hope, because they had no faith in a Christian God. Other gods did not do hope. The Christian hope is for "redemption", which means coming to know the true God. It seems also to be equated with eternal life, which is essentially union with God. This is developed at some length. At times it seems quite similar to Eastern ideas of union with some kind of impersonal transcendental reality. But at the same time it seems to be concerned with human welfare in this world. Benedict then considers whether the Christian search for redemption is purely individualistic,

and argues it is not. Rather, humanity was originally united, and sin is seen as the destruction of this unity. Redemption is the re-establishment of unity, it is for all, and can be seen beginning to take shape in the world community of believers.

This programme was, so to say, subverted by intellectual changes after the Middle Ages, as seen particularly clearly in the thought of Francis Bacon. Reason and experiment became the hopes of progress, and this was developed further by Immanuel Kant, and fully in the 18th-century Enlightenment. A further step was taken by Karl Marx, for whom a scientifically reformed economic system would lead to utopia. Marx gave little detail as to how things should proceed subsequent to the economic revolution. But his major error was to forget that human nature would remain: "Freedom always remains freedom for evil". (Actually, I think, the Marxist view would be that behaviour is the outcome of social conditions, and thus can be altered.) More generally, science, or reason, or human judgment, can never guarantee universal happiness – redemption – although they can make great contributions to well-being. Atheism not only fails to ensure good, it has led to the worst sort of oppression. A human recipe for utopia denies free-will because it insists on only one structure for society (Benedict seems to imagine something like Orwell's 1984).

Humanity cannot be redeemed by science, but only by love. And this is only to be found in the God who became man, sharing his suffering. (In passing, an advertisement on the Underground asks me to sponsor a dog. In return I am promised "unconditional love". On the face of it, dog seems a better bet than god.) In short, "A world without God is a world without hope. Only God can create justice. And faith gives us the certainty that he does so." This is more or less the end of the argument, but Benedict goes on to suggest various "settings" for learning and practising hope. These are prayer, action and suffering, compassion for others, and faith in the Last Judgment. A final section praises Mary, the Mother of God, as the "star" or guide of hope.

My first reflection on all this was that I was left unclear as to the relationship between human well-being in this life, and everlasting life/union with God. Are they the same, or two aspects of the same thing, or can we have one without the other? A traditional Christian view has been that the virtuous may suffer in this life, but will be rewarded in the next. And there is the ancient problem of God allowing evil, such as the deaths of innocent children in natural disasters. If this is because of their "original sin", is not this what Jesus saved us from? Where is the hope, or justice, here? And should we think that the large non-Christian majority of the human race is without hope? My second thought was that the whole thing seems like a house of cards.

On October 14, 2007, Bryan Berg set a

Jesus and Mo



© jesusandmo.net

world record for such a house, 25 feet 9 inches. Amazing. But it can have been no more stable than the simplest such effort, since it had no foundation and nothing to hold it together.

I have yet to see anywhere any basis in reason or experience for supposing that the Christian deity exists, or that he sent his only son into the world to save us. Again, all living things have a drive to survive, and in many humans this is accompanied by a strong belief in life after death. Most religions have embodied this in some form, but as far as I know, there is no reason to think it true. Of course, Benedict was writing for the faithful, and was entitled to assume that most of them share his basic assumptions (though many clearly reject important teachings, eg on birth control and priestly celibacy). However, I doubt if he would have produced anything novel in defence of those assumptions. The ground has been diligently trodden for two thousand years without anything convincing appearing.

My third reaction was that I agree with Benedict that reason, experiment, science, human judgment, cannot guarantee Utopia or any sort of universal happiness. But to my mind, nothing can do this. The future is by its nature unpredictable, and even if Utopia were theoretically possible, it could never be certain. I agree that human free-will may always be used for evil as well as for good. But we can't get out of

this dilemma by invoking an imaginary supernatural being who will make it all come right in the end. Rather, we (individually) have to accept our human nature, try to understand it better and modify our behaviour to do good rather than bad. What good is, is defined essentially by our common humanity, not handed down from on high. There are reasons to hope, and reasons to despair, and reasons just to go doggedly on, as probably most people have done most of the time, with such reasonable and practical hopes as they can muster.

Then there is Benedict himself. He has clearly put a great deal of thought, probably over many years, into this. He obviously has a sincere desire to clarify, and convince others of, what he feels is a Divine promise. This is typical of religious leaders, including Jesus, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, John Wesley, Martin Luther, Abd-al-Wahhab and many more. But, as has been said so often, individual conviction is simply not a sufficient basis for general truth. Faith can give subjective, but not objective, certainty, or even probability. However profound, it remains one person's opinion. Benedict also seems imbued, again like others, with the idea of returning to a better, "purer" past, both in religious teaching and in the supposed state of the human race.

In Christian mythology this means before the Fall. There is no evidence that any such

state ever existed. As religious writers often do, Benedict tends to use a collective "we". Quoting both St Paul and St Augustine, he says "We do not know what we would really like; we do not know this 'true life'; and yet we know that there must be something we do not know towards which we feel driven". Who are "we"? Clearly he feels this, and no doubt he is not alone, but on what basis can he speak so all-embracingly?

This is a simple empirical question, to be settled by enquiry and counting. Everyday experience of myself and others, as well as opinion polls, show me that there are many other views. (Religious apologists often get out of this one by arguing that "we" really want God but are not aware of it. This is a classic non-falsifiable argument and carries little weight.)

Roman Catholic reactions to the encyclical have been predictably enthusiastic, and Benedict has been acclaimed as a great theologian, even the greatest of his age. If so, it does not say much for theology. Many millions revere the words of the Holy Father, and derive great comfort from them. But to my mind, the elaborate structure of hope that he offers falls like a house of cards.

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

Sharia banking: another daft ploy to exceptionalise Muslims

AMID the continuing debate about the application of Islamic laws in Britain, the Treasury announced last month that it was likely to back plans to issue sharia-law-compliant bonds.

Treasury Secretary Alistair Darling plans to issue the Islamic bonds, known as *sukuk*, to tap into a fast-growing market in the products.

Sharia law prohibits charging or paying interest, which has led to the growth of a market in financial services created to be compliant with Islam. *Sukuk* are structured as profit-sharing plans, and the process is usually blessed by a board of religious scholars affiliated with a bank.

Opposition MP Edward Leigh said he feared issuing sharia-compliant financial products could also cause problems. "I am concerned about the signal this would send – it could be the thin end of the wedge. British common law must be supreme and should apply to everyone," Leigh told the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper.

But the Financial Services Authority can see nothing wrong in religion elbowing its way into our banking system; on the contrary, it appears to be positively delighted. "The FSA welcomes the innovation that Islamic banking brings and the diversity it facilitates. The statutory principles under which we operate

encourage us to maintain the strength and diversity of the UK's financial landscape. Having access to sharia-compliant banking products provides financial services to people whose faith prevents them from using the kind of products that are normally offered by UK financial institutions.

But the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship makes a valid point: "The government may be attracted by the prospect of money from Muslim investors, but it seems it has not considered the implications of using bonds that comply with sharia law. Sharia law does not simply prohibit interest and finance speculation, it stipulates that money must not be used for a purpose incompatible with Islam.

"This could include any number of areas of the financial market, such as alcohol and cigarettes, clothing, food, media (which produces gossip), and animal welfare (which promotes the welfare of non-halal animals). It would also mean this money could not be used in the furtherance of many individual freedoms, or in the promotion of any idealistic or political worldview other than Islam (including secular democracy).

A much more forthright condemnation of this trend, now gaining ground in Canada,



An employee in the sharia division of the Bank Negara, Indonesia

comes from Canadian commentator Tarek Fatah. Recently, in the *Globe and Mail*, he quoted Muhammad Saleem, a former president and CEO of Park Avenue Bank in New York, as saying: "Islamic banks do not practise what they preach: they all charge interest, but disguised in Islamic garb. Thus they engage in deceptive and dishonest banking practices.

Saleem exposes these scams in his book, *Islamic Banking – A \$300 Billion Deception*. And in his book, *Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism*, Professor Timur Kuran writes that the effort to introduce sharia banking "has promoted the spread of anti-modern currents of thought all across the Islamic world. It has also fostered an environment conducive to Islamist militancy."

The Alpha Course invites people to “explore the meaning of life” – so long as they do nothing to rock the boat, or try to back course leaders into difficult positions.

Dr Robert Stovold, who recently wrote *Did Christians Steal Christmas?*, is an Alpha veteran. He has attended several courses, not all of which he completed, as he was thrown out for asking too many awkward questions.

Alpha, apparently, now regards him as an “undesirable”. When the Brighton-based rationalist tried to register for another Alpha course at Church of Christ the King, earlier this year, he received the following email:

I see that you have booked on-line for one of our Alpha courses. I do remember that you did an Alpha with us sometime ago and we generally recommend people really only need to do the course once.

It might be helpful to explain that Alpha is an exploration into the Christian faith; the people who benefit most from Alpha are those who are at that point in life when other options are closing down. Their inquisitiveness to do Alpha and the rightness of registering for the course is most often mirrored in their renewed attendance at church on Sundays.

By far the biggest pool of people attending Alpha would be those who for whatever reason have started to attend Sunday church.

Sundays at CCK have changed over the last couple of years to accommodate much more those who are searching. We are therefore pausing in saying ‘Yes; to you attending Alpha at the moment, and would strongly encourage you to think about coming to Sundays at CCK.

This is at odds with Alpha’s declaration on their website that their courses are “designed primarily for people who aren’t churchgoers, and each course is open to everyone who would like to attend”.

“But”, says Dr Stovold, “CCK’s email clearly stated that most people on their Alpha Courses do go to church, and that I will actually have to attend in order to do the course! It’s almost as if the Alpha Course actually functions largely to prop up fragile faith, rather than win genuine new converts. But that wouldn’t look good on the ‘Who’s it for?’ section of Alpha’s website.”

Among the many testimonials on the Alpha website is this one, from Jan in Liverpool:

“If you want a no-holes-barred, open and honest discussion, you can bring all the questions and things that annoy you about anything to do with Christianity or religion to Alpha. You ask it, listen to what has got to be said and then make a decision. If you never ask the questions you’ll never get any answers, and if you never give it a go you’ll never know whether it was right or wrong, good or bad.”

Said Robert: “I think the contributor may have meant ‘no holds barred’”. “No holes

Robert Stovold: Alpha course attendee

barred” does rather imply some kind of sexual element, which Alpha sadly lacks.

Having been rebuffed by Alpha, Dr Stovold immediately set to writing a leaflet – *Religion or Reason* – which he and another NSS stalwart, Bill McIlroy, of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society, gave out to Alpha attendees at Church of Christ the King.

This is the full text of his leaflet.

The meaning of life

ONE way to find out the meaning of life is to look the word up in a dictionary. But when people speak of “the meaning of life”, they are of course referring to its purpose, rather than its definition.

If the purpose of something is thought out in advance by an intelligent agent, people can act purposefully *within their own lives* (they can have *reasons for doing* particular things). However, they weren’t around before their own existence, so they can’t supply themselves with an overarching purpose *for their own existence* (a *reason for being*). But by exactly the same logic, God can’t get beyond himself either. He can have reasons for doing what he does, but *he can’t supply a reason for his own being*. If the atheist’s life is supposed to be miserable because it lacks ultimate purpose, spare a thought for God!

If we evolved through blind random forces, can our life have meaning?

EVOLUTION contains a random element (offspring are similar to their parents, but have small random differences, called mutations). But it also contains a non-random element called “Natural Selection”. A random mutation can have non-random consequences for survival. A black polar bear cub might be a random mutant, but its fate is not random; being less able to sneak up on its prey, a poorly camouflaged individual will likely starve to death without reproducing. We aren’t just the cumulative product of random mutations – we are the cumulative product of random variations *which happened to prove useful*.

Suppose we are “accidents”. Many scientific discoveries (the discovery of penicillin, for example) were accidental, but they are no less true, or less useful – or less meaningful – than scientific discoveries that were arrived at consciously. A fluke discovery, like a beneficial random mutation, is a happy accident.

Does design require a designer?

CONSIDER another question: Does order require an orderer? If a box of cornflakes is shaken randomly, small flakes tend to accumulate at the bottom of the box. How can this happen? Is there a divine hand putting the small flakes at the base of the box? Of course there isn’t. There’s a perfectly natural reason; small flakes can fall through large gaps, but

large flakes can’t fall through small gaps. Random shaking is analogous to random mutation, and “survival of the fittest” (Natural Selection) is analogous to “furthest falling of the smallest flake”. Both systems are self-ordering. (*Note to Creationists: No, evolution and cornflakes do not contradict the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which applies only to closed systems. Living things eat, and cornflakes boxes get shaken, so neither one is a closed system.*)

Is there more to life than this?

RELIGIOUS people sometimes say “You may have significance while you are alive, but when the universe (and all life with it) comes to an end in a billion years or so, everything you’ve done will come to nothing. Your life will have had no *ultimate significance*.” If this life is all that we have, and lack of significance kicks in only after we die, we won’t be around at the time, so it makes no sense to worry about it. Long ago a Greek philosopher, Epicurus (341–270 BCE), made the same point regarding death: “Thus that which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist”. If we cease to exist after death, why worry about it?

We don’t harbour uncomfortable memories of what things were like before we were conceived.

Assuming that everlasting significance were a nicer idea, would that fact make the idea true? Not necessarily, because in the real world many nice ideas happen to be false. In the land of make-believe, however, “happily ever after’s are not uncommon ...

If God knows everything, can you have free-will?

IF God knows that I am going to do *x*, I no longer have the freedom to choose *not* to do *x*. So if you believe in an omniscient (all-knowing) god, you can’t believe in free-will. The idea that God knows what we will freely choose to do is circular. It asserts what it ought to be proving and doesn’t bring any new arguments or evidence to the table.

When seducing potential converts with the promise of an “ultimate purpose”, Christians typically omit to mention the bible verse which states that God’s purpose for some is unpleasant, and that there’s nothing people can do about it because they lack free-will: “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort but on God’s mercy ... God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ But who are you O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is

given food for thought

formed say back to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?' (Romans 9:18-21).

Does God have a plan for you?

ACCORDING to the New Testament, God does not want anyone to perish but wants everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:11) ... and yet, most people are going to Hell (Matthew 7:13-14)!

God: A character reference

GOD, as described in the Bible, required women to marry the men that raped them (Deuteronomy 22:28-29), raised up an army knowing this would force women to cook and eat their own children (Deuteronomy 28:49-57, Lamentations 4:10), punished children for the sins of their fathers (Exodus 34:7), killed all the firstborns in Egypt, both man and animal (Exodus 13:15), required that stubborn and rebellious sons be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), sent lions to kill those who didn't worship him (II Kings 17:25), commanded the slaughter of men, women, children, infants and animals (I Samuel 15:2-3), accepted human sacrifice (Judges 11:30-39, II Samuel 21:6-14), made people deaf, blind and mute (Exodus 4:11), cursed his own son (Galatians 3:13, Deuteronomy 21:23), will torture people to such an extent that they'll want to kill themselves (Revelation 7:4; 9:4-6), and will subject people in Hell to the "punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 7).

Such barbaric behaviour can't be reconciled with the popular notion that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and that God is "loving to all he has made" (Psalm 145:13). The contrast is particularly clear in the light of what the Bible itself says about love: "It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8). If killing people on Earth and torturing people forever in Hell doesn't represent a failure to protect, hope and persevere, what does?

Is something missing in your life?

WE'VE all had that vague feeling that something is missing in our lives. This is a useful feeling, motivating us to improve ourselves. Charles Darwin's theory of Natural Selection offers a simple natural explanation for why we have this feeling: *any conscious being that did not want more than it had would get out-competed by a more motivated being that did.*

Many people sense this hole in their lives. They try to fill it by turning to drugs, comfort food, cults ... or religion. Believers feel that a "god-shaped hole" in their lives has been filled

by religion. The most reasonable explanation for this feeling is simply that *people invented the gods that so neatly fill the hole.*

As Xenophanes (570 – 480 BCE) pointed out, gods tend to resemble the people that worship them: "The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed: the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and red hair." This would also explain why there are so many different religions. Disagreement between (and even within) world religions suggests several minds trying to create their own god, not one god who created several minds.

Why is there suffering?

EPICURUS posed the following riddle: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

The Bible offers the "free-will defence" – that the Earth was once perfect, but people had free-will, disobeyed God and so brought imperfection and suffering into the world. But there's no evidence that the world ever was perfect. In fact, the fossil record proves that disease, parasites and predators existed long before the first people. Also, perfect people don't choose to sin (disobey God), regardless of how much free-will they have. They'd *be able* to choose to sin, but, being perfect, would never actually take that option.

Evolutionary theory offers a simple, natural reason for suffering: Organisms are in competition with one another, and what's good for one organism can be bad for another. When a predator catches its prey, that's good news for the predator, and bad news for the prey! If we get away from the egocentric religious notion that the universe was fashioned for our benefit,

the presence of suffering becomes perfectly understandable.

Can you have morality without God?

IF God has always been good, he never *got to be good*, so God can't be credited for the fact that he is good. If God has always been good, he did not create goodness, so religion offers no ultimate explanation for how goodness came to be. If God determined the difference between good and bad, on what basis did he do it? They weren't good reasons (and God himself wasn't good) because goodness hadn't been invented yet! If something became good simply because God said it was, murder would have been good had God said so, and neighbourliness bad. Such arbitrary standards hardly provide a firm foundation for morality. Fortunately, evolutionary biology offers a somewhat firmer footing.

Morals are useful. People can achieve more by working with others than they can by working alone, so Natural Selection favours co-operation. It also favours the punishment of cheats. But there are benefits to be gained from cheating, provided nobody else finds you out. Accordingly, we all have ideas about how we ought to behave, we feel that cheats should be punished – but we still sometimes feel tempted to break the rules ourselves. Co-operative behaviour, cheating, and the punishment of cheats have all been observed in other social animals, such as wolves, dolphins, monkeys and non-human apes. The idea that orderly societies require divine standards is absurd from a biologist's perspective. Statistics indicate that "In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion in the prosperous democracies" [See G S Paul (2005), "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health

(Continued on p10)

THE ALPHA COURSE

an opportunity to explore the meaning of life



alphacourse.org

starting soon at a church near you

Alpha

Food for thought for Alpha attendees

with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies – A First Look.” *Journal of Religion and Society* Vol.7].

Some facts about Jesus

THE gospels claim that Jesus was followed by “a crowd of many thousands” (Luke 12:1), and that “News about him spread all over Syria ... large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matthew 4:24-5). Yet amazingly, we can’t find any contemporary references to him! The earliest accounts come from the apostle Paul. He never actually met Jesus, and wrote 20 years or more after Jesus is alleged to have died. Some Christians claim that myths could not have arisen in such a short space of time, yet the Bible itself has Paul warning, “Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales” (1 Timothy 4:7), and “Pay no attention to Jewish myths” (Titus 1:10, 14).

In what was perhaps the earliest New Testament book to be written, Paul writes, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). Although they are placed before Paul’s letters in the Bible, the gospels were actually written after the time of St Paul. All four gospels are anonymous works, the names of the evangelists being later additions. They are not thought to be independent accounts; out of a total of 662 verses, Mark has 406 in common with both Matthew and Luke. The dominant source theory among scholars today (“The Two Source Hypothesis”) holds that Mark’s gospel was the earliest, and that Matthew and Luke reworked it for their own purposes. Luke admits being an interpreter of earlier work (Luke 1:2) rather than an eyewitness. Those who portray the gospels as four eyewitness accounts ignore this verse, and over 100 years of modern scholarship. They exaggerate the number of independent sources for much of the gospel material, and give the false impression that each gospel was recorded in Jesus’ lifetime. But if it gets people to accept Jesus as their Saviour ...

Nicky Gumbel’s scholarship

NICKY Gumbel, *Alpha Course* author and writer of the book *Questions On Life*, describes how novelist Leo Tolstoy searched for the meaning of life “in every field of science and philosophy” before finding answers in Christianity. He cites the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s description of Leo Tolstoy (p 14) – a man who wrote “one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature”. What he doesn’t mention is that Tolstoy was excommunicated for his unorthodox religious views: “Drawn at first to the Russian Orthodox church into which he had been born,

he rapidly decided that it, and all other Christian churches, were corrupt institutions that had thoroughly falsified true Christianity ... In brief, he rejected all the sacraments, all miracles, the Holy Trinity, the immortality of the soul, and many other tenets of traditional religion, all of which he regarded as obfuscations of the true Christian message contained, especially, in the Sermon on the Mount.”

Gumbel couples a half-truth with the Argument from Authority (Tolstoy was a *great* novelist, so he *must be right*, mustn’t he?). Gumbel offers what he calls “firm historical evidence” for Jesus (p 25), referring to the works of three historians (Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius). All were born after Jesus is alleged to have died. They made only passing references, and wrote at a time when some of the gospels were already in circulation. Any information coming directly from Christian sources (or indirectly from them by means of oral tradition) *cannot serve as independent corroboration of those sources*. Suetonius referred to “Chrestus” (a common Greek name), not Christ. Tacitus referred to Christ but called Christianity “a most mischievous superstition”. *Britannica*’s article on Josephus states “The implication in the passage in Book XVIII of Christ’s divinity could not have come from Josephus and undoubtedly represents the tampering (if not invention) of a later Christian copyist”. It adds, “As a historian, Josephus shares the faults of most ancient writers: his analyses are superficial, his chronology faulty, his facts exaggerated, his speeches contrived.” Between them, these three historians make more references to Hercules than they do to Jesus, and appear to believe that Hercules was a real person! The testimony of ancient writers is obviously not sufficient to establish the historical truth of Jesus’ miracles. As the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1766)



Alpha’s logo – a man struggles with a rubber ball and a giant bratwurst in a bid to find the meaning of life.



Alpha course guru Nicky Gumbel

reasoned, “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish.” David Noel Freeman (the General Editor of the Anchor Bible Series and many other works) noted: “In the legal profession, to convict the defendant of a crime, you need proof beyond a reasonable doubt. In civil cases, a preponderance of the evidence is sufficient. When dealing with the Bible or any ancient source, we have to loosen up a little; otherwise, we can’t really say anything.” (in *Bible Review* magazine, Dec 1993, p 34).

The leaflet ends with the following quotes:

“I find every sect, as far as reason will help them, make use of it gladly; and where it fails them, they cry out, ‘It is a matter of faith, and above reason’.” – (John Locke, 1632-1704).

Religion

“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this world, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.” – (1 Corinthians 3:18-19).

“The Enlightenment brought enormous progress in science, technology and medicine, but within it were the seeds of its own destruction. Revelation was made subject to reason”. – (*Searching Issues*, by Nicky Gumbel, Alpha Course author).

Reason

“If you don’t think that logic is a good method for determining what to believe, make an attempt to convince me of that without using logic. No one has even bothered to try yet.” – (Brett Lemoine, co-founder of *Internet Infidels*).

“Science, in contrast to religion, opens up the great questions of being to rational discussion, to discussion with the prospect of resolution and elucidation ... Science respects more deeply the potential of humanity than religion ever can.” (P W Atkins).

• Copies of *Religion or Reason?* in pdf format can be downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/29fjom>

Paul Williams: Religion and the age of consent

THE age at which we can legally do all manner of exciting-sounding things is a constant annoyance when we are too young; a source of great bragging when you are just over that age and your friends are not; a much too-low limit as soon as you become a parent!

At 16 a person can get married with their parents' permission. A person can have sex and actually create a baby without parental permission. (I consider that parental guidance might be a little more useful in the decision to make a baby.)

At 17 a child is allowed to drive. In the UK we have no restrictions on what type of car, or what power that car has, and in reality the only constraints are that the average 17-year-old cannot afford to insure a powerful car: buying a half-rusty 1970 supercar is actually cheap however. But nevertheless we parents still allow our hugely inexperienced offspring to borrow our cars and hope they are responsible enough to drive safely.

At 18 we allow the ingestion of potentially fatal poisons for pleasure: tobacco and alcohol. We also allow this newly qualified adult to fight and die in the armed forces. Most importantly, from a democratic point of view, at 18 years of age the right to vote and decide the fate of your neighbours is activated. This is often considered the most important of the age-related limits, as a vote directly impacts everyone in the country.

The experience of society has set these age limits based on when society considers the average youngster has reached a sufficient level of responsibility to be trusted with the choices that are now permitted.

The most important thing about these limits is that no parent has the right to over-rule the law. The protection of the child and, as a direct consequence of that, the protection of others, is the first priority.

Where am I going with this?

Leaders of the various religions tell us everyday that the most important thing in a life (any human life) is its relationship with God. Those religions are of course in opposition to each other, but in modern times their doctrine has been subdued, to an extent, to prevent a repeat of the crusades. However, they all believe they are right at the expense of all the others.

The legal ages of consent, or to put it another way, the age at which we expect a certain level of responsibility, as detailed above, are 'earthly,' or for the purposes of this article, non-spiritual.

The church (I use that as a generic term for all religions) would probably support an increase in the age of consent for sexual relations. It is also likely that they would support a significant increase in the age of consent for homosexual relations and state that a 16-year-old is not sufficiently responsible to make such

a decision. More to the point many religions would still support a ban, effectively claiming that no person is able to make such a decision for themselves: the proper standard of heterosexual behaviour having been set by God.

So if a person under 18 years old cannot be trusted to vote responsibly, and a person under 16 cannot be trusted to make responsible decisions about sex, and by the very teachings of religion these are trivial when compared to the relationship with God, why on earth do we allow children to make a decision about their eternal soul?

When a person selects a god, or a religion, or even a sect of a religion, are they not simply voting?

Following the reasoning above, the age of consent to select a religion should be about 36 if the relationship with God is twice as important as being able to vote! Or is it three times more important? Or is it infinitely more important? Of course, religion must claim that to be true, otherwise at some point a theist would have to admit that the ability to vote legally in an earthly election would be more important than God, when obviously nothing is more important than God.

I attended a good old-fashioned English Boarding School. It was Church of England, and at least three religious services per week were compulsory for all pupils. Even non-Christian pupils (often foreign students) were forced to attend.

The school chaplain was almost the most responsible theist I ever met. When beginning the optional classes for confirmation, if the answer to the question "Why do you want to be confirmed?" resulted in "My parents want me to" he would refuse to prepare the child for the process.

This of course resulted in complaints from many theist parents and the chaplain quite rightly told the parents to mind their own business. Occasionally the use of the phrase "God has directed me not to confirm this boy until it is his own choice" was needed and is of course an unbeatable argument to a theist.

This rather modest level of responsibility (he would still have children confirmed after all) is not shown in mainstream religious thinking, where the battle for new recruits is becoming more competitive by the day and is starting earlier all the time.

Even within the three Abrahamic religions the differences are immense, and if the traditional doctrine is accurate then followers of 'the-other-two' will be burning in Hell. For eternity.

So I ask again: why do we assume young children, often less than 10 years old, have the necessary responsibility to select the "one true religion" that will save their eternal soul?

This leads to a secondary question: if we accept that a child does not possess the skills

needed to evaluate which religion (or none) to select, then why do we permit a parent to over-rule this potential "age-of-consent"?

Let us be clear what that means here: if a parent were able to over-rule the age of consent for sexual relations and give permission for their child to have sex, they could still not force that child to have sex without committing an offence. When religious education is considered, however, that is exactly what we currently permit: theist parents do not "give permission" for their children to make a decision – they force that decision upon them.

The current school application system even allows selection of pupils based upon "proof" (oh the irony) of allegiance (that is the word sometimes used) to a particular church or sect of a church. That so-called allegiance then results in a narrow religious education from the school that happens to support only one religion.

If the parents or the school are wrong, then they have condemned the eternal soul of a child who does not even understand the concept, let alone how to question it.

The Human Rights Act protects the ability of a parent to raise their children in the religion of the parent. The Act also allows freedom of religion which of course is diametrically opposite to the lack of rights for the child.

It is time that religious leaders recognised the contrary position that they hold. If the relationship with God is the most important thing in a human life, then it deserves a formal and high age of consent to be enshrined in statute before any type of Confirmation, Bar Mitzvah etc is permitted. Parents should not be allowed to over-rule it. Parents should not be able to limit the religious information that a child receives: either all faiths must be taught or none.

Will the theists support an age-of-consent of 18 in such an issue?

Of course not. As the Archbishop of Canterbury has stated, teaching children is like "carving in stone", and despite the theists own position about the importance of God they will refuse to do anything that might limit the ability to maintain their numbers.

However: no matter what a formal response might suggest, belief in God is either more or less important than being able to vote in a general election. The theists cannot have it both ways.

Ages of consent are there to allow proper education and the learning of the ability to evaluate evidence before a decision is made. A lack of an age-of-consent in religion merely results in the forcing of an opinion on a child before those evaluation skills are even begun to be taught.

The battle for recruitment of impressionable minds is indeed repugnant.



Nigel Sinnott: Losing My Religion

I CANNOT be sure whether non-conformists are born or made, whether they are shaped by their genes or their environment, but I can say with reasonable accuracy that I showed signs at an early age of being difficult and different.

When my uncles were so rash as to take me fishing, I protested and demanded that the fish be returned to the water. After witnessing a goose being killed in a slow and cruel manner, I went through a series of vegetarian “phases”. (I am now a vegan.) I loathed most sports, and team games in particular. I was gifted in certain areas, but non-competitive, and liked the things most children hated, such as Latin and Greek. My contemporaries enjoyed cowboy films: mine was the dissenting voice (very much so in the 1950s) in support of the Amerindians.

My conscious development appears to have been shaped by the printed word, and by illustrated books in particular. I was charmed by the writings of Beatrix Potter (*Peter Rabbit*) and Alison Uttley (*Little Grey Rabbit*, illustrated by Margaret Tempest). I spent a fair time in the home of my maternal grandparents and there acquired books left behind from the 1930s: they included *The Children's Encyclopedia*, edited by Arthur Mee, which, though imperialist and orthodox, did wonders for a youngster's imagination; and *The Science of Life*, by H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley and G. P. Wells. Even before I could read properly, I would ask my mother to explain the captions of illustrations in *The Science of Life*. It fired my love of natural history and my respect for the scientific method. More than fifty years later, I still consult this work with a sense of awe.

At the age of eight, in 1952, I was sent to boarding school in that home of lost causes (most of them elitist and unsavoury), the city of Oxford. Christ Church Cathedral School was a seedy, cramped, often cold institution in Brewer Street. It was originally a choir school, but also took non-choristers, like me, and a few day-boys.

I loathed the place, and was dreadfully homesick. My solace was the small, dingy library where I discovered the books of Grey Owl (the *nom des bois* of Archie Belaney), pioneer environmentalist, and lover of Canada's trees, lakes, wilderness and the beaver.

Next door to the Church of England Cathedral School was Campion Hall, the Jesuit seminary; and this, of course, attracted my curiosity.

If my mother was at home during the afternoon, she would often turn on the radio and listen to *Woman's Hour*, and during school holi-

days, if I had nothing better to do, I would sometimes follow it as well. The programme carried a regular serial, and one of these caught my attention: it was about a young lad who wanted to become a Catholic, and who pleaded with his mother for permission to do so.

The radio serial about the convert to Catholicism, the proximity of my school to Campion Hall, Cardinal Wolsey's effigy in the school dining room, and stories I heard from the history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries all combined to turn me into an ardent, romantic reactionary: a Jacobite and a would-be Catholic.

'I might, perhaps, have ended up as just a lapsed Christian or a drawing-room agnostic; but my experience of anti-Semitism served to strengthen my resolve to be not just a passive unbeliever, but a militant atheist'

Having decided that I wanted to become a Catholic, I then gave Christianity some serious thought. I had plenty of opportunity for this as I was required, when at school, to attend the Cathedral for prayers every weekday morning and twice on Sundays. The numerous monuments aroused my interest in heraldry, but the services for the most part bored me witless, except for occasional, hilarious sermons by the elderly Christ Church eccentric, Canon Jenkins.

While meditating on my allegiance to Christianity I eventually ran into difficulty. I had at first no problem understanding the concept of a creator god, God the Father, or that he could have an earthly son, Jesus (supposedly of Nazareth), with a beatified human mother, the Virgin Mary. But the concept of the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost — began to trouble me. The first two entities seemed reasonable enough; but what was the purpose and rationale for God the Holy Ghost?

I eventually came to the conclusion that I could not in conscience believe in the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost. Thus began my path to apostasy. For some months I remained a closet Christian heretic — a binarian, if you like; but eventually — over a period of six months to a year — my disbelief in the Holy Ghost led me to start questioning the concept of God the Father as well. I came to the conclusion that I could not believe in this either.

By this time I was about ten-and-a-half

years of age. Being a proto-atheist and a Jacobite was a rather unstable ideological mixture, but eventually circumstances resolved it. I tried discussing my religious doubts with one or two other boys: they were either dismissive or unhelpful. One told me he had discussed my views with a master (possibly the headmaster, but I cannot be quite sure now) who had commented: “Oh, Sinnott's only saying he's an atheist just to be different.” Now Sinnott *did* like being different, but he also resented his integrity being impugned!

One afternoon I was wandering round a sort of common room where there were a couple of scrubbed kitchen tables. On one of the tables I noticed a couple of books: I picked them up and started to go through them. One was a children's book, and fairly new at the time. It was an evangelical publication, and dealt with a child who had Jewish and Arab friends. The child asks why Judaism and Islam should not be treated on a par with Christianity, and the book set out carefully to ridicule this concept.

Then I looked at the other book. It turned out to be a classic piece of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, complete with a lurid steel engraving of a Jewish patriarch, with a knife, putting to death an adolescent who had converted to Christianity.

I was outraged by what I saw and decided that Christianity was not only false, but nasty to boot.

About a fortnight later I was back in the solitude of the library. I had a penchant for history, and enjoyed reading about wars and battles. While browsing I came across a small stack of dog-eared back numbers of the *Illustrated London News*. Some were ten years old: here was history as it happened. I started leafing through an issue from (April?) 1945. There, spread before me, were graphic photographs of British troops using a bulldozer to fill mass graves after the liberation of the concentration camp at Belsen. Most of the emaciated corpses were Jewish. Now I knew to what loathsome depths anti-Semitism had led the human race.

I might, perhaps, have ended up as just a lapsed Christian or a drawing-room agnostic; but my experience of anti-Semitism served to strengthen my resolve to be not just a passive unbeliever, but a militant atheist. The process was completed a little while later by another literary find.

It was a warm, summer afternoon. Lessons were over, but the rough, dusty, asphalt playground did not appeal to me. I used to spend a lot of my time drawing — particularly battles and sailing ships — but on this occasion I decided to read. I got out a textbook with which I had been issued and started to go through it. It was a poetry anthology called *The Dragon Book of Verse*, and I found many of the poems enjoyable. Then I found myself reading Lord Macaulay's “Naseby”!

The words — put into the mouth of a Puritan soldier — rolled over me like an avalanche, and my mouth fell open in astonishment and delight.

*Down, down, for ever down, with the mitre
and the crown,*

*With the Belial of the Court and the
Mammon of the Pope;*

*There is woe in Oxford Halls; there is wail
in Durham's stalls!*

*The Jesuit smites his bosom; the Bishop
rends his cope.*

I read and reread the poem, then looked for another one by Macaulay: it was "Horatius", and describes how a desperate republic produced three volunteers who succeeded in denying Tarquin's army entry to Rome.

Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul,

With all the speed ye may;

I with two more to help me,

Will hold the foe in play.

In yon strait path a thousand

May well be stopped by three.

Now who will stand on either hand

And keep the bridge with me?

Stout Lartius hurled down Aunus

Into the stream beneath:

Herminius struck at Seius,

And clove him to the teeth:

At Picus brave Horatius

Darted one fiery thrust,

And the proud Umbrian's gilded arms

Clashed in the bloody dust.

I had felt so timid and desperately alone: who was I to question the wisdom of my learned elders? But now I had heard, across the valley of history, the clear, proud, angry, fearless notes of the bugles of revolt; and I knew I must seek them out!

The little boy who was once a Jacobite sympathiser and an aspirant Catholic went to bed that night tired and excited. He slept soundly as a convinced republican and militant atheist. He awoke refreshed, and still of the same persuasions.

I left Christ Church Cathedral School in 1957, but was then sentenced to another five years' boarding at Denstone College, atop a windy hill in Staffordshire. It had been founded by Canon Woodard in the 1870s for "the Christian education of the sons of the middle classes".

I was a convinced atheist when I arrived at Denstone. Five years of muscular Christianity, petty regimentation, and mindless official brutality and bigotry did nothing to make me revise my opinions.

Confirmation classes started at Denstone when I was about 14 years of age. I knew the time had come for me to make a formal stand. Whom should I tell first? I decided on a parent, rather than the school, so I spoke to my mother. She was a right-wing agnostic, the sort, I suspect, who regards religion as not necessarily true but good for keeping the working classes docile. Her reaction was "Don't be so ridiculous! You've got to be confirmed: you've been baptised!" I remained intransigent, so she consulted my father. He was a harsh, cold man, and a sincere Anglican. He made no effort to

press me into being confirmed but tried, with rapidly diminishing success, to persuade me to accompany him to church in the holidays. When I got back to school I had no trouble in dropping confirmation classes. The chaplain, ironically enough, was one of the few tolerant voices in the place and even (shock! horror!) voted Labour.

The chapel services at Denstone were many and long. I resented the time I was forced to waste at them. (I refused to sing.) On several occasions I found I could partially escape the boredom by inclining my head and listening to the chirpings of sparrows nesting above. I appreciated the birds but, alas, others did not. One afternoon as I walked past the chapel I found a workman busy clearing out all the nests high up in the walls of the building. A wheelbarrow was piled to overflowing with debris and dead fledglings. I was appalled by this needless barbarity. Here in Australia the sparrows are more than welcome to scrabble about in the garden, and from my study I watch with pride the blackbirds nesting on top of our kitchen window.

I left Denstone in 1962. As I was driven out for the last time I swore eternal enmity towards

the Church of England. A couple of months later I came across, and immediately joined, the Oxford University Humanist Group.

My return to Oxford, however, was very short-lived, and the beginning of 1963 found me in the London area, working in that splendid creation of 19th-century science, the Herbarium and Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Later that year I joined the Ethical Union and the Rationalist Press Association, and started to read up on humanism. Humanism was very much in fashion at the time, but I have to admit that the more I read the less satisfied I became with its anthropocentric aspects and some of its vague verbosity. I was probably searching for something with less pussyfooting and more pounce.

Finally, at the end of 1963, I found what I was looking for in the form of the *Freethinker* and the National Secular Society, and promptly subscribed to both.

• Nigel, 44, is a former editor of the *Freethinker*, now living in Australia. The first version of this text, entitled *Sine Apologia: My Path to Unbelief*, was written in 1990 in response to a letter that appeared in the *Freethinker*, inviting people to submit their accounts of their loss of belief.

William Harwood: Does God hate creationists?

ON "Super Tuesday", February 5, 2008, Republicans in the American states of Tennessee and Arkansas voted to make Mike Huckabee their candidate for President of the United States. On Wednesday February 6, a series of tornadoes tore through Tennessee and Arkansas, killing 24 people. There were tornado deaths in two other states, but neither of those have yet held presidential primaries.

Is there a correlation between natural disasters and the whims of an avenging god? While rationalists say no, that is not the answer touted by America's Christian Taliban.

When a hurricane leveled New Orleans, the ayatollahs of the Religious Right did not hesitate to cite it as proof that "God hates fags," and had taken vengeance against New Orleans because gay talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres was born there. And the maddest of the Christian Taliban's mad dogs, Jerry Falwell, informed viewers of the Christian Broadcasting Network that his god had conscripted his good friend Osama bin Laden to punish America for appointing judges who upheld the separation of church and state, and for tolerating laws granting equal rights to gays, liberals and evolutionists.

So why are the "when God does it, it's not evil" preachers deafeningly silent about their imaginary playmate's seemingly definitive denunciation of the states that voted for a hardcore biblical literalist who (unless he is lying about believing that everything in his Bible is literal truth) believes that the earth is flat? Do they see it as coincidence that the tornadoes did not penetrate any of the states won by John

McCain or Mitt Romney? Apparently, bad things happening to persons who oppose the Religious Right is divine retribution, but bad things happening to themselves carry no such implication. That is somewhat inconsistent, to say the least. But given the Christian Taliban's other qualities, inconsistency is one of their least reprehensible features.

1. The Judeo-Christian Bible expressly endorses a flat earth (Gen. 1:6-8; Deut. 30:4; 1 Sam. 2:8; Isa.13:5, 40:21-22; Job 9:6, 22:14, 26:11; Psa. 75:3, 103:12; Dan. 4:10-11; Mat. 4:8; Rev. 7:1, 20:8); an earth that neither orbits the sun nor revolves on its axis (Psa. 93:1, 96:10, 104:5); a solid sky to which the sun, moon and stars are attached (Job 22:14; Rev. 6:14; Acts 10-11); stars tiny enough to fall to earth (Rev. 6:13, 8:10; Mat 2:9) and a moon that is not a reflector of light but a source of light (Gen. 1:16).

It also declares that the billions of years old universe was created by *elohim*, "the gods," less than ten thousand years ago. Huckabee either believes all of the foregoing, or he does not believe that his Bible is literal truth. If there were a creator god, it might be willing to forgive the original authors of such cosmological speculation, since they wrote at a time when everyone was scientifically illiterate. But it would have to regard present-day creationists, who in effect accuse it of disagreeing with the discoveries of science, as monstrous blasphemers.

In the absence of any other method of displaying its displeasure, such a god might well use tornadoes to send a message, "Huckabee is no friend of mine."

The Bible and believers

DR Thomas W Smythe does an excellent job of casting a critical eye on the Bible. But it may not impinge on believers, even if they read it. I have not seen a systematic study, but I have observed among them at least the following attitudes.

1. Ignore the Bible. Go to church on Sunday, listen to the vicar, do the flowers, say your prayers, attend christenings, weddings and funerals, and so on.

2. Read the Bible occasionally, but only the nice bits.

3. Read the Bible, but realise it has to be interpreted. The nice bits mean what they say, the nasty or impossible bits mean something else.

4. Rather like 3, read the Bible, but in parts metaphorically. Adam and Eve did not literally disobey God, but we all do. But Jesus really died and was resurrected (it says so).

5. The Bible is mostly, or even all, myth and legend, but it is true in a deeper way. In a very real sense.

6. The Bible is the Word of God and is literally true. Anyone who doesn't accept this will go to Hell.

Of course there are many other attitudes, but to the above, Dr Smythe's cogent arguments are irrelevant.

JOHN RADFORD
London

Socialism v Democracy

IF anyone still doubted the ideological bankruptcy of the Left, then Ian Andrews' desperate letter effectively asking the *Freethinker* to censor my contributions to its pages finally confirmed it.

Like Graham Livingstone before him, Ian seems to have read my article "Why free-thinkers must proceed from race fact, not race fiction" from the middle to the end, ignoring the first half which put the case for immigration and firmly rebutted the banal prejudices and intolerance of right-wingers. But whereas Graham at least admitted he found the article "thought-provoking", Ian claims to have "dismantled" the argument, though citing one little known bluestocking from an obscure left-wing think-tank is hardly a devastating riposte. My accredited sources, in comparison, were governmental, judicial, publicly accountable, or independent.

I can't help thinking that Ian Andrews is missing the point about the *Freethinker*. In asking "Was it intended to be an attack on the Left ... was it intended to enhance the profile of Migrationwatch ... or was it a call to end all migration or just Muslim migration?", it is clear he thinks that the *Freethinker* exists to provide watertight answers and timeless solutions in the same way that religionists, or doctrinaire socialists, claim they can. Personally, I see freethought as a fluid process more than a rigid ideology. As a freethinker I accept that I cannot provide answers (at least, only rarely).

I can only pose questions, assess the evidence, keep an open mind – and disrupt the cosy shibboleths and assumptions of Ian Andrews and other ideologues.

Bizarrely, he calls my article a "sophisticated rant" but his response is rambling and incoherent. It begins with an attempt to be witty (or what might pass for wit in Rochdale), and ends with a call for the *Freethinker* to be censored to suit his tastes (the stock-in-trade response for Lefties, who, like religionists, live in perpetual denial of reality). In another time and place, Ian Andrews would have made an excellent apparatchik. Might I suggest that if he can't stand the heat in the *Freethinker's* kitchen, he goes back to reading *Socialist Worker*? Half-baked delusions confirmed weekly!

DIESEL BALAAM
London

DIESEL Balaam has no evidence for his assertion that I think democracy ought to be replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat. What I said was that a shortcoming of democracy is that selfish and short-sighted people can vote. To point out that something is not perfect is not to call for its abolition.

I do not believe that capitalism is the root of all evil. However, it is a ruthless system built on exploitation and fuelled by self-interest and materialistic greed. In its globalised form, it is increasing inequalities not only within countries but also between them. Inequality is of grotesque proportions – billions have no access to clean water while in the developed countries people swill designer-label bottled water, costing vastly more than tap-water though it is actually less pure.

In the UK, many pensioners cannot afford to heat their homes properly, while in London a house was sold this year for 50 million pounds. It boasts a glass bridge over its indoor swimming pool. People living on that scale cannot of course possibly pay any more tax!

As Diesel points out, socialism can bring benefits such as the NHS by humanising capitalism to some extent. But the Labour government under Blair and Brown has moved so far to the right that it is a threat to the survival of the NHS, decent pensions and what is left of our public transport. One does not have to be a Marxist fundamentalist to move into the ground that it has abandoned.

Finally he invites me to embrace libertarian freethought. I suspect, reading his rantings, that my views on most subjects are nearer to libertarian freethought than his are!

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE
London

The Church of Carp

WE are the Bishop in the Church of Carp, and we hope soon to have our Church recognised by the Government, after which we propose to take our seat in the House of Lords. I am pleased that the Archbishop of Canterbury has now established a precedent in confirming that the advent of some parts of Sharia Law are

inevitable, for it follows then that the advent of some parts of Carp Law will soon become inevitable.

We will not bore your readers by expiating at length on our laws, which number more than a thousand; suffice to say that women must be totally covered in tar and feathers and always walk backward in public. However, they are allowed to drive cars unaccompanied, provide they face backwards; many of the Church's vehicles have been fitted with sets of mirrors to accommodate this procedure. This follows the general philosophy of the Laws of Carp, in which women are honoured and encouraged to participate fully in the life of the Church.

Possibly of more interest is the Law of Peculation, in which goods must be supplied to our devotees at half the advertised price; the amount thus saved goes directly from the purchaser into the Church fund for the purchase of tanks, missiles and other items of a godly nature, as well as to supply bishops' vestments. Failure of the seller to participate is normally followed by amputation of his/her ears in a hygienic and compassionate manner, supervised by a doctor and a bishop – usually me.

We are aware that many of your readers have a cynical view of most religions, which is why I am bringing the Church of Carp to their attention, where we openly practise pederasty, misogyny and peculation proudly and without any attempt at concealment.

Acceptance into the Faith is inexpensive and women and dogs are warmly welcomed.

The Extremely Reverend Bishop of Carp
FABIAN ACKER
London

Songs of Praise

WHEN I went to school (pre WWII) the hymn book we used for morning assembly was *Songs of Praise* so I suggest that some publisher had the copyright to the phrase long before the BBC used it (*Freethinker* report, February). Did they ask for permission to use it?

CHARLIE ABLETHORPE
Leigh on Sea

Offensive phrase

TERRY Sanderson's phrase "nipping a simmering religious war in the bud" (*Freethinker*, February) is deeply offensive. No war ever simmered, nor does this one. People are blown up. Further, there is no home or abroad in the conflict because Islam, as is acknowledged by the scholars and leading journalists, is no more a religion than its prototype, ancient Judaism; it is a fascist political ideology whose adherents will, when the situation looks right, have no compunction about killing those in the way of a polity, the *dar ul islam*.

So if people are put down in north-west China, Timbuctu or the North Pole, the casualties are ours. There is no easier route to losing this battle than by pretending we are engaged in something-or-other which is not war. And the crucial strategic error would be the aspirin-belief that Islam is religion as the word is

understood by non-Muslims. And, incidentally, were one to allow that Islam is a religion which, to use Mr Sanderson's idea, could be contained in a mosque, we have to face up to the fact there is no ethics in it, which would make it an odd system indeed to take seriously as a means of educating people into the byways of rationalism, reasonableness and citizenship. Even in a mosque.

Please, no quisling quackery from the *Freethinker*. Leave that to the Westminster ducks.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

An award for Stephen Green?

SURELY an award is long overdue to Christian Voice's very own Stephen Green, who through his own arrogance and vanity, has done more than any secularist could ever hope to do in destroying that laughable anachronism, the blasphemy law. Come on, let's not be churlish – let's give this man the credit he truly deserves.

DAVID GOODES
Exeter

Creationism

CONGRATULATIONS to Neil Blewitt ("We've all been having a go at it", February). It was the best piece on creationism I've read, and should be compulsory reading in all faith schools and colleges.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

The legitimacy of Israel

AS a secular humanist I have some sympathy with W K Harper's letter about Palestine (*Points of View*, January), but as a Jew and life-long Zionist I hated the last paragraph because it denied the legitimacy of the modern state of Israel. This state derives its legitimacy from the UN resolution of 1947. The UN is the collective voice of the entire human race, and no nation can boast of a greater legitimacy than that.

The 1947 resolution followed the Balfour Declaration of 1917 where Britain as the sovereign power of Palestine declared itself in favour of a Jewish homeland.

Britain failed to keep its word and as a result six-million innocents were hideously murdered, there being no place for them on the surface of the planet.

Two thousand years ago the Romans sacked Jerusalem, and Palestinian Jews were dispersed. Their fate was similar to many other nations, but the Jews were unique because after 2,000 years they remained a recognisable separate entity. It was part of their culture that they would some day return to their homeland.

Can Mr Harper explain the legitimacy of North American, Australian and New Zealand European settlements? Or should native Americans, Aborigines and Maoris destroy these settlements and commit genocide?

Islamic states have endeavoured to destroy the progressive, democratic, non-racist state of Israel. Every secular humanist, and every

decent person everywhere, must deny them their wicked, criminal intentions.

DEREK WILKES
London.

Historicity of Jesus

WITH apologies to readers who are not interested in the Jesus-problem, I have to comment on letters in the February, 2008, issue. It is true, as Charles Douglas alleges, that I can never "resist the temptation to write a letter whenever someone suggests that we know nothing about Jesus, or that he is a fictitious person". All I can say is, if people stopped making these allegations, I would stop responding to them. I am bound to defend a point of view that I consider to be both justified and correct.

Martin O'Brien correctly quotes Albert Schweitzer as claiming that "The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma". However, that is not the same as claiming that "we have no real knowledge of the historical Jesus". Mr O'Brien should know, as I pointed out in an appendix to my book (*The Rise and Fall of Jesus*), that the idea that Schweitzer left virtually nothing certain about Jesus is false. Schweitzer came to very definite conclusions regarding Jesus' purpose and mission. *His Quest* (1954) is largely a summary of the views of others. His own views are found in several other works, viz: *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (1925) and *The Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity* (1968).

Despite the span of half a century between the writing of these two books, Schweitzer's fundamental view, that only an eschatological interpretation can make sense of Jesus' life, hardly changed. Commenting incredulously on mythicist ideas, he wrote: "How can men who think seriously come to the conclusion that the ideas of Christianity do not go back to Jesus, but merely represent a transformation of ideas which stirred religious circles in the then heathen world?" Indeed, in the introduction to the third German edition of the *Quest*, he claimed that the book dealt with "practically all conceivable arguments against the historicity of Jesus".

Charles Douglas quibbles about particular statements in my book. He particularly questions my claim to have found the real Jesus. He is entitled to do that, but he also has an obligation to present a reasoned argument for his case. Taking my statements out of context, as he does in relation to remarks about Josephus, is unhelpful and misleading. He also attributes to me the views on the relative historicity of Jesus and Plato I quoted approvingly from F C Conybeare. Mr Douglas makes a further serious error in assuming (for example) that Plato must have existed because there are books bearing his name. Perhaps he is unaware that, in ancient times more so than now, books were often written pseudonymously. If not true of Plato, it is certainly true of many religious books. So even if we found a book attributed to

Jesus, it would hardly prove his existence; conversely the lack of such writing is not evidence for his non-existence. Nor is the fact that accounts of Jesus' life appeared about a century after his death good evidence that they were invented; they can more easily be understood as accounts based on previous ones. What is more important is whether or not the accounts we do have contain evidence of historicity (I show that they do, surprisingly).

What Mr Douglas calls my "vicious attack" on Professor Wells (in my book) is no more than a reasoned demolition of Wells's special pleading for mythicism. Douglas ignores the flaws I have pointed out in Wells's argument.

It is not true that I made "not a single reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls"; I mentioned them on p186, with an intentional inference that they cannot interpret the Gospels. The Scrolls belonged to an Essene community that had cut itself off from normal Palestinian life.

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

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. Friends Meeting House, George Rd and St James's Rd, Edgbaston. Sat. March 15, 2.30pm. Lorely Burt MP: *Thirty Years on from the Sex Discrimination Act*.

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 Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, March 5. 8pm. Jim Herrick: *19th-Century Secularism and its Relevance Today*. Wed April 2, 8pm. Ken Humphries: *The Resurrection – Fact or Fable?*

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information above. 50th Anniversary Celebration at The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton on Sat, March 15. All tickets sold.

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: 01296 623730.

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

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

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

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

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

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506. Website www.dorsethumanists.co.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. Conway Hall Library, Red Lion Sq, London WC1. Fri, March 14, 7.30pm. The London Mayoral Election. Speakers to be announced.

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

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

Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings second Wednesday of the month at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Next meeting March 12., Subject: *Why post-mortems?* Speaker: Dr Julie Crow, former consultant histopathologist. Further details from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Cres, Gidea Park. Thurs, March 6, 8pm. Bob Cant: *From the Wolfenden Report to Civil Marriage*. Thurs, April 3, 8pm. Ralph Ison: *The Bible as Folklore*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Sq, Leeds. Tuesday, Mar 11, 7.30pm. John Wilson: *The Law – Fit for Purpose?*

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

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

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

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

Liverpool Humanist Group. Information: 07814 910 286. Website: www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/. E-mail: lhghumanist@googlemail.com. Meetings on the second Wednesday of each month.

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

Marches Secularists: A local pro-secular movement covering the counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire and Powys in the Welsh Marches region of England and Wales. Membership is free. Website: www.MarchesSecularists.org. Contact: Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

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. Wed, Mar 5, 7.30pm. Rob Murfin: *Topical Issues*.

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.

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.